

Martha Schwendener and Marc Lenot
Vilém Flusser's *Orthonature Paranature*

Orthonature Paranature is Flusser's third book in French, after *La Force du Quotidien* in 1973 and *Le Monde codifié* in 1974, and the last published in France during his lifetime. It was published in February 1978 by the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste (ISRP; Scientific Institute for Paranaturalist Research)¹, probably in Cabrières d'Aygue (Vaucluse) where the Institute was then headquartered at the home of Louis Bec. In the ISRP pamphlets, Flusser was given the title of Special Philosophical Advisor. The ISRP published some 12 pamphlets; this is Flusser's only one.

The ten-page pamphlet for *Orthonature Paranature* reproduces the text of a lecture given by Flusser (presented as "Professor of Communicology at the University of São Paulo") on October 9, 1976 at the Entrepôts Municipaux in Chalon-sur-Saône on the occasion of Louis Bec's exhibition *Les Sulfanogrades*, which was part of the program "Rural and Urban Landscape in Burgundy 1976" at the House of Culture of Chalon-sur-Saône. The themes listed for the overall event were: "Zoo / Organisms in their greenhouse / Laboratory - Antenna / Physical interventions / Monographs of organisms / Press release on current experiments / etc." The Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste presented three lectures: *Orthonature Paranature*; another lecture by Vilém Flusser on October 8, titled "Nature - Culture - Ordure"² and one by François Bazzoli, Vice-President of the ISRP, titled "Anatomy of the Monster" on October 13.

For the exhibition, Sulfanogrades were described as artificial organisms living in a hostile sulfur biome, which Louis Bec modeled and designed on the basis of morphological, physiological, behavioral and communicative specifications. The Sulfanogrades were first exhibited in 1973 inside greenhouses in Marseilles, at the Vieille Charité. Following that, they were shown in Chalon-sur-Saône, at the Saline Royale d'Arc-et-Senans, and then, at the invitation of Flusser, at the São Paulo Biennial in 1981, not without some administrative and health difficulties. (The sulfur substrate caught fire in a 1976 installation, creating an actual toxic environment, and the venue had to be evacuated.) Flusser wrote two short texts on the Sulfanogrades, one in Portuguese, and another

¹ See the essay by Marc Lenot on Bec & Flusser in this issue.

² The text of this lecture seems unavailable, because the typescript with the same title, under the reference [Sem Referência] _2968 pages 13-16 of the file ESSAYS 5_FRENCH-M-Q, seems to concern not this lecture in Chalon, but one of the courses on the phenomena of communication given at the end of 1975 and early 76 at the Théâtre du Centre in Aix-en-Provence. Flusser would revisit the idea of nature, culture, and waste in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 108-109), with post-industrial and immaterial culture – for instance, plastics - disrupting the historical process of entropy in which cultural objects turn into waste and finally decay back into "nature."

one in German; these unpublished texts are included in this issue, together with a French translation; the translation of one of them into Czech was published in the magazine *Výtvarné umění = The Magazine for Contemporary Art: čtvrtletník pro současné umění*.

