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Flusser's Selfies

"One might contend that if in his media books, Flusser paints his topic, in *Gestures* he photographs it."

Nancy Ann Roth, *Translator's Preface*

"I don't know whether there are cameras with such mirrors."

Vilém Flusser, *The Gesture of Turning the Mask Around*

Gesture is a concept through which Vilém Flusser tackles one of phenomenology's most challenging and enduring complexities: the body. This is not a peripheral difficulty but arguably phenomenology's predominant methodological aporia. For example, Edmund Husserl (1982, 1989) vacillated between the indeterminate terms *Leib* (the lived body as the zero-point of perception) and *Körper* (the body as a physical thing), muddying the ground of perception it is meant to define, and Merleau-Ponty wrestles with the body as neither an object among other objects nor a transcendental subject standing apart from the world, but an 'inbetweenness' mediating between sensing and being sensed (Merleau-Ponty 1958). Within these works there is a conceptualisation of the body that resists being treated as a discrete object (as it is experienced) and as the condition through which experience becomes possible, and therefore an inchoate trouble needs to be acknowledged from the outset: why is the body so central to phenomenology if the preeminent phenomenologists were so adamant that a distinction between the body and mind (Husserl 1982, 1989) or the body and lifeworld (Merleau-Ponty 1958, 1964) was a false dichotomy? Do we let this dichotomy rest, or is it responsible to engage with a philosophical method for navigating this tension? Flusser can help answer this question through his conceptualisation of gesture.

This research demonstrates that Flusser resolves some of these phenomenological challenges in his essay collection, *Gestures* (2014). However, this paper argues that he does not do so through thorough, philosophically complex, and methodologically succinct theorising of the body and structures of consciousness. Instead, this paper argues that Flusser demonstrates the body's place within phenomenology through the creation of a series of self-portraits. But these self-portraits are not paintings nor photographs; instead, the function and arrangement of perception and

observation in these self-portraits operate in a mode most readily recognised in the contemporary media form known as the *selfie*[1].

Not literal selfies, of course, but a series of 'selfie-like' sketches. This series of selfies offers an array of impressions, illustrations and instances of the body that not only (re)articulate where a body sits within the phenomenological method but also provide detailed methodological considerations for articulating the body following what Patricia Clough calls the affective turn in intellectual thought (2008, elaborated below). Therefore, when read as selfies, the essays create what I refer to as perceptual affect. This allows Flusser's *Gestures* to unravel some of phenomenology's enduring difficulties and, in turn, provides a heuristic for situating phenomenology within readings of the apparatus, considered in relation to freedom: transitioning from a theory of technical images (2000, 2011) to a theory of technical *gestures*.

This paper will conduct a formal analysis of Flusser's *Gestures* to demonstrate how he captures impressions to navigate the complexities of the body within phenomenology. The discussion will begin by contextualising his book, *Gestures*, and will present a provocation that the collection should be considered a series of selfies, as well as the methodological impetus for using this slang term. Building on this foundation, the paper will provide an overview of Flusser's place within the phenomenological tradition and demonstrate how his work draws on this tradition through techniques such as Husserlian bracketing. It will then provide a formal analysis of Flusser's selfies and conclude by showing how this analysis allows us to extend Flusser's work on gesture, the body, and phenomenology into his work on the apparatus and the technical image via that sinuous and slippery concept of affect (*Gestimmtheit*); ultimately raising questions of freedom and how his conceptualisation of the body plays against deterministic misreadings of his apparatus theory.

Gestures as a Collection of Selfies

Gestures is a collection of essays originally published just months before Flusser's death in 1991. The collection was originally published in German (*Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie*), and has subsequently been translated into various languages, including Spanish (1994), French (1999), English (2014), and others. The text contains work collected over a 30-year period of Flusser's life

[1] The term selfie should be easily recognisable to most readers, but a quick etymological note would be beneficial. A selfie is an image of an individual captured by him/herself, and therefore, a mode of self-portraiture. The term was first coined as Australian English slang, and the first online usage of the term was dated the 13th of September 2002; attributed to an individual named Nathan Hope who would later claim that "selfie" was not a word he "coined… [but] common slang at the time, used to describe a picture of yourself" (Zimmer 2013). Not a unique nor special term, only the result of a peculiar Australianism in which words are constructed as a hypocoristic. In 2013 Oxford Dictionary deemed selfie English word of the year following a surge of online popularity (Oxford Academic 2013).

(Roth 2015: 61), yet, when compiled into a single edition, the work results in what, firstly, functions as a fragmented theory that outlines Flusser's conception of gesture and, secondly, offers Flusser's most comprehensive exegesis on the place of phenomenology within his ideas.

