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Dear Flusser – Dear Don
Letters from 1973 – 1983

2 friends, 10 years, 60 letters

Image or word, which came first? This is an old discussion, and while “In the beginning was the word“ is a well-known phrase, a more interesting take on it might be “I think that it all started with a picture! (Although I often suspect it could as well have been a stomachache!) (even diarrhea!)“¹

Does an image contain more essence than words? Are both just tools? Is it possible to be concrete or can we only be abstract? Can we use words to break through words? Are we creating the painting or is the painting creating us? Do we think an idea or does it think us? Is there an It with a capital I? Must it be absolute? Must it be known? Must it be true, or does it just have to work? Are we polar bears, jumping from iceberg to iceberg, or are the icebergs just mirrors and we are all opticians?

Don Stacy worships the image and art more than almost anything else, he enjoys word games, nicknames philosophers, shows emotions in every other line of his wild handwriting and knits chains of brackets, one making fun of the other. He does not mind being called Dan for nine years of the friendship presented here, but he does mind his friend’s tendency to simplify things by breaking them in half (accompanying a long list of Western dialectical thinkers).

A less bouncy, but no less curious or less innovative mind quotes – instead of Castaneda – Plato and Socrates; and it is highly unlikely that Flusser would refer to the latter as “Sock”. Flusser’s brackets do not contain jokes, but the Latin origins of the words. The “verbal magician“ Flusser, according to Stacy, follows a path of producing more and more words in forms of essays, books, and lectures, while the “optician“ Stacy, according to Flusser, just as meticulously paints, teaches, and also writes. But while Stacy trusts the image, Flusser trusts the words and the languages. To give an impression of Don Stacy’s work, a few reproductions have been added at the end of this article and within the present issue of Flusser Studies (with kind permission of Bernice Stacy).

This friction between the “magician” and “optician” continues throughout the correspondence, and other topics pop up, disappear or recur later. Flusser and Stacy work partly in the same area, with different tools and different emphases. The pattern of a communicative dance the two men are performing across the Atlantic is shaped by different displays of commitment

¹ Stacy, June 26th, 1975.

and hesitation, revealing euphoria and criticism, egotism, hope, humor and friendship. The way both deal with information beyond the theoretical discourse, e.g., organizing travels or moving houses, is also of interest, particularly concerning their relationship. Although they do not discuss daily life in detail, we can still view those kinds of practicalities, responsibilities, worries about colleagues, money, and family as the glue to their lives; hence, the letters refer to at least as many contexts and encounters of the everyday as they contain otherwise theoretically dense content.

This account of a letter exchange is merely an initiation of analyzing Stacy's and Flusser's discussion of art and related theoretical concepts. Their friendship weaves back and forth into the discussion, constantly changing their communication. I here present the correspondence in seven stages, taking them as a point of departure for my future research.

Spark. March/April 1972.

The spark between the two men lights in March 1972 when Vilém Flusser's article "Bottles" is published in the magazine *Main Currents of Modern Thoughts*. The text discusses what we learn about the human condition in the way we deal with our bottles; filled, empty, disposed or changed.

One member of the board of editors of *Main Currents*, Stacy, is working on experience. Searching for meaning within and outside of him and others, Stacy deals with artistic experiments regarding forms, among other things. He is convinced that, in art, a form has to be found that reveals itself and should then be captured in order to make it also visible for others in this self-revealing way. Stacy also tied this conviction to his idealistic interest in the improvement of the human condition. What links him to Flusser right from the start is the joy of disagreement and the strong sense of knowing that one's own opinion is the right one, but still being curious why someone developed another opinion.

Donald L. Stacy was 47 when he read Flusser's article. The artist was born September 3rd, 1925, in New Jersey and, in 1953 and 1954, received a Fulbright grant for studying in France. He had his first exhibition in New York at the George Wittenborn Gallery in 1955. From 1956 on he was an instructor of drawing and painting at the Art Centre at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. In 1959, his work was shown at the Biennale at the Documenta II in Kassel. He lived in New York City with his wife Bernice Stacy, where for many years he headed the "Stacy Studio Workshop". He died in April 2008.

In February 1973, Stacy puts a sheet of paper in his typewriter because he wants to criticize Flusser's view on art: it does not include a space for art to serve as a model for the world. Stacy

presents his main ideas concerning art and society to Flusser in an empathic, friendly, warm way, testing the waters, but remaining very serious about the matter, interested in communicating.

1. First encounter. February/March 1973.

Stacy. February 12th 1973. New York City.

Donald Stacy starts his first letter with the expression of a feeling: “Dear Mr. Vilém Flusser, your article in *Main Currents* was very moving to me. It made me happy to be one of the board of editors.” After mentioning that the next issue of *Main Currents* will contain one of his texts, he criticizes Flusser’s view on art. He emphasizes especially the potential that lies within art, its universal background and effect on individuals: “The deeper aspects of art deal with transformation.”

