

**Simone Osthoff**

**Performing the Archive and Vilém Flusser**

In contemporary art, performances in, with, and of the archive continue to produce a transformation of the archive as a repository of documents to the archive as a dynamic and generative medium. Artists who literally exhibited the archive as artwork, and those who questioned the archive's institutional boundaries, contributed to change the archive's former stability, function, use, and meaning. This change in the archive's ontology, produced in part by the contamination between artwork and documentation, reveals that history is neither completely outside the realm of art nor entirely inside of it, but in continuous relays.

Over the last decade, my interest in artworks that disrupt the archive evolved roughly in three phases and related directions. The first examined the work of artists, mostly Brazilian, who destabilized the archive by creating fluid boundaries between their artworks, their writings, and archives. These reflections are included in my book *Performing the Archive* from 2009.<sup>1</sup> The second direction are collaborations in the context of the digital humanities—two creative projects at Penn State University developed with designers, researchers, and musicians in 2012-13. The third phase, still unfolding, focuses on the fluid boundaries between the subject and the object of research, especially in decolonial practices and histories. In every instance, insights into the archive stemmed primarily from the dialogue with artists, but also from the exploration of a few curators and theorists, including Vilém Flusser.

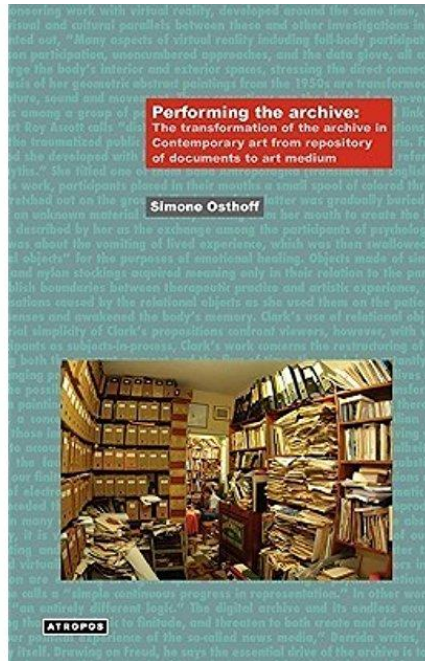
My encounter with Flusser's ideas began with *A História do Diabo* (*History of the Devil*, his second book, published in Brazil in 1965). The book, organized according to the seven deadly sins, playfully approached history and the creation of linear time, as the work of the devil. This early work already contained Flusser's philosophical style of thinking across disciplines, such as this suggestion in one of his last essays from 1990:

If we abandon the idea of possessing some identifiable hard core, and if we assume we are imbedded within a relational network, then the classical distinction between “objective

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<sup>1</sup> S. Osthoff, *Performing the Archive: the transformation of the archive in contemporary art from repository of documents to art medium*. New York: Atropos, 2009.

knowledge” and “subjective experience” will become meaningless. If inter-subjectivity becomes the fundamental category of thinking and action, then science will be seen as a kind of art (as an intersubjective fiction), and art will be seen as a kind of science (as an intersubjective source of knowledge).<sup>2</sup>



Simone Osthoff, Performing the Archive

In 2007, I visited Flusser’s archive at the Universität der Künste in Berlin and I began to think of its unique organization—around key concepts and the multiple translations-versions of his essays, published in the four languages—as a dynamic artistic project in itself. And I believe that was also the perspective of the curators of the 2015-16 exhibition *Without Firm Ground: Vilém Flusser and the Arts*, which displayed and discussed Flusser’s archive and philosophical legacy in three exhibition venues and symposia.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Vilém Flusser, “On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)”, *Leonardo*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (1990): 399.