The fragmented collection does not explicate a final definition of the term gesture, and rather the "essays tend to spiral in on the meaning of gesture from many different angles" (Roth 2014a: x), but perhaps most important to take note of is that Flusser distinguishes between gestures and involuntary reactions such as scratching, yawning, or reflexive actions (throwing one's arms forward if one were to trip). This is because, for Flusser, a gesture exemplifies how the body navigates its potential for freedom: not freedom as unconstrained autonomy of the individual, but rather a capacity for *intentional* action within relationships structured by social, linguistic, technical, and bodily conditions (codes and programs). The essays depict moments in which Flusser negotiates possibilities of action against conditions that simultaneously enable and constrain the individual. Within this complexity, a gesture is more than just a movement of the body but, as Cristian Ciocan argues, a "fundamental mode of existing in the world… that a phenomenological effort (*phänomenologische Anstrengung)* is necessary to grasp" (2024: 19). The recurring tension identified in his conceptualisation of gestures (the subject acting while also being acted upon) is therefore not the disappearance of freedom but, arguably, its phenomenological condition.

Bearing this, *Gestures* (the text) can be understood as phenomenology in practice. The German edition was published with the subtitle *Versuch einer Phänomenologie,* which translates to 'an attempt at phenomenology'; however, such a flat English translation does not convey the implicit notion of 'testing' or 'probing' that the German *Versuch* connotes. Nancy Ann Roth, the text's English translator, comments that she wrestled with the subtitle during translation and notes that while the "original subtitle of the book was 'An Attempt at a Phenomenology of Gesture,' the alternative 'An Attempt at a Gesture of Phenomenology' is not absurd", mentioning that several essays operate as a primer on the phenomenological method (Roth 2015: 61-62). This is also implicit in the vocabulary that Flusser institutes in his description of *how* gesture should be read: first-person perspective, attention to perception, and a focus on experience through which Flusser describes movement and instances of gesture. More explicitly, Husserlian methods of phenomenological inquiry are directly apparent in the bracketing (Flusser 2014: 30, 37, 49, 62, 99) that appears throughout (returned to below).

Insofar as these essays were written over three decades, Flusser's figure haunts the collection. Roth writes in 'Towards a Phenomenology of Gesture' (2015) that the essays are "highly personal and idiosyncratic" (Roth 2015: 64) and—as I have argued elsewhere—Flusser's theory of gesture is a theory of Flusser's personal gestures (Berkland 2021). Notably, in his essays on

'Writing'[2] and 'Smoking a Pipe', the figure within the essay is Flusser, and the reader is tracing the movements of *his* body and the machinations of *his* thinking and observations. It has therefore been noted that a central methodological mode employed by Flusser is biography (Roth 2015: 64), life writing, which provides a narrative and unifies the fragmented collection into something more singular. However, my supposition is that the work does not merely function as an autobiography of Flusser's life but is better understood as a work of *self-portraiture* depicted through a series of phenomenal selfies that produce an impression of the figure—Flusser—and of his attempts at freedom.

This provocation to describe Flusser's essays as a series of selfies was expounded following Roth's assertion that Flusser "photographs" (2014a: x) his movements in the snapshot essays. Roth asserts that the reason these essays operate as photographs and not paintings is in how 'observation' operates within photography. To quote (2014a: x): "…Flusser memorably describes a photographer moving around a person who is being photographed, changing distances, angles, lighting, asking the sitter to adjust the pose. In the argument, we, too, move, from the position of the photographer to that of the subject being photographed and on to that of an observer of the scene, noticing how each kind of awareness affects the other. Through observation, we establish that the photographer's decisions—his position, his interaction with the subject, his critical relationship to his own activity—are all free decisions, articulating his way of being in the world. In this, his direct interaction with the "object" he is photographing, the photographer differs from a painter."

The emblematic image in this metaphor is the painter situating and framing their object of study—a still life, for example—from a single position. Photography circles the subject, shifts perspective and allows the subject to look back. Photography in this metaphor does not depict its subject as a singular unified object, but instead as a series of impressions; moments of perception, or a series of perceptual affects of the self, all contained within a volume of relations between photographer, camera, subject, space, distance, and so on. But a selfie is a singular mode of photography that differs as its particular volume of relations collapses and rearticulates itself in a novel way for two reasons: first, a selfie is centred on the observation of movement in a mirror, and second, the selfie is implicitly gestural. For these reasons, my use of the selfie metaphor (rather than photography) is heuristic rather than historical.

A selfie is a mode of photography in which the photographer can 'see' him/herself in the apparatus used to capture him/herself, and this is why a selfie is, foremost, an observation of

[2] All essays in the collection follow the naming convention "The Gesture of [gesture name]", for ease I have simplified the names of the essays '[Gesture Name]' and maintained a capital letter. I will also occasionally simply refer to the essays as the gesture name (i.e. Shaving). These should each be parsed easily within context and through my use of capitalisation

movement. For the most part, a selfie is taken with a mobile phone where the large, high-definition screen and front-facing camera create a mirror in which the individual can observe and adjust their body.[3] The selfie-taker is looking at him/herself looking at him/herself, and this is what Flusser is doing as he considers his "position, his interaction with the subject, his critical relationship to his own activity" through observation (Roth 2014a: x). There is an echo in how Flusser is incredibly aware of his body in these essays, and the essays become the "cameras with such mirrors" (Flusser 2014: 84) alluded to in his essay 'Turning the Mask Around'. In the way a selfie-taker sees him/herself in a mirror[4] before capturing their image, Flusser does the same by paying close observational attention to his position before he describes his gestures. Implicitly, this is why describing these essays as selfies instead of photography is useful because, not to drag Roth's metaphor further than it can bear, Flusser the photographer is not photographing a separate Flusser subject insofar as they are—like a selfie-taker—one and the same.

