

Introduction to the Proceedings of the International Symposium

Transcoding Flusser: Synthetic Thinking

Many people are disaffected with conventional forms of public speaking events. Many panel discussions fail to deliver on the synergetic potentials of the panelists and the unique occasion of the meeting with the public. There is too often too much self-promotion and too little dialog. We wished to address this crisis in a Flusserian manner.

In the ancillary talks program which accompanied the exhibition *Vilém Flusser and the Arts* we strove to elaborate new dialogical formats and approaches which, inspired by Flusser's communicology, would provide more opportunities for the generation of "new information" in "a dialog in which people lose themselves in the subject-matter"¹ (Flusser 1996: 203). We are grateful for the generous collaboration of the speakers and the public.

In late 2015, during the opening of the exhibition at the ZKM in Karlsruhe and the next stop at the Berlin Akademie der Künste, we took the opportunity to begin our experimental elaboration of a utopian dialogical format. We integrated selected Flusser researchers and amateurs attracted by the exhibition into our performative archive concept *Flusser Talks*.² In *Flusser Talks*, Flusser himself is reanimated to take part in the conversation in short clips of archival video recordings. To generate an emancipated dialog, and foster creative engagement in question and answer, we sought synergies in the participants' particular ranges of interests and took an active moderators role in reprocessing the discussion in real time. In April 2016, we had happy opportunity to apply what we had learned from our experiences at ZKM and AdK and rework our approach for a third time at an expanded two-day colloquium-style symposium generously supported by the third host of the exhibition: West Den Haag³.

We worked to provide a space where the dense proposals of the contributors could be metabolized and reprocessed as part of the proceedings. All participants sat together for the entire symposium, speaking and responding spontaneously as we attempted to approach each dialog as an instrument of thought. In this way, we took Flusser's and our research interests seriously by playing with them, fully

¹ "Die Wissenschaft ist ein Dialog, bei dem sich die Leute in der Sache verlieren." Translated into English by ZKM | Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany.

² For further details and the video recordings of the *Flusser Talks* at the ZKM in Karlsruhe see <http://zkm.de/en/event/2015/08/globale-flusser-talks>. For more information on the *Flusser Talks* at the Berlin Akademie der Künste see http://www.adk.de/en/programme/?we_objectID=49585&ym=201511, and thanks to the Vilém Flusser archive in Berlin the video recordings are available on *vimeo*: <https://vimeo.com/157271875>.

³ Further information on the International Symposium *Transcoding Flusser: Synthetic Thinking* at the West Den Haag in The Hague are available at http://westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/16_04_Flusser/more1.

involved in rising to his challenge, to often switch position from listener to speaker and back again, taking the risk to negetropically generate synthetic thinking between us.

So what was the subject-matter we got lost in? Some of the most pressing questions that occur in our research revolve around his call to “use synthetic images”⁴ (Flusser 2010: 36) or to “practise the new *Einbildungskraft*”⁵ (Flusser 1988: 5). But how to do this? Flusser provocatively suggests that technical images may free us from the tyranny of linear thinking⁶ (Flusser 1986: 1). But is there a certain promise of agency, a special notion of freedom?

What new modalities of thinking are implied in Flusser’s claim that the digital transcoding of texts represents a pivotal techno-cultural revolution? How can we apply Flusser’s suggestions of techniques of thinking with and against the apparatus? Several examples in the exhibition show Flusser explicitly trying to use new technologies to philosophize, to generate new ways of thinking technologically. This is how the topic *Transcoding Flusser: Synthetic Thinking* also reworked Flusser’s own transgression of the traditional opposition of art and philosophy and his translation between cultural practices.

Any success we had in generating new information at our symposium was due to all the people who joined the dialog with their special perspectives. What follows are the proceedings of an intense two-day colloquium-style public dialog between Fiona Hanley, Rainer Guldin, Katerina Krtilova, Peter Mahr, Marcel René Marburger, Arjen Mulder, Simone Osthoff and Polona Tratnik, convened and moderated by Baruch Gottlieb and Steffi Winkler, to accompany the Den Haag instance of the exhibition, produced by West Den Haag.