Context

Orthonature Paranature is framed by other texts. There was the cross-disciplinary roundtable *Technologie et imaginaire* (1975), a book³ that resulted from a 1973 roundtable at the Institute of the Environment (1969-1976) in Paris, an experimental school inspired by the Bauhaus and the Ulm School of Design (HfG).⁴ The Institute was interested in collapsing disciplinary categories and overhauling architectural education: using the word “environment” was an attempt to move past stagnant academic terminology and encompassed anything from psychology and architecture to art, design objects, or agriculture.⁵ *Technologie et imaginaire* (Technology and Imaginary) presaged future French projects like *Les Immatériaux* (1985), the landmark exhibition at the Centre Pompidou organized by Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput, which considered the “new materials” of digital technology and biotechnology, and which would impact Flusser’s thinking. The 1973 roundtable included nine people: Klaus Blasquiz, singer and percussionist for the progressive rock group Magma; Alexandre Bonnier, an artist, friend of Flusser’s, and organizer of the plastic arts curriculum at the Institute; film director Enrico Fulchignoni, head of the audiovisual Department at UNESCO; Jeanne Gatard, a painter and Alexandre Bonnier’s life partner; the sculptor Piotr Kowalski; information theorist Abraham Moles, (also a friend of Flusser’s);⁶ physicist and engineer Erich Spitz, Czech-born, director of the Thomson C.S.F. central laboratory, which was devoted to electronics, aerospace, and defense technology and an inventor in the fields of radio communications, optical disks for information storage, and liquid crystal flat screens; and Jean Zeitoun, a mathematician concerned with architectural models, and information and communication technologies. Foreshadowing the arguments of *Orthonature Paranature*, Flusser responded in that roundtable to Moles and the physicist Erich Spitz by describing the difference between past and present:

³ The first four pages are reproduced at <http://rosab.net/fr/la-situation-francaise-les/technologie-et-imaginaire-table.html>

⁴ Erich Spitz, Vilém Flusser, Klaus Blasquiz, Jeanne Gatard, Alexandre Bonnier, Enrico Fulchignoni, Abraham Moles, Piotr Kowalski, Jean Zeitoun, *Technologie et imaginaire* (Paris: Institut de l’Environnement, 1975).

⁵ See Tony Côme, “L’Institut de l’environnement : Descendant du Bauhaus ou dernier bastion de mai 68 ?”, *French Historical Studies* 41, No. 2 (2018): 305-333 and *L’Institut de l’environnement : une école décloisonnée. Urbanisme, architecture, design, communication* (Paris: Éditions B42, 2017), and Monique Eleb, “L’Institut de l’Environnement : Une utopie vécue (1969–1976),” *Rosa*, No. 5 (2013), <http://www.rosab.net/fr/la-situation-francaise-les/l-institut-de-l-environnement-une.html>

⁶ See in this issue Anderson Pedroso’s essay on Flusser and Moles

In the tradition of which you always speak, there were two domains of the human condition: the domain of nature and the domain of culture. Man was dominated by nature and freed himself from nature by cultivating it. Today the situation is quite different. I am dominated by cultural things. Nature has disappeared from the horizon. I forget that the cultural things which dominate me are not givens, like natural things, but manipulated by someone to dominate me. And this is my new situation.

Near the end of the discussion, Flusser teases this out further, showing how philosophy has a stake in considering categories such as nature, culture, art and science: “This is precisely the difference between the science of nature and the science of culture, because natural things do not have a truly symbolic dimension and we find they have meaning which we apply. Whereas cultural things are truly all-symbols because they are man-made, and man is about ‘symbolizing.’ Man gives meaning to everything. Culture, including technology, is symbolic.”

Flusser would touch on this idea again in another lecture at the Institute of the Environment that served as the impetus for his essay “The Codified World,” initially published as a forty-eight-page pamphlet.⁷ In the back of the pamphlet, an exchange between Flusser and an audience member looks forward to his later writings on nature: Flusser’s interlocutor argues that nature doesn’t exist without culture, but Flusser argues that nature is a realm of neutral ethics and the distinction between the two is not epistemological but moral.

Orthonature and Paranature

In *Orthonature Paranature*, Flusser argues that, rather than culture existing as the transformation of nature, the opposite is often true. Flusser defines “orthonature” as the commonly understood version of nature as universal and omnipresent, preexisting culture, and “paranature” as multiple: all the natures and cultures reduced to epistemological categories in order to make them understandable and manipulable. The mission of the ISRP then follows the goal of paranature: to fabricate new paranatures – which Louis Bec and artists like Eduardo Kac would ultimately do. New creatures produced by artist-scientists would be as “natural” as other animals described by zoology (Louis Bec invented the term “hypozoology” to incorporate these new organisms), but they would also belong, according to Flusser, to a different paranature.⁸

⁷ Vilém Flusser, *Le Monde codifié* (Paris: Institut de l’Environnement, 1974). See also Vilém Flusser, “The Codified World,” *Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 35–41.