Furthermore, what makes the selfie a unique type of photography that warrants distinction is that it is an inherently gestural form of photography from the vantage that it is recognised more readily through the pose struck when taking a selfie than by the photograph-object produced (see Senft & Baym 2015: 1589; Eckel et al. 2018; Ruchatz 2018). It has, for this reason, been described as a form of kinaesthetic sociability (Frosh 2015). My work on the matter (Berkland 2022, which is greatly influenced by Flusser) asserts that the selfie is not a photograph, but a gestural assembling. The selfie exists neither as a photograph nor a movement in and of itself. Instead, a selfie is evidence of movement that is implicitly observed. If we are to follow Roth and argue that Flusser photographs his movements, viewing this type of photography as selfie-photography suggests that he is not concerned with the final image-text produced but rather with how his work presents evidence that movements have occurred and how these movements arrange perception and observation. Ultimately, the use of the word selfie serves a methodological function and is not employed solely for the novel cultural capital that this contemporary slang presupposes.

The Body and the Phenomenological Project

As mentioned, Flusser makes direct reference to the phenomenological technique of bracketing within his collection (2014: 30, 37, 49, 62, 99). Bracketing is a term adopted from the work of

[3] Extensive work has been conducted on this dynamic between the mirror and camera (in Tiidenberg 2014, 2016; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz 2015; Warfield 2017a, 2017b; Walker 2005; Walker-Rettberg 2014), and my work (Berkland 2022). However, the specific details are beyond the scope of this paper.

[4] Holding a camera to a mirror is a practice as old as photography itself, however, the selfie allows the camera and the mirror to become singular when the arm is extended and an individual 'looks' into their mobile device.

Husserl, who argued that bracketing creates the intellectual foundation from which all phenomenological inquiry can take place, and this technique allows for the development of a new site or space for thinking and examination that undoes the snares and prejudices of a severely ingrained natural standpoint of Western knowledge[5].

He argued that bracketing is instrumental in the development of a new phenomenological ἐποχή (*epoché*, 1982: § 32): an intellectual position from where a phenomenologist can attend to experience directly and avoid the prejudices of any existing epistemological system. Husserl writes (1982: 110): "[By bracketing] I disconnect [all sciences which relate to this natural world], I make absolutely no use of their standards, I do not appropriate a single one of the propositions that enter into their systems, even though their evidential value is perfect, I take none of them, no one of them serves me for a foundation—so long, that is, as it is understood in the way these sciences themselves understand it, as a truth concerning the realities of the world."

This bracketing appears almost Cartesian, a form of radical doubting, but this is not the case. Husserl reiterated and confirmed that he did not deny nor doubt the world but rather wanted to create a space that "completely bars [him] from using any judgment that concerns spatio-temporal existence" (1982: 111). Details of some of the things he wished to bracket can be seen at the beginning of § 56 of *Ideas I* where he states unequivocally that "it goes without saying that with the suspending of the natural world, physical and psychological, all individual objectivities which are constituted through the functional activities of consciousness in valuation and practice are suspended" (1982: 171). This process—this creation of a phenomenological ἐποχή—is what Husserl refers to as *reduction*. "It's explicit bracketing," Husserl writes, which maintains "the bearing on method that they continually remind us that the relevant spheres of Being and Knowledge lie, in principle, outside those which require to be studied in the way proper to transcendental phenomenology" (1982: 179). Through reduction and the return to the ἐποχή, phenomena could be realised in their fullness, no longer contaminated by a natural standpoint.

Flusserian bracketing is referenced in 'Speaking' (30), 'Making' (37), 'Loving' (49), 'Painting' (62) and 'Planting' (99), and echoes Husserl's mode of reduction through the deferral of some

[5] Husserl's project (and arguably the project of phenomenology more generally) at its inception emerged as a response to what is deemed the "natural standpoint" of Western knowledge (1982: 51). The natural standpoint of Western knowledge does not denote 'from nature' or 'of the natural world' (as an English reader may understand it), rather the natural standpoint is translated from the German *natürlich* that can mean "'of or pertaining to nature' but it can also—more importantly—mean 'the familiar,' 'the customary,' 'the matter-of-fact'" (Kohák 1978: 32): "naturally" or "of course". The natural standpoint is not posited as an empiricist position, but rather a learned and repeated habitual mode of thinking in how Western intellectualism and science approaches knowledge construction. This was a catastrophic issue at the heart of thought (for Husserl) that not only reinforced a false mind/body dualism, but also put Western thought in a precarious and unsustainable position (1982: § 1).