- Rainer Guldin’s insight into translation theory and Flusser’s practice of self-translation is well known because of his 2005 Flusser monography *Philosophieren zwischen den Sprachen* and recently published titles as *Translating Philosophy* or *Translation as Metaphor*⁷, whereas his contribution *Cotton Wool. On Flusserian Methodology and Terminology* explores Flusser’s life-long attempt at theoretical transgression of disciplinary borders and his consistent avoidance of hierarchical and static structures of thought in favour of a principle of mobility and fluidity.

⁴ “It is my firm belief, that if you want to have a clear and distinct communication of your concepts, you have to use synthetic images, no longer words. And this is a veritable revolution in thinking.”

⁵ “Hypothese: Man ging vom Bild zur Schrift, diese wurde vorherrschend, kam in eine Krise, wurde durchbrochen, und nun steht man jenseits der Schrift, in einer neuen Einbildung, in der wir uns erst zu üben haben.” Partly translated into English by the authors.

⁶ “Computer codes, (especially digital ones), may be seen as a liberation of numbers from letters. [...] are synthetic images of equations, (for instance fractal ones)? Imagination delivered of letter tyranny?”

⁷ Rainer Guldin, *Philosophieren zwischen den Sprachen*. Vilém Flussers Werk, Munich 2005 (Wilhelm Fink); Rainer Guldin, *Translating Philosophy: Vilém Flusser’s Practice of Multiple Self-Translation*. In: *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture*, IATIS Yearbook, London et al. 2013 (Bloomsbury, ed. by Anthony Cordingley), pp. 95-109; Rainer Guldin, *Translation as Metaphor*, New York 2015 (Routledge)

- Peter Mahr has an expertise in philosophical aesthetics and attracted our attention with his 2007 paper *Philosopher-Artists, Artist-Philosophers?*⁸ His elaborated contribution “Für eine Phänomenologie des Fernsehens” is divided into three parts that question Flusser’s phenomenology by tracing the references to phenomenological sources, the fate of the eponymous Flusser essay as well as Nam June Paik’s influence on Flusser.
- Fiona Hanley impressed us with her 2014 article *X: The Gesture of Essaying*⁹ just as much as her contribution *Encountering Bibliophagus: An Aesthetics of Reading* stands out as an aesthetic experience of a Flusserian thinking style, poetic, philosophical and performative.
- Polona Tratnik is a brilliant thinker of communications aesthetics and philosophy of art as well as she is a pioneer bio-artist. Her contribution *Art as Acting Against the Program of the Apparatus* focuses on the concept of an artist in Flusser’s thought and discusses the notions of art and creation in connection to (bio)technologies.
- Marcel René Marburger, longtime scientific supervisor of the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin, dedicated his 2010 monography *Flusser und die Kunst*¹⁰ to the aesthetic relevance of Vilém Flusser’s writings and, in his contribution *From Science to Fiction*, pointedly claims Flusser himself was an artist.
- Simone Osthoff, in her 2009 book *Performing the Archive*¹¹, remarkably suggested re-enacting transgressions between fiction and non-fiction by examining Flusser’s concept of techno-imagination. In her presentation *Raising The Temperature Of the Conversation in the 21st Century*, which is accompanied by an introduction, Simone Osthoff connects Flusser’s provocative predictions for a telematics society to current works of arts facing the challenge to critically engage technology.
- Arjen Mulder is both biologist and media theorist, dedicated to studying the relationship between technical media, physical experiences and art. His presentation *Dialogical images in an environment of data*, also accompanied by an introduction, goes beyond Flusser’s distinction of traditional and technical images and explores the meaning of and agency with dialogical images. As a treat especially for the Dutch speaking Flusserians Arjen Mulder’s postscript to *In het universum van de technische beelden*¹² (*Into the Universe of Technical Images*) is republished in this December 2016 issue of the *Flusser Studies*.