⁸ Hypozoology was “zoology emerging from the underside of positivist zoology via technological modeling” that would fill in the gaps left by standard biological taxonomies. Louis Bec, “Artificial Life Under Tension: A Lesson in Epistemological Fabulation,” in Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, eds. *Art @ Science* (Vienna and New York: Springer Verlag, 1998), 96, footnote 12. See also Marie Renoue, “Entretiens : La vie artificielle du zoosystémicien Louis Bec,” *Interfaces numériques 2-2* (2013): 183–208.

For Flusser, overturning orthodox ideas of nature and culture means questioning established ideas, like Darwinian evolution and the chronology of “natural” history. For instance, in Flusser’s deeply ironic chronology, primates now come *after* humans in evolution, since they were discovered in the nineteenth century, and thanks to Darwin, humans may “become” primates. Accepting this view, in which zoology is an art and paranature is a science, has profound consequences, not just for art and science. (Flusser spent much of his career railing against the division of disciplines suggested by C.P. Snow’s landmark 1959 *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, which argued that substantive change in the world, following the devastation of World War II, was stymied by these divisions.)⁹ Rather, if science is an art, or “artifice,” philosophical categories like truth and knowledge are subject to change.

Later, Flusser’s thinking around “the nature-culture dialectic,” as he called it, became sharper and more focused. For instance, *Natural: Mind* (1979) develops the thinking, if not the experimental, fantastic terms of *Orthonature Paranature*.¹⁰ Following their earlier escapades with the ISRP and *Orthonature Paranature*, Bec would go on to curate the exhibition *Le vivant et l’artificiel/The Living and the Artificial* (1984) in Avignon, which, like *Technologie et Imaginaire* or *Les Immatériaux* (1985), featured objects culled from a range of sources: art, agriculture, biology, horticulture, medicine, psychiatry, and taxidermy. Some of the art works in that exhibition included paintings of wild animals in captivity by Gilles Aillaud and Danièle Akmen (Louis Bec’s wife), Joan Fontcuberta’s photographs of imaginary plants, Serge Landois’ cactus sculpture and Martial Raysse’s faux-mushroom assemblage, a fireproof brick by the French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, a film shot by Agnès Varda in the Hospice Saint-Louis during the exhibition, and a Gina Pane performance with chocolate. These were exhibited alongside anatomical models, prosthetics, photographs of genetic mutations, biological specimens, wax *ex votos*, organisms and living cultures such as sauerkraut, mushrooms, hydroponics, and artificial organs, plants, and intelligence models. Flusser gave a lecture and wrote an essay for the *Le vivant et l’artificiel/The Living and the Artificial* catalogue in which he argued that, once the simulation of life in inanimate objects merges with technological simulations (robots, artificial intelligence, and other augmentations), the category “artificial” will cease to exist

⁹ C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

¹⁰ Rodrigo Maltez Novaes writes that Flusser chose the adverb *naturalmente* (naturally) as the title for the Portuguese version of the book, adding a colon just as the book was about to go to press, transforming the title into a multi-valent concrete poem. “Introduction,” *Natural: Mind*, trans. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013), xiv; originally published as *Natural: mente: vários acessos ao significado da natureza* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1979).

and the objectification that reigns in art and technology will be erased.¹¹ Additionally, the transcendent subject, Western philosophy's foundational figure, will also disappear; future humans will function as players (*homo ludens*), and life will be treated as a meta-game.