Stacy agrees with Flusser on the fact that art is a language, but states that one has to include the Orient when thinking about this topic. For him, an elite is also a factor when talking about art, not a financial or status-determined elite, but one in terms of intellectual openness: “I can only say that the full appreciation of this type of expression is not for mass man.” He thinks that to try to change humanity as a whole can be counterproductive for one’s own needs. His thoughts about modern communication go in a similar direction: “I am always surprised at the idea of modern communications - and this has become the mother of much of today’s art. Why is speed stressed?” “Time is money” is not worshipping of time, but its diminution. He emphasizes that artwork of every kind that affected him, has left him changed for good, consciously or unconsciously. “How can time as speed, then be measured? Must I test my change against the reactions of society? God forbid!”

His quest regarding Flusser is to achieve a place in his theories so that art can be “a model of man and universe” in order to change individuals not for a time, but for a lifetime. “My art does this, however small. If I am not changed by my own work, it cannot live for others. I will not reinforce a mass culture just because time and numbers demand it. (They always have.) Time and numbers pass, it is the individual who leaves a mark.”

When Flusser receives Stacy’s first letter, he is 53 and lives a nomad’s life together with his wife Edith, traveling, writing, publishing, lecturing in Europe. To be in contact with many friends and thinking partners remained important during the entirety of Flusser’s life, while Stacy, on the other hand, increasingly draws back from social expectations in the art and academic scene, although he stayed in touch by corresponding with a lot of influential thinkers. To him, being true to insights, keeping up his own work, focusing on teaching and learning is of highest priority.

Flusser. March 3rd 1973. Merano, Italy.

Flusser's reply was written two weeks after Stacy's initial letter, which is quick, taking into account delivery time. Flusser answers in a critical way, polite and thankful, appreciating the possibility to exchange arguments with someone who has similar interests.

"Dear Mr. Stacy, let me thank you for your letter and say it is replies like these that prove that publishing is not an entirely futile commitment. (You know this well, since you publish and exhibit.) Now your letter is very rich in suggestions, and I shall take up only three of them." He discusses: 'art as language', a universal reality, and the discussion of an elite. In summary, he argues: Art is a language. Languages as systems composed of symbols are codes, and the sum of the symbols' meanings that compose the code is the universe of that specific language. Art has three codes concerning message: epistemological ones, ideological ones, and aesthetic ones. Symbol and meaning have a special relationship in the latter, and the structure of the aesthetic codes and the structure of their universe have a special relationship. Two-dimensional aesthetic codes have specific problems, and then there is the problem of translation, the trans-codifying, "like the attempt you and I are now making. I should love to have your comments on this from your 'codifying praxis'". He continues: Concerning the Oriental contribution, there is not such a thing as a universal reality behind everything because every code has its own universe, though some do overlap. The oriental codes contribute to our problems only in so far as they are translatable! Calligraphy is an example for an oriental cultural practice that has something in common with Western tradition.

About Elite and mass: "I am just as aristocratic as you are, but with a bad conscience." The „I“ is not individually determined, but collectively („I am 'I', because I am Occidental, and bourgeois, and twentieth century, and so forth.“). Because society sustains the individual, the individual owes something to society: "I can be the beautiful 'I I am, because children in North-Eastern Brazil are dying of hunger." To talk about an intellectual elite means alienation – but still, "bad conscience is not a program, especially if I agree (as I do), with most of the things you say in this matter."

Furthermore, Flusser states that time in communication should not be underestimated, because we have only a limited amount for our use. Concerning the changing of the world, he writes "to be changed is the same as to change the world (dialectically), and therefore in a sense the only reasonable test of your change is the reaction of society." The letter ends with "As you see, I love to argue. This is my way of showing you my sympathy, and my gratefulness for your letter. Please stay in contact with me. I am aristocratic enough to agree with you, there are few of

us who can discuss those questions. I shall stay under the above address until the end of March, so please answer quickly. Cordially yours.“

In this first encounter many ideas are expressed that stay important and shape their discussion as well as their relationship: e.g., the topics universal reality/ change through art continue to be significant issues. Stacy also offers to support Flusser with networking. The realization of this offer will become an important factor in Flusser's activities in the U.S. later on, and also a sensitive point in their relationship. Flusser's mentioning of his love to argue as a way of showing sympathy is also something the reader of the letters will be reminded of in the discussions and misunderstandings to come.

2. The first deeper dive. March 1973.

Following this first epistolary encounter, they talk in the next letters about codes, knowledge, consciousness, art's role as a bridge, universality, truth and alienation.

Stacy. March 11th 1973, New York City.

“Dear Vilém Flusser, your letter was as pleasurable to me as your article!“ Stacy then goes immediately into the relationship of codes – knowledge, the universal reality (is there a place behind creation?) and the possible contact with another person. The unknowable: „To have art, the great tool of genuine revolution, fall into this mass minded trap is shameful.“

For him, it is clear: „Knowledge is and will also be limited in essence. “Why? Because knowledge is based on consciousness, therefore on separation from „that which truly is“. “In order to really ‘know’ man must remain clear and precise as to his separateness from reality. Reality would in fact be that from which his separateness stems. Once this ‘whole’ is broken, all understanding is relative. Even ‘another’ reality (Castaneda) will not change this. That which is unknown is unknown because of man's conscious separation from the wholeness of reality. This is the basis for Garden of Eden longings, back to nature, etc.“

In this concept, art has the role of bridging the known and the unknown. Every people create a different bridge to this as Klee puts it: “the place before creation.“ For Stacy, the symbol-image is the best possible expression for unknown content, which makes art poetical. And exactly that part of art that stays untranslatable turns an object into art. Culture is forming art, but the limitations are the limitations of translations. How to codify the universality of humans? That is the problem of the future, therefore it is the one of art today.

