

David Batchelor

A few things I didn't know about Vilém Flusser

I have known Vilém Flusser's book on photography for some time and have often thought about his comments on black and white. But I didn't know anything about his work on colour. I hadn't heard of *The House of Colours*; I knew nothing of his life in Brazil, or his work on the São Paulo Biennial; I was unaware of his friendship with Mira Schendel. Given my interest in all these areas – I have worked with colour for over thirty years; I have visited Brazil and exhibited there many times over the last two decades – this is a bit of an embarrassment. But one of the many pleasures of working with colour is the knowledge I am never in danger of running out of material. In the studio there are all the many and diverse colour-carrying substances – many kinds of paint, obviously, but also varieties of glass, plastics and lights, as well an endless variety of forms and surfaces and edges and degrees of opacity and transparency and more. And there is an equally endless stream of theoretical material that has been supplied by philosophers and poets, scientists and story tellers, linguists and anthropologists and artists. The sheer quantity of material on and information about colour is useful not least because it reminds me that, however long and in whatever way I might work with it, I can never *know* colour. But there are other reasons colour always escapes me. One of these is that colour is essentially opaque to language. The few colour terms we have to deploy, even as specialists, are woefully and wonderfully inadequate to the complexity of colour experience. And in this uncontainability of colour there is a marvelous lesson and a vivid reminder: of the deep strangeness within the heart of the familiar.