Although the term “paranature” does not appear frequently in these or subsequent texts by Flusser, *Orthonature Paranature* clearly laid the ground for his later thinking. After all, Flusser and Bec's collaborative opus, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, is often described as a work of “parabiology,” in which biology is treated as model in flux, thanks to biotechnology and the variety of paranatures now available. Many of these ideas would be developed further in Flusser's “Curie's Children” (1986-1992) column in *Artforum*¹² and his correspondence with artists engaged with Bio- and transgenic art. In this sense, *Orthonature Paranature* serves as a small but potent experiment around which Flusser's ideas of nature, art, science, and philosophy hinged, and which would be elaborated upon in his writings until his death.

Edition

The title page of the book is “Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste / V. Flusser / Orthonature / Paranature”. The following page is marked “.O.E.D. ”, followed by 1978, which stands for “Office Publishing and Distribution” of the ISRP. The following cover page is marked: “We thank Vilem [sic] Flusser for having kindly contributed, through this text, to the overall reflection undertaken by the Scientific Institute for Paranaturalist Research on the concept of paranature. L.B. and F.B. ”

L.B. is obviously Louis Bec, founder and president of the Institute; F.B. is François Bazzoli, born in 1947, art historian, then Vice-President of the ISRP and professor at the Beaux-Arts School in Toulon (and subsequently at the Beaux-Arts School in Marseilles and at the School of Photography in Arles). Bazzoli co-founded the ISRP with Louis Bec in 1970/71 and was its director of publications. He is also the author or co-author of several pamphlets published by the ISRP, *Sulfogénétique*, *Du culturonomatif*, and *Les îles de l'iguane*.

At the bottom of the last page of *Orthonature Paranature*, below the text, the colophon reads: “This pamphlet, the second in the “Foundation's” collection, was printed in 60 copies (50 + 10 h.c.) all numbered. February 1978. ”(The copy in the Flusser Archive, however, is unnumbered.)

¹¹ Flusser's lecture was delivered at the Festival of Avignon on July 11, 1984. See Vilém Flusser, “Le vivant et l'artificiel,” in *Le vivant et l'artificiel: Recueil: Fictions, poèmes, récits, communications, dessins* (Marseilles, Sgraffite / Festival d'Avignon, 1984) 63–66, and « Vivre artificiellement », in *Le vivant et l'artificiel: catalogue* (Marseilles, Sgraffite Éditions, 1985) 143. Both texts have been republished in *Multitudes* 74 (Paris, 2019): 199-202, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2019-1-page-199.htm>

¹² Vilém Flusser, *Artforum // Essays*, ed. Martha Schwendener (São Paulo: Metaflux, 2017)

There is a typescript of the Orthonature Paranature lecture, densely typed by Flusser himself (ESSAYS 5_FRENCH-MQ file, pages 40-45, call number [SEM REFERENCIA] _3016_) and another typescript with the same text, albeit with minor modifications, but better typed and in a more airy presentation (evidently transcribed by someone other than Flusser for the lecture). We thank Mesdames Danièle Akmen and Virginie Bec for bringing this second version to our attention.

The text of the final pamphlet is slightly different from these earlier drafts in two particular ways: it no longer mentions Louis Bec directly, but refers only to the ISRP Institute; and about one-tenth of the lecture has been omitted, about 350 words. This omitted part mainly concerns the relationship between nature, culture and waste, and the power of irony. In the edition of the text presented here, we included the text of the booklet and have (added in italics or footnotes) significant passages omitted from the typescripts. We did not cite the slight spelling or stylistic changes made in the pamphlet, which are quite numerous, reflecting a fairly substantial edit. However, we corrected the spelling errors that remained, and improved the punctuation when necessary, while respecting Flusser's neologisms, such as “copulable” or “questionnante.”

The announcement for this lecture is online on page 91 of file Con_1_FRENCH_1 of 4. The correspondence between Bec and Flusser regarding the lecture and the pamphlet can be found in file Cor-104_FRENCH (GENERAL), pages 30 to 44. The text of the pamphlet was translated into English by Martha Schwendener and will be published shortly.

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