aspect of analysis to present a denuded adumbration of the phenomenon of study (the experience of gesture). For example, in 'Loving', he suggests that one can bracket out the "complex of the sexualisation codes" (49) and return to the experience of loving directly. Further, in 'Painting' there is a recommendation that philosophers of gesture—phenomenologists—employ "methods of bracketing out prejudices of observation" (62). Also, in the work on planting Flusser brackets "all economic, social, and political" codes (99). Two important notes here: Flusser is demonstrating his relationship to phenomenology explicitly through bracketing, however demonstrating that the phenomenological method is not exclusively concerned with perception in how one brackets. What this means is that the phenomenologist does not bracket to 'perceive' more clearly, but instead bracketing becomes a tactic for identifying from which direction codes and programs of epistemological prejudice emerge. If gesture is the object of study, the process of bracketing develops a reduction by ostensibly identifying the variety of influences that will prejudice or dictate any movement of the body: to describe gesture with "no satisfactory causal explanation" (2). The decision to defer—not ignore—this explanation is the gestural ἐποχή.

Yet, while the use is explicit, Flusser remains cautious of bracketing. In 'Speaking' (30) the limitations of bracketing emerge as he writes how the gesture "is not an attempt to bracket out the world to get at something else but rather to catch it in words" as speaking disrupts experience (30). This contention is furthered in 'Making'; to quote at length (37, [*emphasis added*]): "*But didn't we close off this discussion at the moment we bracketed out all models*? All that is true, but the power of our hands over our thought is so strong that we can't honestly avoid such an unproductive dialectic between "subject and object," "real and ideal," "material and form." The old circular argument "the two hands" closes in, and there is no honorable way to escape."

The "power of hands over our thought" is key to understanding how bracketing is impossible for individuals constantly comprehending the world, grasping at experience. Hands in this regard function as metonymy of the entire experience of the perceiving body,[6] which is the central challenge to phenomenology and one Flusser, in the exercise of these essays, and the creation of his selfies, attempts to grapple with. Because ultimately within every instance and each essay within the collection, regardless of how meticulous and careful Flusser is in his bracketing, the 'body' simply cannot be bracketed away.

With this Flusser encounters the limits of reduction and limitations in the development of Husserl's conception of the body (*Leib*). For Husserl, the body "is, in the first place the medium of all perception; it is the organ of perception and is necessarily involved in all perception" (1989:

[6] The importance of the hand in Flusser's work is discussed in Cristian Ciocan's essay 'The Chiro-Phenomenology of Vilém Flusser: Exploring the Gestures of the Hand" (2024).

§ 18), yet Husserl was still adamant that this is not an issue for the phenomenologist. Husserl's centring of the body within the ἐποχή is a response to one of his fundamental criticisms of Cartesian dualism. This is evidenced in a passage from *Ideas II* (1989: § 40): "To say that this Ego, or the soul, "has" a Body does not merely mean that there exists a physical—material thing which would, through its material processes, present real preconditions for "conscious events" or even, conversely, that in its processes there occur dependencies on conscious events within a 'stream of consciousness' …. Soul and psychic Ego "have" a Body; there exists a material thing, of a certain nature, which is not merely a material thing but is a Body, i.e., a material thing which, as localization field for sensations and for stirrings of feelings, as complex of sense organs, and as phenomenal partner and counterpart of all perceptions of things … makes up a fundamental component of the real givenness of the soul and the Ego."

The assertion that the body can be bracketed away as part of reduction is a limitation in Husserl's work, and Flusser asserts that this is not possible with "hands that move almost constantly" (34). Readers of phenomenology will be aware that this body problem was central to the work of Merleau-Ponty, who fundamentally disagreed that the body could be bracketed away. This is impossible for Merleau-Ponty as all perception is a function of the body, not something that functions through the body (as medium) as "perception and action are not separate capabilities, but two sides of the same ability to engage with the world" (Romdenh-Romluc 2013: 107). Knowing the world and finding a place in it becomes an embodied process as any "account of perception implies that certain perceived properties result from interaction between the world and consciousness" (Romdenh-Romluc 2013: 109).

Here is the start of the body problematic in phenomenology. As with many of phenomenology's proponents, Merleau-Ponty is anti-dualistic, and this problematises any discrete focus on the body (how could an anti-dualist analyse the body?). His approach is scaffolded from the position that, fundamentally, consciousness and the world are a centre—a zero point—of the perceiving body, and the body is not ontic in its ontology, but phenomenological: an experience, or rather, an in betweenness. This conceptualisation is made explicit in his unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he writes (1964: 135-136): "The body interposed is not itself a thing, an interstitial matter, a connective tissue, but a sensible for itself… [it] unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born in segregation and, upon which, it remains open."

And it is this complexity that Flusser addresses through gesture: a complex exegesis of the notion of 'body' that does away with mind/body dualism and consolidates them into an "incarnate

consciousness" (Carr 1967: 369). This is the phenomenological aporia Flusser is attempting to navigate in *Gestures*: the problem of the body as a category of experience. As he writes in 'Painting' (67): "What we see is not the interaction of bodies and mind but a gesture, and one may doubt whether there are situations in which we can actually see a body without a mind (with the exception of a corpse) or a mind without a body. Mind and body are extrapolations from the concrete phenomenon "gesture," explanations that come later, in fact, more evidently later with mind than with bodies. They form only an abstract, "theoretical" horizon for the gesture that is actually observed. But then we project this subsequent explanation onto the gesture itself and go on to believe that we actually see it."

