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On Creativity: Blue Dogs with Red Spots¹

In one of his pivotal essays, “Exile and Creativity,” Flusser proposes to view “exile as a challenge to creativity”: “Here is the hypothesis I propose. The expellee has been torn out of his accustomed surroundings, or has torn himself out of them. Custom and habit are a blanket that covers over reality as it exists. In our accustomed surroundings we only notice change, not what remains constant. Only change conveys information to a person who inhabits a dwelling; the permanent fixtures of his life are redundant. But in exile everything is unusual. Exile is an ocean of chaotic information. [...] Because exile is extraordinary, it is uninhabitable. In order to be able to live there, the expellee must first transform the information swirling about him into meaningful messages, that is, he must process the data. This is a matter of life and death. If he is not able to process the data, he will be swamped and consumed by the waves of exile breaking over him. Data processing is synonymous with creation. If he is not to perish the expellee must be creative.

At this point of the expellee discovering that s/he must be creative, according to Flusser, dialogue becomes possible and we can become creative. In fact, creativity, arguably Flusser’s most central philosophical concept lies at the basis of all communication, dialogue, and life because the aesthetic experience lies at the center of human perception. How then, did Flusser consider and write about the making of art?

The Making of Art

In one of the last essays published before his death in 1991, Flusser defined the making of art as follows: “When making art, the task is [...] to produce something that does not yet exist, that is, something that could not be anticipated by any program. We should not look at the work of art as a plant which was developed and unfurled from some randomly available seed, but as a seed from which something shall develop and unfurl in its recipients, a new experience with new realizations and values, for example. The artist, after all, wants to be someone who produces seeds or works out programs, not someone who scatters seeds and watches over their growth. [...] Yet, because current usage calls such a noble artist, such a producer of logoi spermatikoi an author, we have to object. The original meaning of auctor is not the issue here; at issue is the fact that we are dealing with a myth, which obfuscates the making of art as it occurs today. The talk about the

author stands in the way of a disciplined and self-confident making of art. Indeed, authors should not be present in the territory of art!”²

Though Flusser certainly does not sum up his complex understanding of art or art making in this short passage, he calls attention to the idea of the artist as producer and to the work of art as that which marks the beginning of something. The artist does not watch over or manage the growth--s/he simply makes a beginning possible and, according to Flusser, she or he should thereafter fade into the background. His argument appears as a thoroughly Barthesian move to cut off the author-artist from the work and to let the work of art flourish in whichever direction or dimension it pleases, tended and formed by its recipients, away and dislodged from its origins. Flusser, however, seeks to call attention to something else as well: by writing about a generic “making of art” he is trying to attack a stubborn cultural position on “two cultures” whereby the artificial separation of science and art or humanities should be abandoned in the interest of a much more multi-modal and interdisciplinary approach to creativity, ideas, the making of experiences and the production of knowledge.

Significantly, in an interview for the Brazilian journal *Superinteressante*, published in 1986, Flusser urged art and science to agree on a common language: “It makes no sense today to query one of the synthetic, computer-generated images or fractals whether they are art or science. If they are art then they are a very exact art. It makes no sense to find out whether these images were created by artists or by scientists. If, indeed, they were created by scientists, then they are very beautiful artworks, and if they were created by artists, then they are extraordinarily accurate conceptual compositions. There is no difference any more between art and science.”³

In the following, then, we continue to put forth a reading of Flusserian aesthetics as creativity emerging from exile as it is linked to digital aesthetics, speculative computing, ideas and their realizations (or not) in art, to experience and aisthesis; or to creativity in general in the in-between-territories of interdisciplinary inquiry and unfamiliar territory. For some of the artistic practices Flusser conjured up in the 1980s are only now finding expression in, for example, bio-art or trans-genic art, most importantly, perhaps, Eduardo Kac’s *GFP Bunny*.⁴ Lev Manovich’s cultural analytics projects provide other examples, most fittingly for this context, his “Interactive Visualization of Image Collections for Humanities Research,” which exhibits how Mark Rothko’s paintings became data to be graphed into paintings that documented “patterns and trends in a painter’s life.”⁵ While some of Manovich’s work within cultural analytics remains questionable⁶, his explorations surely echo Flusser’s ideas and questions during the 1980s.