Stacy ends with considering that to reach the truth, it might take two decades, and it might take five years to reveal a part of the true inner nature to a close one.

Flusser. March, 16th 1973. Merano, Italy.

Flusser writes about knowledge: “For me it goes without saying that all knowledge is possible only through the mediation of symbols. ... This is not to deny that we have some direct experience of reality, ...but only that we can know what is real.“ Concerning the alienation of human beings, he agrees with Stacy, but not concerning the universal reality and the universal human. „We can know nothing directly about reality, not even whether it is ‘one’.“

The role of art: “Of course, the type of knowledge art offers is different from what is offered by science and ideology: science articulates public and general, (theoretical) knowledge, ideologies articulate imperative projections as public knowledge, and the arts articulate private experience through the public space toward another private experience in the form of knowledge. But, nonetheless, art is geographically and historically conditioned just like ideologies and science. First, because all private experience is so conditioned. Second because the way it articulates itself, (the way the artist works), is so conditioned. And third because the reception of the message, (the way art is experienced), is so conditioned. ... (This is what characterizes art: it is a communication of a private experience which is experienced in private.) Therefore, and paradoxically: what makes art universal is the fact that it is understood by everybody in his own way.“ Flusser then asks Stacy where he can see his work, because “this is the way you articulate your knowledge in that matter.“

Stacy. March 25th 1973. New York.

Without any greeting or address, Stacy begins: “Sooner or later I knew I’d have to face the fact that my image making would move between us and words.“ He moves Flusser to his side, in opposition to the words. To address that situation, Stacy attaches a reproduction of one of his works and explains about his work process: that he paints without an image and finds a personification by solving an abstract texture/ shape problem.

“As a rather overstocked mind, my only goal is to surprise myself. When this happens the image has a kind of life. Every time I look, the image continues to surprise me. Then I have the feeling that something as yet unknown to me has personified itself. To me it is a moot point as to whether or not I create the painting or it creates me. Mostly it is mutual!“ His definition of gnosis is tied tightly to that belief, because the ‘knowing’ that expresses itself in the image is a knowing deeply entangled with experience. “Only an individual can have a knowing-experience, and each individual is time bound creating a vast area that remains beyond knowing. This unknown is seldom diminished.“

Concerning codes and art, he writes that the difference between their two views is one of emphasis: while Flusser stresses the cultural code, for Stacy the individual life experience is more important – because to him, mankind is an abstraction to man. Universal reality: whether or not it exists, is an existing idea. Therefore it can be seen as a part of reality that can be experienced. “Alienation to me is the split that gave birth to consciousness. As a distinct cultural code word I find it boring. Too many filled bellies cry about alienation. I am not alienated, I am also alienated! Yet I am never alone, for which responds to the name given it has an editor’s role.”

He again emphasizes the potential of art to be a tool for creating world-models. “The paradox is that the unique atypical individual carries a total species pattern within him. As the impersonal base is made personal, or the personal is made impersonal, the possibility of a new image immerses. The ‘absolute’ center of the individual is universal! At this point we enter the code of paradox, which I admit fits my feelings best!”

3. Cooling Off. April 1973 - February 1974.

While these first letters between them seem to be a good starting point for a deepening discussion, the following letters show the opposite, although a personal meeting takes place. Flusser’s replies from April to November 1973 are caring, sharp, but shorter, in length as well as in depth and consideration. Flusser organizes his journey to the US; mediating agent Stacy helps him to get public speeches by contacting many people. Flusser and his wife travel to New York City in December. As a matter of fact, Flusser has several public lectures thanks to Stacy’s contacts, but he does not meet Stacy – at least not in a sense that would result in more than small talk. In January, Flusser writes a sort of excuse to Stacy.

Flusser. February 25th. 1974. Merano, Italy.

In the letter landscape, this one is definitely the coldest point of the cooling off phase. The phase of cooling off can be explained by acknowledging that both men had many obligations, despite the common goal: to get Flusser to the States. When there finally is the possibility to do so, it seems odd that the result of this work from both sides benefits only one of them. So, after not meeting, Flusser writes: “Dear Don, you live in a terrible town: one gets together, but one does not meet there. Too much excitement in the air, too many ideas floating around, too little concentration. But you have built an island around you. I am sorry we did not really land on your island. We just took advantage of your friendly help, but gave nothing in return. I hope there will be soon a next time. Or will you be coming here and give us a chance to retribute something?”

He promises to write, and asks Stacy to write if he has anything to say. “Your thought, (and action), is fertilizing to me.” With warm greetings, he sends the note.

During the last 8 months, Flusser continuously used Stacy’s contacts and stressed several times that he wants to meet up with him, too. From Stacy’s perspective, this is not the behavior of a friend as the next letter shows.

4. Opening up. March - August 1974.

In March 1974, Stacy’s answer starts a new phase of communication in their relationship. He writes very openly and expresses being hurt and feeling exploited.

Stacy. March 11th 1974. New York City.