Bluntly, when Flusser talks about the body, a reader could be left wondering what it is he is really talking about. Is it A collection of organs, skin, limbs and follicles? A socially inscribed category of subjectivity? Or—as phenomenology would have it—a zero point of incarnate, experiential perception? What is the thing that gestures, or the thing perceived through gestures? Flusser does not provide any answers, but, as this research contends, by examining *Gestures* as a series of selfies rather than a philosophical text, an avenue into how Flusser illustrates the body and its impossibility becomes readily apparent through his conceptualisation of affect, or lack thereof.

Gestimmtheit and Affect

The depiction of himself as a *body* intimated within *Gestures* is revealed through a series of gestures. There is no Flusser-object; instead, impressions and movements sublimate a thing that a reader can ostensibly recognise as Flusser. As the essays spiral in on the meaning of gesture the individual at the book's centre is also a spiralling of impressions (Flusser 2014: 1). However, it is not a matter of reassessing what a 'body' is through this spiralling, but instead a method Flusser employs to expand his critical phenomenology to better understand the idea of a body as a series of gestures. This spiralling reveals a structure of perception that can be referenced through the concept of *affect*, a translation of the German *Gestimmtheit*. Flusser translated it as 'sentimentality', but—as Roth reminds us—contemporary readers of English hold "many associations with sentimentality that seem distant from the meaning [Flusser] is trying to 'ambush'" (Roth 2014b: 178).

However, this is not helpful as Flusser is reticent to present a 'flat' or even useful definition of affect within the text. As he writes (2014: 1): "As a matter of courtesy, as well as for other reasons, a writer should define his concepts. In this essay, I will do this for the concept of "gesture" but not for that of "affect." I hope that the reader will excuse this impropriety. My plan is to feign

ignorance of the meaning of affect and, by observing gestures, try to discover what people mean by this word. It is a kind of phenomenological effort, through the observation of gestures, to take affect by surprise."

This is admittedly frustrating, but Flusser is suggesting that readers remain in a position of 'inbetweenness'. If affect were explained away with a concrete, material definition, it would collapse any phenomenological reading of the body; or, if affect were an "object", the body it measured would be an object as well, and the implicit undecidability of the body as neither object nor sensing thing would collapse. As a phenomenological tool, the concept of affect—for Flusser—requires it to operate as impressions that emerge and disappear, leaving only the sense that the initial impression is contiguous with the impressions that follow.

Furthermore, the decision to read the term as affect inherits a series of surprising complexities, especially considering that during the initial period of the collection's publication, a host of disciplines were experiencing what Patricia Clough called the "affective turn" (2008) as affect inundated social theory. As a result, affect has been inculcated across myriad disciplines, with myriad definitions, and therefore occupies a troubling position within theory, cultural studies, literature, and philosophy today. Clough contends that the turn to affect was "in response to […] limitations of post-structuralism and deconstruction" (2008: 1), but evidence that the literature on affect does not offer a unified perspective. This does not mean that to understand Flusser's affect (*Gestimmtheit*), a reader should 'turn to the turn' and adopt an existing definition of affect provided by others (such as Massumi (2002), Ngai (2005), or Terada (2001)). However, in the same way that Flusser's definition of apparatus is occasionally explicated through conceptualisations provided by Foucault (1972) and Agamben (2009),[7] his definition of affect within *Gesture* can certainly be scaffolded by prevailing definitions before it is later circumscribed.

I therefore take the risky manoeuvre of scaffolding Flusser's *Gestimmtheit* as 'perceptual affect'. This is risky insofar as theorists working within such a definition of perceptual affect argue that it is not defined in terms of emotion or feeling, nor of *affection,* nor of the sentimentality implied by Flusser's translation. Rather, perceptual affect is defined in terms of perception and how

[7] Rainer Guldin writes in "Golem, Roboter und andere Gebilde. Zu Vilém Flussers Apparatbegriff" (["Golems, robots and other structures: On Vilém Flusser's concept of the apparatus"]: 2009) that the "genealogische Wurzeln dieses Begriffs reichen … weiter zurück: in das Prag der 20er und 30er Jahre" ([The genealogical roots of this term go back ... further: to the Prague of the 20s and 30s], 2009: 1) and gives no indication whether Flusser's conceptualisation of apparatus is influenced by Foucault. However, the research presents an extended comparison to Flusser's apparatus and Agamben's (explicitly Foucauldian definition of) apparatus stating that "hier geht es … nicht um eine Übereinstimmung, sondern um einige Kontaktpunkte" (["it is not about a match … but about a few points of contact"], 2009, p. 8). Flusser's *Gestimmtheit* certainly shares points of contact with contemporary definitions of affect.

perception is made possible.[8] This seems to bifurcate from Flusser's translation, but the parallels (points of contact) are clear. Flusser writes (2014: 6): "If I accept that affect is a state of mind transformed into gesticulation, my primary interest is no longer in the state of mind but in the effect of the gesture. As they appear in symptoms and as I experience them through introspection, states of mind throw up ethical and epistemological problems. Affect, conversely, presents formal, aesthetic problems. Affect releases states of mind from their original contexts and allows them to become formal (aesthetic)—to take the form of gestures."