However, if we search for something akin to a Flusserian concept of art history or theory, we come up (relatively) empty. In an unpublished article, Rainer Guldin probes one of Flusser’s es-

says on the topic, “L’art: le beau et le joli,” part of his *Les Phénomènes de la Communication* (1975/76) and concludes that Flusser’s idea of art and art making is based on poeietic principles: it creates reality, it is closely linked to everyday life, it has the power to bestow meaning to our being-in-the-world, and it allows us to design models with which we communicate and create new worlds. According to Flusser, “art is that aspect of communication which broadens information as it relates to concrete experience. [...] We need art to be able to perceive the world.”⁷ In fact, concrete experience has the potential to become projected experience and to turn each individual into a potential artist, the creator of alternative worlds: art is creativity linked to design, resulting in unknown possibilities. In that sense, Flusser’s conception of art and creativity contains an activist and forward-looking element as well, as apparent in his essay on “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object”: “Ever since the fifteenth century, Occidental civilization has suffered from the divorce into two cultures: science and its techniques--the ‘true’ and the ‘good for something’--on the one hand; the arts—beauty--on the other. This is a pernicious distinction. Every scientific proposition and every technical gadget has an aesthetic quality, just as every work of art has an epistemological and political quality. More significantly, there is no basic distinction between scientific and artistic research: both are fictions in the quest of truth (scientific hypotheses being fictions). Electromagnetized images do away with this divorce because they are the result of science and are at the service of the imagination. They are what Leonardo da Vinci used to call ‘fantasia essata.’ A synthetic image of a fractal equation is both a work of art and a model for knowledge. Thus the new photo not only does away with the traditional classification of the various arts (it is painting, music, literature, dance and theatre all rolled into one), but it also does away with the distinction between the ‘two cultures’ (it is both art and science).”⁸

Flusser explored such anti-disciplinary approaches to creativity repeatedly, and the topic travels through a number of his texts.⁹ The 1980s, in particular, mark the period during which Flusser aggressively investigated what he observed as diminishing differences between art and science in some depth, at least judging from his prolific output beginning with *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, *Vampyrothentis Infernalis*, and, finally, *Does Writing have a Future?*. All of these texts, including others as well, address his specific understanding of creativity, art, aesthetics or aisthesis, and, in particular, his theory of the image and the technical image. Yet, this approach to creating and dialoguing in everyday contexts was received in Europe – where Flusser soon verged on being viewed a prophet, albeit a critical one, of virtual reality – as media theory and philosophy of communication, while his engagement in Brazil, where he had been an active participant in artistic circles since the early 1970s, was not taken into consideration. It may well be for that reason that he turned to a third continent, specifically the USA, to

explore the collapse of art and science into each other further and where he found a welcoming venue for his ideas on art, science, and everyday creative dialogue.

Flusser at *artforum*

According to Sarah Thornton who refers to *artforum international* simply as “The Magazine,” the periodical “is to art what *Vogue* is to fashion and *Rolling Stone* was to rock and roll. It’s a trade magazine with crossover cachet and an institution with controversial clout.”¹⁰ Founded in 1962 in California, *artforum*, after a move to New York in the 1960s and an editorial dispute in the 1970s (which ended in the creation of another well-known journal of art criticism, *October*, in 1976),¹¹ established itself as an international platform for contemporary art. In 1980, Ingrid Sischy, herself an artist, was appointed editor and, as the critic Jerry Saltz has observed, made the magazine hip: “She had a great sense of timing which saved the magazine from ever being inextricably linked to any one set of artists, or too intent on seeing the success of any one movement. No “Artforum” just wanted to be where the action was and maybe lead the pack – and it did. The January 1980 issue of “Artforum” had 94 pages – by the end of 1989 it had increased to 180 pages.”¹²