“Dear VF I am not sure how to write. We revealed each other – to each other. I like your mind, but it is, after all, only a tool- like a beautifully designed axe – or hoe. If you think you are this tool, then it is all over- for the tool of the mind has you. (I have escaped this particular trap!) But my attempt at honesty was – from another vantage point – just an unworldly weakness, and I was disappointed that you rejected it. I guess I had better get used to it!” He mentions his friendship with a writer who lived in Switzerland. Stacy traveled to Zurich to meet him – “of all places!” His statement contains some self-pity, but he does not take himself too seriously. “So I remain alone – amidst a hundred student-admirers (fortunately women!) (I must do something right!).”

Concerning Flusser’s behavior in New York, he writes: “That you needed contacts etc.- no problem. To make a great change in life – for you – as for me – great courage. No problem for me to understand and to admire that. But if there can be no simple revelations between two people? Then it is really of little interest. You realize that I write this against my better judgment; I still offer you my weakness it seems. But you must know that what is said is different from what is trying to be expressed. For this you need an image. An image that floods you and then – in the midst of all the words – you simply know. To have a mutual image, mutual ‘knowing’. That is surely worth looking for! I understand by gnosis – not being afraid to what you know. Words are the most ancient – and contemporary tricks to take away this ‘knowing’. You are – in this way – a trickster. You follow the words and do not see the person. It is very pleasurable – as I really know – but it is a kind of rape. (Not always undeserved or unasked for!) So I am not sure what this all will mean. You will have to tell me. I liked you both – but that terrible group shocked my poor weak system!”

Flusser. April 26th, 1974. Fontevraud, France.

Flusser answers after a month: “Dear Dan, your letter of March 11th remained so far in my files unanswered. I might say because we traveled a lot, but that would be only the apparent truth of the matter. The fact is: yours is not a letter that can be answered by a letter.” He defends himself: “[Y]ou put yourself in the passive role, as if a ‘rapport’ depended only on my, (not your) attitude. So that’s that. And then there is this way of yours of looking at words and the mind, (words and the mind are almost the same thing), as if they were tools like brushes. How can I answer you with words of my mind after that? You know: to me words are the essence. ... If you do not allow me to speak, you do not allow me to be. I am a writer of words, and this is me. In a sense you are right: I am a tool of words. ... To me as a writer, as one possessed by words, human contact cannot be but ‘dialogue’, (transparent words). Please: read this by making my words transparent. And make my words vibrate within you. ... In short: let this letter be one of words that speak like mouths. And let us try again: you being a painter of images, and I am a writer of words, speaking with each other. Your friend.”

Flusser hopes that his own words vibrate in his friend. He wants his words to become transparent. He uses both tactile and visual metaphors for what he wants to achieve with his words, deliberately emphasizing a quality that Stacy accuses him of losing when not looking beyond the words. They use different tools. What remains is Stacy’s desire for sympathy.

Stacy. Without date. 1974. New York City.

Stacy is firm in his expectations towards friendship, and clarifies his position: “That I look for real relationships, and not for overlong flirtations. My own value is not in doubt! But since I am really an outsider I do not have to support ambition, and I loath power plays and using people. So I am – must be – watchful.” He does not care about the opinions and behaviors of all people: “But I had hoped to strengthen a relationship with you.”

He confronts Flusser with an accusation: “So I can only surmise that you indeed are your tools, and since all language is an abstraction – you become an abstraction. This is not something I need. As for my passivity – I did an enormous lot of work in your behalf (So passive my ass!) You are very weak on feeling. You listen to the words but not to what the words are trying to say. (Something in you surely listens – but I’m overstressing) I always leave a kind of active vacuum within me when I listen. All kinds of amazing forms show themselves then – and I grasp, to some extent. That odd shape from whence come the other persons words. I would touch – and be touched at that spot just before the words were formed! Now I can’t say this kind of thing to many people I try with you – but as much as I admire your mind – I am still asking for an exchange that goes beyond abstraction. It is a lot. (We are both fortunate!) If this doesn’t appeal to

you, say it. The spermatic word is not dialectic, and when poor Mary got it in the ear a slight squinting of the eyes was her only (pictorial) response! Now aside from all that – and I hope you realize I am not attacking or complaining – just reaching – I am still happy to help you...“ This letter makes clear that Stacy still has to express some critique, but it is simultaneously a reaction to Flusser’s call to “Let us try again”. Flusser is also open to a discussion of feelings as the next letter reveals.

Flusser. May 12th, 1974. Fontevraud, France.

Flusser responds to the desire of fostering a concrete relationship rather than a verbal one. “Now your second letter, by stressing the moment of articulation, and by questioning the sincerity of the Main Currents crowd, made everything much clearer. You do not really mean concrete and abstract relationship, (this can be had only on a physical and on an intellectual level), but you mean sincere relationship and one which uses the partner as a tool. What you felt in New York was not that I was being abstract, but that I was using you. It shows your deep insight that you quite correctly localize the problem in the creative moment in articulation.“

He is also self-critical, feeling that he has come to understand what Stacy means. “You can find out whether somebody is lying by examining the meaning of his words, or by examining his face. In the second case you examine the moment of articulation. Now friendship is a relationship in which you do not examine the partner’s face: you trust him. (‘Trust’ and ‘truth’ have the same root.) What you felt in New York was that you had to examine my face. This is what made you physically sick, and not the Main Currents crowd. Our friendship went to pieces, from your side of the relationship.“ He resumes: “In other words: I read your second letter not as a challenge to me as a man and a writer, but as a challenge to me as your friend.“ Flusser assumes a difference between being a writer and being a friend; for Stacy it is one and the same thing, he does not care about the writer when he is not also a friend.