Affect is a state of mind transformed into intentional movements; it is the translation of our perception into movements of the body through intentionality. This is the first selfie of the text: an image of a philosopher frustrated by the limitations of the terms they hope to conceptualise. But this is also Flusser clarifying: state of mind (mind) and gesture (body) should not be read as a duality; rather, they are a translation of how the individual relates to the world, and the stuff of this relationship can be referred to as affect. The selfies below are Flusser's perceptual *affetti,* and in rendering a tenuity of his body through these snapshots, the readers encounter affect—the very stuff of perception—in a very real way and begin to unravel Flusser's phenomenological idea of the body.

Flusser's Selfies: Methodology

Following this extensive theoretical discussion, Flusser's selfies can be analysed. Two methodological considerations have been made to situate this analysis.

Firstly, the challenge of analysing the essay collection as a series of selfies is formal, inasmuch as Flusser's use of first-person pronouns complicates matters. When writing (and being translated) into English, Flusser writes in a collective first person ('we gesture', 'our gestures'), resulting in clusivity. This linguistic clusivity is complex insofar as it creates a grammatical distinction between the inclusive 'we' and the exclusive 'we': for example, 'we' as individuals who read the text is inclusive (everyone), but 'we' pipe-smokers is exclusive (not everyone). The importance is not merely stylistic; if we examine the gesture book as selfies, we need to focus on the moments when Flusser is capturing his gesturing directly. Consequently, due to this clusivity, the collective pronouns also require attention. It needs to be acknowledged that, for Flusser, 'we' includes himself directly. In other words, if 'we' listen to music—as described in 'Listening to Music'—Flusser

[8] The intricacies of this specific articulation of affect were popularised in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (see 1994), and was later ratified in work by Grossberg (1992), Massumi (2002), and Shouse (2005). It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in their work and the (warranted) criticisms provided by theorists such as Leys (2011) and Wetherell (2012).

is also a music listener and is alluding to his gestures. For clarity, this analysis will pay attention to Flusser's direct references to himself ('I'), but clusivity with the other gestures he illustrates ('we') is acknowledged (if beyond the scope of this study).

The second formal challenge and methodological consideration in this analysis is the decision to bracket out available biographical notes on Flusser's life, so as not to draw on Flusser's life when describing these perceptual selfies. This may appear profoundly antithetical to the exegesis being undertaken, but it offers a useful heuristic for navigating why these perceptual selfies are so important to consider in Flusser's broader project: gestures are non-causal. *Gesture* is implicitly linked to the technical image, and therefore gestures and affect fall within the ambit of the apparatus, *not* only of the individual but more specifically of the *subject* (defined simply as the individual who has been captured by the apparatus). Therefore, Flusser's selfies are not depictions of the 'man', but of the *subject of gesture*. This unfolding of Flusser as subject, which tends towards the individual (the depicted Flusser who gestured vs the real Flusser who lived), places the reader in a novel relationship with the theory, revealing a possible new avenue for how this work (and Flusser's other work) should be read. In short, there is no concern with the biographical Flusser for this self-portrait, but with the one constructed through his writing.

Flusser's Selfies

The most direct and specific illustrations of Flusser are found in 'Writing', 'Filming', 'Turning the Mask Around', 'Shaving' and 'Smoking a Pipe'. Outside these essays, the introduction ('Gesture and Affect') is also a comprehensive description of his gestures and, therefore, another selfie. In each of these essays, there is an image of a figure outlining their methodological concerns in detail and, by implication, directly referring to themselves and what they are trying to achieve while paying close attention to the movement of their body. They are not photographing these movements but, like a selfie-taker, reflecting on them: adjusting their body and attempting to consolidate the various impressions into a unified image (or at least the possibility thereof). However, each impression is a moment of Flusser grappling with the limits of their agency, and if there is one central theme or motif in these selfies, it is that of a subject whose desires and decisions are constrained by external forces (codes and programs). The recurrent image is of Flusser wanting to accomplish something but rebuffed by limitations of either intention, the mind, the apparatus, *etc.* Importantly, the forces arresting Flusser's agency do not seem to exist externally but are also the subject of these perceptual selfies: congruent with the desire to gesture.

For example, within 'Writing' (Flusser 2014: 22-23 [*emphasis added*]): "In my memory, there are words from various languages. They don't mean the same things. Each language possesses its own atmosphere and, as a result, is a universe in itself. It is inexact to say that I command the languages stored in my memory. Of course I can translate, and in this sense, I transcend them all. In this same sense, *I can choose the language in which I would like to write. But in another sense, it is the languages that command me,* program and transcend me, for each of them throws me into its own universe. I cannot write without first recognizing this power that the words and the languages exercise over me. It is, furthermore, the root of my choice of the gesture of writing."