⁸ Peter Mahr, *Philosopher-Artists, Artist-Philosophers? A Double Review with Four Footnotes*. In: Peter Weibel, *das offene werk. 1964-1979*, Ostfildern 2007 (Hatje Cantz), pp. 939-944,

http://homepage.univie.ac.at/peter.mahr/Peter.Mahr_PhiKueKuePhiE.pdf

⁹ Fiona Hanley, *X: The Gesture of Essaying*. In: *Flusser Studies* 18, November 2014,

<http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/hanley-the-gesture-essaying.pdf>

¹⁰ Marcel René Marburger, *Flusser und die Kunst*, Köln 2011 (Edition_)

¹¹ Simone Osthoff, *Performing the Archive: The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium*, New York, U.S.A. and Dresden, Germany 2009 (Atropos Press)

¹² Vilém Flusser, *In het universum van de technische beelden*, Utrecht 2014 (Uitgeverij Ijzer, transl. Marc Geerards)

- Katerina Krtilova is a brilliant thinker of media philosophy and dedicated several publications and her doctorate to gestures of thinking¹³ critically following Vilém Flusser. Her contribution *Can we think computation only in numbers?* questions Flusser's concept of techno-imagination and asks for a new kind of thinking.
- Baruch Gottlieb, an artist, curator and organizer, writes on the political economy and historical materialism of electronic and digital art. He is curator and co-creator with Siegfried Zielinski of the exhibition series *Vilém Flusser and the Arts*, based on the philosophical writings of Flusser. His contribution *To Save Philosophy in a Universe of Technical Images* suggests that Flusser's drive towards a form of synthetic thinking through his collaborations with artists was an effort to elaborate new forms of philosophy for the post-historical era.
- Steffi Winkler's doctoral research focuses on narrative and thought patterns in Flusser's writing and is especially immersed in the video recordings of Flusser. Her contribution *Denken neu denken mit Vilém Flusser* hooks into Flusser's transgressing of art and philosophy to search for techniques of thinking with new technologies.
- As part of the creative outcome of our dialog, the contributions in these proceedings vary from annotated or summarized presentations to essays or elaborated scholarly papers. These proceedings as well as the video recordings of all the talks¹⁴ also invite you to join the dialog!

We thank West Den Haag very much for generously hosting the symposium and especially for embracing our experimental approach and providing for the freedom of the dialogical sphere. Special thanks also go to the *Flusser Studies* for providing the opportunity to publish the proceedings.

We must warmly thank the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin for the excellent and invaluable support, the ZKM | Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe and the Berlin Akademie der Künste for their enthusiasm and professional assistance in every step of the production of the exhibitions and ancillary talks programmes for *Without Ground – Vilém Flusser and the Arts*. We must also thank all the artists who generously participated in the exhibition, and all the students from the UdK who were of invaluable assistance to the realization of the exhibition, and last but certainly not least Siegfried Zielinski, who diligently and carefully shepherded the Vilém Flusser Archive to Berlin as it accrued a vibrant community

¹³E.g. Katerina Krtilova, *Gesten des Denkens. Vilém Flussers 'Theorie des Gesten' als Medienphilosophie*. In: Toni Hildebrandt et al. (Ed.), *Bild und Geste. Figurationen des Denkens in Philosophie und Kunst*, Bielefeld 2014 (Transcript Verlag); Katerina Krtilova, *Inverse Motion of Thinking: On Technoscience, Gesture, and Writing*. In: MAP – Media/Performance/Archive, #7 *Media/Performance: On Gestures*, 2016, <http://www.perfomap.de/map7/media-performance-on-gestures/inverse-motion-of-thinking-on-technoscience-gesture-and-writing>. The project title of her as yet unpublished dissertation is *Gesten des Denkens. Vilém Flussers Medienphilosophie*.

¹⁴ For a collection of the video recordings of *Transcoding Flusser: Synthetic Thinking* published on *vimeo* by West Den Haag see http://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/16_04_Flusser/more2.

of avid Flusserians, a community of knowledge and appreciation which found concretion in the exhibition series.

Steffi Winkler and Baruch Gottlieb

Berlin, November 2016

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