Stacy. May 19th, 1974. New York City.

The clarification of emphasis, interest, and motivation comes to characterize this phase of opening up. Stacy asks for intimacy: “Friendship, to me, is a kind of revealing. I would reveal you to yourself and watch for myself revealed in turn. At least, this is what would be of most value to me. It is a kind of rare exchange granted, but life in all its commonness promotes uniqueness!“ Stacy talks about Flusser’s “razzle dazzle use of words“: “They ricochet... Objects are used as an excuse for leaping. Each new object creates a newly shaped jump!“ He thinks about publishing their exchange: “Well, let us keep going. Maybe we could eventually edit out something from our correspondence.“

By the end of this phase in mid-August of 1974, the letters show two writers who are closer than before. Expressing the conflict has cleared the air. Stacy takes the matter personally, whereas Flusser turns the individual problem into a conceptual one, with the effect that Stacy brings the discussion back to the personal level.

It seems that Stacy is busy professionally as he is emotionally invested in his work while Flusser is busy with Stacy personally because he is interested in widening his art horizon. Also noteworthy is how Flusser appears in this conversation. Compared to other authors writing on philosophy and media developments, he emerges as an alternative voice, he comes across as very intuitive and sometimes imprecise. Compared to Stacy and his definition of friendship, he sometimes seems to position himself as an overly rational intellectual, rather than an emotionally involved friend.

5. Productive Friction. December 1974 - January 1976.

The intense self-reflection of the summer's exchange now forms a solid ground for venturing into a series of sharpened and profound arguments that inspire and challenge both partners. When Stacy and his wife Bernice come to France in the summer of 1973 in order to stay for a while, he and Flusser write regularly. When Flusser suggests a meeting, Stacy is the one who replies "it would be nice to see you but it doesn't really matter, because we are staying in such a close contact by writing."

Flusser. December 29th, 1974. Merano, Italy.

The last letter Flusser writes in 1974 opens with: "Ever since you left France I wanted to write you a long letter and kept postponing it in the vague hope that I might get a letter of you first. Now that the end of the year introduces an artificial "époche into the flux of time, I shall use it for an accounting, reckoning, comptrendu, (or however you call those confessions that have something of a miniature Last Judgment to them). Here it goes, and be my Judge, or Office of Transcendent Revenue, or table tennis umpire." After this rather vague, but inviting introduction, one finds a letter neatly structured in sections a, b and c, geography, history, action. In "a: geography", Flusser lists the names of the places they visited over last few months, and behind every name a bracket describes the place's atmosphere or the ideas triggered by the place. Then he comes to the main topic of this letter: the "New Man". "I don't understand why the New Man wants to live 'intensely', and he doesn't understand why I want life to have a meaning. We cannot communicate, but this is the better part of it: he will be around when my kind has become extinct." Flusser writes: "What 'wisdom' is to the old man, 'pleasure' is to the new one. But al-

though he wants to make love, not war, he is just as much a killer as the old man, because there are too many of him, (from 5 billions upward). But what is most important: although the new Man wants to make love, he cannot love, because he goes constantly hungry.“

Stacy. January 11th, 1975. New York City.

Characteristic of Flusser’s letters is the use of a structured line of thinking, planned, and then fooling around in and around these structures. Stacy, in comparison, starts the letter without restrictions, but then creates frames by using deliberately specifying brackets, often two brackets directly behind each other, one joking about the former one.

Stacy writes “Wise and over–wordy–worldly friend ... I have joyfully pulled out of most of my ‘foreign’ activities – pleasantly filled with disgust towards the Main currents + Fields crews. So I exist in my own integral world, amidst my own moral cowardice! (Someday I will have to learn how to be success oriented!) (I thought a Jewish wife would help!)” Concerning the ‘New Man’: “The deep quest for meaning (which is probably one notch below beauty!) (That is rather high!) I share with you.“ Stacy recommends that Flusser read Castaneda: “please read all four – in sequence. (Very fine and extraordinary!)“

He asks other questions comparing his and Flusser’s view on these and related matters („Or your idea of history is not as historic as mine! Or your belief in ‘man’ is deeper than your faith in a man? Tell me.“), but after all he does not see the need to disagree with Flusser; instead he positions them more and more like “us against them“. With a line of conspiratorial elitism he ends: „Between us – we seem to be ‘there!’“

Flusser. January 26th, 1975. Merano, Italy.