There is an immediate and perspicuous tension between the desire for agency to "command" and the "power that the words and the language exercise". These forces or programs would appear in opposition, but this reading is too superficial. The clear distinction between internal and external forces dissolves as the language and intent both appear to emerge from an internal locus within the subject. Flusser describes how the subject experiences the existential ambivalence of acting and being acted on simultaneously (Flusser 2014: 107). The languages exist "in" the subject's memory, and this apparatus is not exterior to the subject. Ultimately, there can be no distinction between internal and external forces, and this distinction needs to be rejected in favour of a new language for discussing the subject; the selfies demonstrate that this language is gestural. However, like a selfie, they are not gestural because they are movements of the body; rather, they are gestural because the intent behind these movements is grounded in reorienting the subject's perception and observation.

This is precisely the freedom at issue in Flusser's distinction between gesture and mere reaction: Flusser's choice of language is not unconstrained, but neither is it reducible to a reflex like scratching or yawning—it is a meaningful negotiation of *a structure of perception* that precedes and exceeds him, which is what makes it gestural rather than merely automatic. It is admittedly clumsy to try to describe the image of Flusser, and it should be understood that the perceptual selfies are not images of an individual and their apparatus (pipe, shaving razor, writing implement, *etc.*), rather, all these apparatuses are implicit in the form and delineation of the subject. We experience Flusser's challenge of the limitations of language to express precisely what is being seen: 'the subject *and* the apparatus' is a statement that is falsely syllogistic, as there is no distinction between the subject and the apparatus. There is only a moment when both exist in relation to each other, in a moment of assembling, as the subject and the apparatus become mutually constitutive within gestural situations. In this example, as presented in 'Writing', the subject emerges through language that in turn produces the subject. To quote further (23): "It is lovely to dive into the stream of words, to let them flow from within, through the fingers, over the keys of the machine

and against the paper, so as to marvel what they have wrought, the sheer musical beauty of the words, their wealth of connotations and the wisdom of generations. But I lose myself in the flow, and the virtuality that pushes out to be typed in the machine dissolves. Once again, writing means leaving the magical power of the words behind and, by doing so, gaining a certain control over the gesture."

The image of the subject is an image in movement, and it intervolves a series of impressions—the diving subject, the stream of words, the flow that pours them over the machine. And the machine dissolves, not disappears, under the influence of this flow as it stops operating as a machine and instead goes beyond machines and emerges as an apparatus. This flow is not created via gesture; it is gestural because his efforts are perceived within their intent, and this is what the selfies depict.

Therefore, this allows us to provide an axiomatic for why these essays are selfies: they show gestural images of phenomena that are being navigated via perception. The subject of the selfie does not sit to be captured by the camera but rather attempts to demonstrate him/herself in the midst of a flow that disentangles any false relationship between the subject and the apparatus, forming a singular assemblage of their relationship. Unlike the individual seated to be photographed, the subject captures their reflection first in the mirror of the apparatus and adjusts their body: they gesture. Of course, Flusser is not looking at himself in a literal mirror in each instance, but he is using writing to pare such specular observations. Agency becomes a central aspect of these mirror self-portraits and something implicit in how Flusser responds to phenomena. The myth of the material body as a mechanical object supposes an object that can be controlled ("I lift my arm" (Flusser 2014: 162)), but a phenomenal body that is not distinct from 'mind' or 'lifeworld' rejects notions of agency and control in favour of perception as an existential concept; a series of affects manifest through the stuff of perception.

And this leads back to the first implicit challenge of phenomenology: Where, then, is the body? Flusser's most direct description of the body is seen in 'Shaving'. Flusser must contend with the issue central to phenomenology—the situatedness of the body in the world—most directly as this thing that has been reduced and abstracted to a series of perceptual affects can feel pain or lose its hair. The body is real. Surely, it is a body being shaved: a material corporeal thing? How do you shave perceptual affects, or Merleau-Pontian incarnate consciousness? Flusser, somewhat humorously, seems to be asking "How do I shave this phenomenological zero-point of perception?". But he manages (2014: 107): "Because the gesture is directed toward the gesticulator himself, because in it, he is both agent and object, both the one who performs it and who suffers it, it offers an unusual, and in fact not a dialectical experience. One feels how the hand guides the apparatus

over the skin and how the skin is scraped by the apparatus, without sensing conflict between the two experiences in a relationship between subject and object. That is what is called a "liminal experience" (mystics try to speak of this in a completely different context). It would be easy, but also unproductive, to go on to explain this double experience physiologically (e.g., neurologically). For the crucial thing about this gesture is not the biologically explicable movement but the existential ambivalence of acting and being acted on at the same time. In taking the aspect seriously, we encounter the phenomenon of pain."