<sup>3</sup> Bodenlos—Vilém Flusser und die Kunst [Without Firm Ground—Vilém Flusser and the Arts] was curated by Siegfried Zielinski, Baruch Gottlieb, and Peter Weibel. It was showcased at the ZKM in Karlsruhe (Aug. 14 - Oct. 18, 2015), the Akademie der Künste in Berlin (Nov. 19, 2015 to Jan. 10, 2016); and at West Den Haag in The Hague 2016 (Mar 19th – May 7th 2016). In each venue, the exhibition was accompanied by an international symposium. I participated in the West Den Haag Symposium: Vilém Flusser—Synthetic Thinking (April 15-16, 2016), videos of the conference at [http://westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/16\\_04\\_Flusser/more1](http://westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/16_04_Flusser/more1)

Similar concerns with language, translation, and the development of digital culture are central to artists who challenged traditional definitions of the archive, especially Paulo Bruscky and Eduardo Kac, who explore verbal and visual dimensions of technology, communication networks, architectural spaces, and performances, while also historicizing the movements they participate in in the 1970s and 1980s.



Visiting the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin in 2007

Lygia Clark's and Hélio Oiticica's participatory legacies were also influential, especially Clark's emphasis on the topology of the Möbius Strip, a concept which seamlessly connects inside and outside, beginning and end, above and below. It suggests, as did Flusser, a more fluid research method of exchange between subject and object, distance and engagement, science and art.



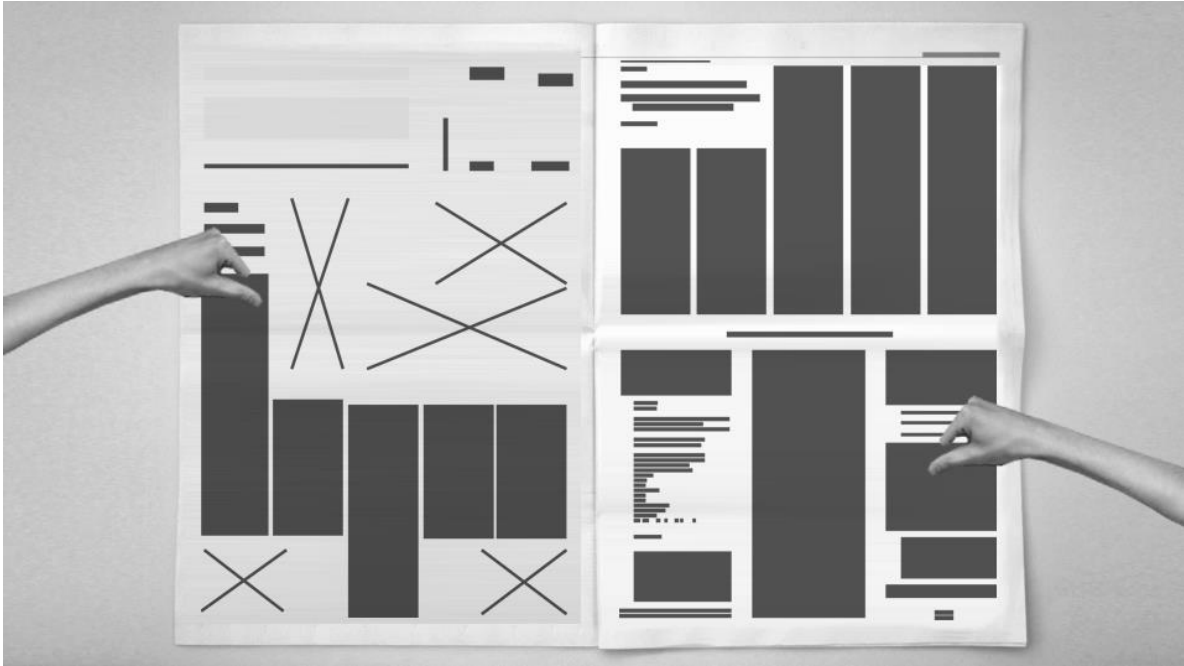
Paulo Bruscky's archives in the Torreão neighborhood, Recife, Brazil, 2004.  
(Photograph by Léo Caldas, provided by the artist).