Flusser goes on to equate being unique with being concrete. “Unique, (concrete), means what cannot be compared, therefore cannot be generalized, therefore cannot be theoretized, therefore cannot be spoken about, therefore cannot be imagined, therefore cannot be thought. It can only be experienced, and that’s the end of it.“ He argues for faith as the result of concrete, unique experiences. “Therefore faith cannot be “explained,“ and cannot be supported by proof. “Communication theory, (like any theory), is about unfaith.“

Flusser sums up his own words: “Let me try to resume my cryptic thought: You want me to read Castaneda, think about uniqueness, and have faith in images. I want you to read Kierkegaard and Camus about Don Juan, listen to Mozart, and have faith in the absurdity of the concrete uniqueness. No doubt, in the end we shall meet, because both the New and the Old Man are eternal, (as you so correctly point out in one of your more “inspired“ moments).“

They write frequently during the summer. They keep in close contact, and they maintain the intimate tone.

Stacy. September 5th, 1975. New York City.

Stacy states he liked Flusser's last letter as well as the attached article. "If art is fiction, you are an artist indeed!" The following lines are less flattering; Stacy challenges Flusser once more. (The challenge Flusser puts before Stacy is just one, but quite substantial: that Flusser appears mostly rather unemotional, which requires Stacy to communicate with words which Stacy does not trust very much, but he still has to use them.)

"I am still bothered by something – something you will not admit, so it will be difficult to find it out and air it. But that is what codes are for! I sense that you somehow escape reality. I know that that is a non-sensical statement, but I also know that it will have an effect on you, if only during that split second interval that exists before your trained mind dislodges the effect from language. Once in language, you know what is what."

Stacy states that the element art is based on is the "pure use of abstract form, whatever the code," but that he nevertheless has been able to touch people, "over and under the words." He mentions Socrates who saw education as a tool to help people remember what they always knew but had forgotten. "I have seen that re-awakening look in the eyes of others at times. If the experience can be taken for fact, will it fit into a philosophy without doing it injury?" This last sentence precisely describes the dilemma of the conversation between the two writers. Words form the world for one, while for the other the world is a mute experience. Their grounding and reality are fundamentally different. To accept a fact from the other is to question one's own whole attitude.

Stacy describes his ideal. "It is more a loss of control that gives deeper control – ultimate control it is knowing so much - that one does not know!" He asks "But do you never get the feeling that you are also being thought! Perceived? That those quick mental reflexes that exist without philosophical definition work in more than one direction? I am only posing non-logical answers! (The questions are logical enough!) It is in this realm that I would work, and to me, the 'true' image is that which contains me, the form of art, and that which is simply there. In this sense the image falls under transcendental implications. But this only means that it has no place in the most current philosophies. Not knowing is really my meat! What say you?"

Flusser. October 28th, 1975. Peypin d'Aigues, France

Flusser needs more than a month to use his typewriter for a “shout” in Stacy’s direction, although not through lack of time: “The truth is that the ideas you toss over the wall toward me are like rubber balls: they hit me but then bounce off again. I shall nonetheless try to catch two of them and hold on to them: Socrates ‘recollection’, and the feeling that it is we who are being thought.” He ignores Stacy’s accuse that he would escape reality and explains: the old Greeks thought we were thought by heaven and if we discover the source of our thinking, we would gain wisdom. Now, we think what thinks us “is idiotic (chances and statistics), and that if we discover what thinks us, (programs us), we may liberate ourselves from that absurd stupidity of mere “being-just-so” and begin to impose a purpose upon it.”

Flusser concludes: “...dialectics for us is not analysis, but synthesis, not a return, but a revolution. Yes indeed I feel that I am being thought, but I also feel that it is not a He, but an It that thinks me.” Despite his Jewish origin, he is more on line with Faust: “I hear the message, but I lack faith in it.” He ends: “I know just as little as you do, but I believe even less than you do. Write more often.”

Stacy. October 6th, 1975². New York City.

“Dear v.w. (joke, you are much bigger than that, but dear rolls or royce is too much!) Anyway, your letter was very good indeed. The connection between Sock and our times, quite fine. But I have a few more balls left! (Let the follis bawl!) You really have put the case well. If it is possible to circumvent the language (!) perhaps we can get a little deeper. (Too bad you are not a woman, to paraphrase Rex Harrison!) All these vulgar touches could count more. O.K.” A sparkling beginning of the letter, the jokes so banal that it is hard to resist them, especially because they complement so nicely the sharp and inspiring passage after the OK, which is based on physical experience reflected in the mind. “It returns to the problem of how we know who we are. On a phenomenological level I must accept the experience of my self as true. This experience comes to me on multi levels, often from the feet up, at any rate not always from the head down. The inflow of material washes against an outflow from within and the two smash together to describe a dike-like structure that has a faint outline smothered demand for detachment and stillness in order to ‘see’ what one’s image is like. I must acknowledge this ‘shape’ to be both personal and non personal; and yet, this very act of differentiation can only take place by virtue of a loosely knit bundle of inherent and acquired elements that I ‘know’ as ‘me’.”

² Stacy’s letter, dated October 6th, is irritating, because Flusser’s letter before is dated October 28. I presume Stacy just made a mistake and wrote the letter on November 6th. Stacy refers to Flusser’s letter of November 28th, and Flusser, in the following letter, also refers to Stacy’s letter dated the 6th.