There is no body; there is a subject and an apparatus that emerge as movement 'scrapes' across the skin, revealing the chiasm of experience that provides an illusion of subjecthood. Flusser contends with this problem as a person shaving his beard, while paying particular attention to errant beard hairs he sees collecting in his razor (the apparatus) as "beard hair that was formerly part of [his] body has become part of [his] shaving apparatus" (2014: 106). There is a constant back-and-forth throughout his description of himself as he defines the troubling liminal experience (107) that *the gesture* of shaving occupies. We immediately have a profound statement on where gesture sits in terms of the phenomenological problem, as the bridge between the illusion of the body and the illusion of the world it inhabits is united via gesture as perceptual. And he does so by maintaining his selfie-like self-perception, moving in front of the mirror. Quoting at length (108-109): "Shaving makes the skin, and not the face, visible, and that means it makes the boundary between man and world visible. The beard hair is removed, not because it covers the face and so obstructs communication between man and world, but because it obscures the difference between man and world. The goal of shaving is not to make a connection with the world but to distance oneself from it and assert oneself in it."

This fundamentally sounds like Flusser is asserting a profoundly anti-phenomenological stance, in which the body is presented as a thing-in-itself of being, revealed by the gesture of shaving. But this is not what is being communicated in this passage. Flusser, the razor, the beard hairs, the obstruction all unfold as the stuff of perception and require observation, but this can only be achieved by perceiving a moving body. While shaving, Flusser perceives gesture not only as an individual pulling a razor across their skin but also as an anxiety about how this action ratifies their existence. This ambivalence is the freedom Flusser attributes to gesture as such: not the absence of constraint—the razor, the skin, and the apparatus all act upon him—but the capacity to inhabit that constraint as a meaningful, self-directed act of perception.

Just as in his work on photography, where he describes freedom not as an escape from the apparatus's program but a play against it: the photographer's freedom consists in exhausting, redirecting, or working against the possibilities the camera's program allows, rather than stepping

outside that program altogether (Flusser 2000). In 'Shaving', Flusser does not escape the razor's honed, keen logic—he cannot un-invent the blade—but he inhabits it in a way that produces the liminal, non-dialectical experience of acting and being acted upon that he describes; the gesture of shaving is a minor act of play against an apparatus whose operations are otherwise automatic and unremarkable. Similarly, in 'Making', the "power of hands over our thought" (2014: 37) is not a loss of agency to the apparatus, but the site on which a play against that apparatus takes place: the choice of language, the diving into the flow of words, is a redirection of a program he did not write but can still inhabit inventively. This reading clarifies why the role of the apparatus in this study cannot be settled with a single formula: the apparatus is neither simply an external constraint on the subject nor collapsed into it, but the very field across which Flusser's gestural freedom is exercised.

This is, ultimately, why it was asserted above that the essays are more effectively read as a series of selfies. Selfies seldom exist alone and instead relate across a network of impressions: scrolling the social media feed is reading these disjointed essays that compel a reader to perceive Flusser in each instance—never complete, but always consistent. Flusser offers a productive way of navigating the problem of phenomenology and the body, not by ignoring the body but by deferring (bracketing!) a unified perception of the body and obliging an onlooker to consider the body in a new way. Because if the body is reduced to gestures, it can only exist as a series of affects that unfold into and across apparatus. The anti-dualism of mind/body championed by phenomenology is held by Flusser; the parade of affects results in an image of a body that we know to be whole in its fragmentation.

Conclusion: Towards a Theory of Technical Gestures

By reading *Gestures* as a series of selfies, this work demonstrates the illusion of the individual. Each instance where Flusser attempts to fully realise himself, his body, or his gestures appears to 'collapse'. By examining these movements as selfies, the reader turns Flusser's mask around, and that essay ('Turning the Mask Around') becomes Flusser at his most bare. He declares, most readily (like selfie-takers), that he is looking at himself looking at himself. As he writes (94): "If I take the mask off and look at it from the outside, I see how others have seen me. In this sense, the removal of the mask is self-recognition. But if I take it off and look at it from the inside, I see a gray surface that extends […] The political, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of the mask are all located on its other side, now invisible. […] in turning the mask over, I find myself beyond good and evil. […] in which the untheatrical, posthistorical form of being finds expression."

Flusser demonstrates that the body in phenomenology needs to be rearticulated as an array of affects. While this perceiving thing cannot be bracketed away—as Husserl would infer—the body can occupy our phenomenological ἐποχή as a series of gestures: movements that allow for the possibility of perception that in turn allows for an intentionality towards freedom.

But what remains to be examined in light of this thesis is Flusser's work on apparatus and the technical image. If mind/body is to collapse to allow for new forms of perception, the apparatus/subject dyad needs to do so as well. If the technical image is an image created via an apparatus, the technical gesture is a movement of the body in which the limitations of perception are dictated, captured, and presented via the inseparability of the apparatus and the subject. This then requires another definition of a technical image: not one produced by apparatus, but one produced by the desubjectified subject of the apparatus. This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper; however, the groundwork that the above research presents demonstrates that by solving concerns with the body in phenomenology through gesture, Flusser requires that we reconsider how individuals perceive their relation to media (specifically) and the lifeworld (generally) through movements dictated via their perception: and reconsidering perception in this way is the first intentional act gesturing towards freedom.

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