### **Playing data archives in the context of the digital humanities**

In 2012, looking for ways to visualize the almost three thousand pages of a newspaper archive—the *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*— published in Rio de Janeiro between 1956 and 1961, I began collaborating with designer Candice Ng. We first made a video piece identifying visual patterns that could be translated into other media. Later this video, which translated graphic elements into shapes and rhythms, was automatized by a computer programmer, opening up through OCR technology, ways to search text, in addition to opening this archive for new forms of research and interpretation.

The *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*—SDJB is a newspaper cultural supplement published in Rio de Janeiro between 1956 and 1961, when it became a venue for much of the cultural debate during the visionary years of the Juscelino Kubitschek's government. The SDJB made history, both in form and content, with its graphic design increasingly reflecting concrete and later neoconcrete ideas, which after 1959, influenced the design of the whole newspaper, transforming the *Jornal do Brasil* into a standard of innovation for years to come. (This video can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/46111510>)





Study for the *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil* video showing the graphic innovations of this publication. Photograph by Candice Ng, 2012.

This project grew into a larger collaborative research exploring various forms of data visualization, materialization, and sonification. Titled *Playing the Archive*, the collaboration took place in the Studio Lab—a research incubator bringing together the arts and sciences at Penn State University. Participants included Nilam Ram, Brian Orland, Candice Ng, Michael Coccia, Simone Osthoff, Mark Ballora, as well as visiting percussionists Robyn Schulkowsky and Joey Baron. This project culminated in a well-attended public performance in the Bio Behavioral Health Building auditorium on Feb. 4, 2013, when nine data archives were played as musical scores, including the eight pages of the Neoconcrete Manifesto published in the *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*. (Videos and documentation of this project can be found here: <http://playingthearchive.com/#/>)



Studio Lab workshop in preparation to the *Playing the Archive* performance, February, 2013

In this performance, Schulkowsky and Baron read the graphic patterns of the eight pages of the Neoconcrete manifesto as a music score, assigning different sounds and rhythms to headlines, text columns, concrete poems, and photographs. And also by interpreting the white space of the pages as pauses. More than fifty years after its publication, we heard the rhythms of this remarkable work, which I continue to analyze.

### **What do we owe to our “object” of study?**

Decolonial practices and shifting boundaries between subject and object have been the third emphasis of my research on archives since 2010, as I continue to engage the challenges of historicizing contemporary media art by focusing on the exclusion of cultural heritages, usually located at the margins of mainstream histories. Collections and histories of display explored by curators, designers, and artists often point to *other* histories through original approaches to the obsolescence of artifacts. Among them is the Turkish acclaimed author Orhan Pamuk’s hybrid project *The Museum of Innocence*, which combines a novel, published in 2006, and the creation of a museum with the same name, inaugurated in Istanbul in 2013.

Another example and a provocative approach to narrative and display of objects is designer Leanne Shapton's fictional auction catalogue, titled *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry*, 2009. It highlights a collection of objects, which are described objectively, dispassionately, and with the technical jargon of objects for the auction block, and yet, they obliquely tell a fascinating story of love and loss. Loss and material destruction are also present in the *Suplemento Domini-cal of the Jornal do Brasil*. These pages documented a few artworks never built or destroyed, and which were central to the Neoconcrete movement.<sup>4</sup>

Relations between subject and object are the focus of the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's book, *Metafísicas Canibais* [Cannibal Metaphysics], a book manifesto in which he raises questions such as: what is it that we conceptually owe to our subject of study, [in my case, the artists and art objects]? Can a transdisciplinary perspective include the point of view of the object? Would such perspective, as he argues in the field of anthropology, contribute to decolonize our thinking? Does it create other histories? More than a reversal of the positions between subject and object we seek new connections between them. In this discussion, Flusser continues to be influential, addressing and questioning anthropocentrism by exploring the point of view of a deep-sea animal in his *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*.

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<sup>4</sup> See my forthcoming chapter, "Overlooked Sites of Neoconcretism: the Newsroom, the Dance Floor, and the Flooded Underground" in *Sighting Technology in Modern and Contemporary Latin American Art*, Maria Fernandez, ed., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Institute for Comparative Modernities, 2018.