Stacy continues to elaborate on the subject of editing – he sees humans as a combination of different yet related units: “The group of elements that seem to remain identifiable as ‘me’ can be used in an editorial manner. There is a yes or no that is qualitative, and is directly related to quantitative life. It can say yes or no to the act of living itself. In this case it is more than a philosophical problem, it is a central hub around which all studies must revolve.” He elaborates further that, by editing, he recognizes certain qualities that are “accessible and controllable as such, they are my qualities.” But there are also qualities that he experiences which are not being controlled. The first ones are the individual ones, the other ones are typical experiences for mankind. “I must not make the mistake of thinking that everything that goes through my experiential system is me. That is to identify with one’s life; the editor becomes the manuscripts he is to edit.” Stacy says he does not fear the fact that “another one speaks through me, or even lives in me!”, and that he prefers to call this ‘it’ an image-building technique to encourage “a two-way dialogue.” The attitude that works best for him “is that of keeping aware of not knowing.”

He writes about bridges that are made and used for a purpose, but not in order to be owned and to be carried around. “All these images are bridges, and art is that great bridge. The trouble is that everyone ends up standing on the bridge, cherishing its aesthetic details and eventually leaving it as another false path.” Stacy argues that knowledge about oneself comes by knowing more of the “not you”: “The more of the not you that you ‘know’ the more whole you are in the limitations of your personal, historical, lived life. The more real you are.”

Stacy states further: “No absolute knowledge is possible, but knowledge that is built (created) as a bridge to this other can be judged in regard to its function. Does it work or not – not is it true or not. There is no truth in the area of the unknown. That is true phenomenology, as I understand it. So we make a communication system that brings us the ability to further differentiate ourselves and to adapt with a kind of health in the face of the unknown. This ‘health’ shows itself by energy bursts. Certain ways of looking at things, trips over certain bridges – these give me increased disposable energy. Others take energy and deplete me. Since the question is at heart beyond solution, I must take the point of view, which echoes through my system as ‘good’. How does that sound?” Stacy ends with “And keep your eyes open, and your feet dry!!”

While this phase of their correspondence has an air of harmony without being tedious, apparently both Flusser and Stacy do not feel the urge to keep up the intense exchange in the next months, and then years.

6. Fade out. March 1976 - December 1976).

After one letter from Flusser in January 1976, the intensity of contact vanishes and the time periods without writing each other expand. They write 5 letters in total in the 10 months from March to December (one of Stacy's letters is missing and only referred to in Flusser's answer). In December 1976, the conversation comes to a temporary halt.

What happens next is not clear, a long break seems to take place, at least judging from the dates of the available letters. However, there must have been some communication – if not in letters – in between, as Flusser's next letter shows, which expresses an affectionate Thank you.

7. Embrace. March 1982 - March 1983.

In 1982, Flusser writes again, thanking Stacy and his wife for the wonderful time he and his wife had in their home. Flusser is deeply impressed with Stacy's living situation. It seems to have been inspiring and touching to him, and, of course, offered him a new perspective on Stacy's theoretical reflection on his art and art in general, because he was finally able to experience for himself how Stacy argues in practice.

Flusser seems to open up only after meeting Stacy in person, although he is the one who believes more in words than Stacy. Stacy apparently can reveal and commit himself emotionally much more easily in letters, although he is the one repeatedly referring to the trickery of words.

Flusser. March 24th, 1982. France.

“Dear Friend, of all the impressions which our New York trip provoked in me, (and God knows they were numerous), our visit with your wife and with yourself was the most lasting one. I have not yet succeeded in analyzing it: was it your monastic way of life on an ant hill³, or your dignified attitude towards creative work?, or your work itself?, or what I may call your ‘religious wisdom’, (for lack of a more adequate term)? Maybe it is with you as with your ‘figures’: it is hard to discover you, and when one believes to have seized you, you disappear again, unless one continuous to stare at you. But of course: to stare at you is to invert one's look and to stare inside, (at least in my case).“ Flusser mentions reading “Gödel, Escher, Bach,“ and states that this thought “of infinite regression which turns around and becomes infinite aggression was always with me. And it is ‘in the air’, like spring, and it constitutes the spirit of the times, (in your painting and in

³ When asked about her impression of the relationship between Flusser and her husband Bernice Stacy responds: “As to the Flussers' visit, I barely remember it because at the time I was working out of the house, I have only a fleeting image of Don and Flusser being very relaxed in their conversations. However, I think I can explain Flusser's impression of Don's life. He was monastic in that he studied and viewed the world and all it had to offer sitting in his chair, behind his desk, surrounded by his books and paintings. His anthill were the students and people he invited into his life, things he could control and build, a lead ant, if you will.“ Email from August 20th, 2009.

my writing).“ Flusser closes the letter by considering his friend’s situation again as in the beginning of the letter: “I suppose this letter is just such a creeping-in of the world on you. Please react. Let’s keep in touch, and our most cordial greetings to both of you.”

In this letter, Flusser calls Stacy by his real name, Don, for the first time. The close level of communication is kept during the next couple of letters for a bit less than one year, until the final end of their writing (as far as it is possible to detect from the available letters). They spend this phase of their conversation to talk about gods, death, Psychoanalysis (Jung, Hillman, Neumann). The spiritual ideas they have diverge, but their attitude towards the matter has something in common, at least the absolute lack of bias with which they think about these matters and test their ideas in the same independent manner with which they treated all their subjects. In March 1983, Don writes the last archived letter of their conversation.

Stacy. March 7th, 1983. New York City.

“Dear Friend. You have, indeed, become a sage. Your letters are quite beautiful and filled with human response.”⁴ About himself, he writes: “I have been over occupied with odds and ends – painting and writing and teaching. I’m having a one-day exhibit here this Sunday - so I am still working hard - but want to at least acknowledge you.” Stacy writes that it is well possible that every situation in life belongs to the domain of one god, and “the art of worshipping would be to know and to respect that-which-is-there.” He thinks that those gods, by not recognizing them, become autonomous, and can appear demonic, “like any locked away, unadmitted feeling.” The following argument is convincing and charming: “True, this terminology is archaic, even humiliating to ‘modern’ man. But the underside of man is just this archaic element. You don’t quote scripture to an ape, you feed it a banana!”

His personal thoughts about death seem to be free and without fear. “Sometimes I get an odd feeling that it is possible to carry ‘over’ one’s known self – in an unknown way- into other spheres. All of the writing on the subject may not be wish fulfillment. Life seems a tempo, a series of beats. (India) Change the speed and all perception changes. Biology does not quite work.” He ends with: “I do believe – for some old fashioned reason – that dying is important. I would not like to miss it - barring slow crushing etc. Love to both, Don.” Then he turned the page 90 degrees to the right, and wrote in the corner: “You could publish a book – letter to an unknown artist! The English might love it!”

⁴ This opening shows that another one of Stacy’s wishes came true. In the letter from the August 15th, 1974, he writes: “I wish you would let yourself become a Wiseman.”

Talking about the end of life shifts their discussion from being-in-the-world (art, language, reality) to being-outside-the-world (god, death, demons). From the perspective of posterity, this fits almost too well with the fact that at that time their conversation comes to a full stop.

Final comments

When, according to the available documents, their exchange ends, the two men have aged ten years, they are now 63 and 57, and still/again in contact, still/again thinking on parallel tracks. Affection grew, so did gain understanding and acceptance. While one received a lot of recognition and even fame, the other one remained rather unknown to a bigger public, although becoming a worshipped artist in his niche and, more importantly, seems to have reached his personal goals. That probably is one of the reasons why the difference in respect from the outside world did not seem to affect their relationship. Stacy comments on that twice, once just after one of Flusser's trips to France ("I would love to have the freedom of your limitations," 6/8/75), and one in the last letter ("you could publish a book – letters to an unknown artist," 3/7/83). Both lines are not bitter, but rather amused.

The letters between Vilém Flusser and Don Stacy both discuss and display knowledge that comes from direct experience and knowledge that only unfolds by connecting certain experiences with creativity. Their analysis contains concepts (e.g. from the 'New Man') as well as close-ups of human beings (e.g. from each other). Both men continue to define themselves and each other, express their relation to different influences and ideas, vulnerable, strong, and critical. The curiosity they had for their professions made them curious for each other, and that likely is the reason why at one point, the correspondents linked by reciprocal disagreement turn into friends who enjoy the friction between each other. This internal reorganization is mirrored by an external transformation that happens when reading their dialogue today as one text. To reduce the distance between the letters in time and space, decades after they were written one by one, constructs a many folded universe of cross references that still encloses the dialogic tension between mutual frustration and inspiration.

References

All letters between Flusser and Stacy are housed at the Vilém Flusser archive in Berlin.

Chronological Overview⁵

March/April 1972: Bottles, in Main Currents in Modern Thought, Vol. 28, No. 4

1 article >> spark

Stacy:

Flusser:

1973: 15 Letters, 8-7.

February 12th

March 3^d

2 letters >> 1st encounter

March 11th

March 16th

March 25th

3 letters >> 1st deeper dive

April 11th

May 6th.

May 22nd

June 13th

June 19th

September 13th

September 26th

October 16th

November 7th

Nov/ Dec.

1974: 14 Letters, 7- 7

February 25th

11 letters >> cooling off

March 11th

⁵ Quoted letters are in italics.

April 26th

Without date

May 12th

May 19th

May 30th

June 14th

June 28th

July 9th

August 12th

August 15th

12 letters >> opening up

December 29th

November 4th

1975: 13 Letters, 7-6.

January 11th

January 26th

May 5th

May 28th

June 8th

June 15th

June 26th

July 11th

September 5th

October 28th

October 6th

November 20th

December 26th

1976: 6 Letters, 3-3.

January 27th

16 letters >> productive

friction

March 18th

May 1st

July 28th 75 – missing

October 25th

December 12th

5 letters >> fade out

1982: 10 Letters, 4-6.

March 24th

April 12th

April 23rd

May 21st

May 28th

June

July 5th

October 30th

November 29th

December 13th

1983: 1 Letter, 1- 0.

March 7th

11 letters >> embrace

Photographies

of paintings by Don Stacy, property of Bernice Stacy (Don Stacy estate). She writes: „Unfortunately Don very seldomly titled his work, with rare exceptions. He used acrylic paint and I would say the ones I sent were done between 2000 through 2008. He was totally uninterested in dating and naming. He would always say ‚I know who painted them.’“⁶



Picture 1: Untitled (on paper, 25 x 19 ½ inches).

⁶ Email from October 20th, 2009.



Picture 2: Untitled (acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 inches).



Picture 3: Untitled (acrylic on canvas).