Flusser’s first piece in *artforum* was published in the September 1986 issue, entitled “Curies’ Children. Vilem [sic] Flusser on Science.” In a letter dated June 8 of the same year, the managing editor, Kathryn Howard, referred to a conversation with Flusser in which they discussed the publication of “Taking Leave of Literature.” He would be paid \$300 upon publication or a \$100 kill fee should it remain unpublished. Howard familiarizes Flusser with their editorial procedures, and the following letters point to a close relationship with the managing editor (Charles V. Miller as of September 1986), who encouraged, but on occasion also disciplined, the overly productive columnist Flusser.¹³ In fact, while Flusser provided specific titles for his pieces, *artforum* decided to print more generic names of Flusser’s texts, fitting the columnist’s genre.

While all 20 columns echo the texts produced in other languages and for other venues, Flusser clearly explores the limits of a territory or territories that mark even an adventurous contemporary art magazine. Unsurprisingly, he commences his first text from 1986 with a bang, mirroring the essay in *Leonardo*: “We are about to enter the age of electromagnetism. Microelectronics, artificial intelligence, robotics, and holography are some of the signposts on our path away from a material culture and toward and ‘immaterial’ one in which we will concentrate on the processing of rays rather than on the manipulation of inert, perfidious matter.” He concludes, after weaving together a web involving reason, modernity, light, and the juxtaposition of mental

and material energy: “This is the metaphor that suggests itself to identify this new age: there is an ocean of light, which is partly visible and partly not, and all things are permeated by it. So are we ourselves; our reason is one means by which this ocean of light infuses us. In fact, everything about us, our own bodies, our own minds, are soaked with radiation.”

From here on, Eduardo Kac’s radiated bunny is not a far-fetched contraption or hallucination of modern science or of artistic imagination. Pointedly, Flusser continues to develop his notion of science, art, thinking and creating as one and the same in his work for *artforum*, and his columns soon receive the subtitle “Vilém Flusser on Discovery.” In his March 1988 column, he begins his exploration of “biotechnics”: “The word seems a Greek-derived version of the Latin ars vivendi, but it is quite different in climate from the ancient sense of the term. In fact, it is a discipline out of which a whole world of artificial living beings--living artworks--will arise [...]” In the October issue of the same year, Flusser proposes bolder steps: “Why is it that dogs aren’t yet blue with red spots, and that horses don’t yet radiate phosphorescent colors over the nocturnal meadows of the land? Why hasn’t the breeding of animals, still principally an economic concern, moved into the field of esthetics?” Indeed, “[W]hy can’t art inform nature? When we ask why dogs can’t be blue with red spots, we’re really asking about art’s role in the immediate future, which is menaced not only by explosions both nuclear and demographic, but equally by the explosion of boredom.”

Flusser here applies the shifting structures of his philosophical thinking -- on doubt, on media, on communication, on culture, etc. -- to the parameters, such as they are, of art and poses questions that might be familiar at this point in our introduction. Similarly, he questions not only epistemological formations and encrustations in art making but also those of architecture (e.g., columns published in 1990) and of the environment. Indeed, he published a column on popes in the 1990 October issue, significantly, a critique of art criticism, continuing with the trope of trinities in subsequent columns in which he writes about “Three Times” (February 1991) and “Three Spaces” (May 1991). Ironically, his next to last column, published in the November 1991 issue, in the month of his death, Flusser focuses on books, predicting the loss of letters in the image flood of the new digital age, wondering whether “the majestic river of letters passed down to us through Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare [...] stagnate into a muddy, swampy delta?” We have yet to find out. For Flusser, the “space” in *artforum*, presented a stimulating opportunity to try out his ideas and texts from elsewhere with another audience and in another language, and we can only assume that *artforum* would have kept him on as a columnist into the 1990s.

We would like to close with a quote by Johanna Drucker who, akin to Flusser’s idea of art-making and creativity, summarized the coincidence of art and digital culture by referring to con-

ceptual art of the 1960s: “The conceptual artists of the 1960s struggled to dematerialize art. In the process they made us aware of a very fundamental principle of art making--the distinction between the idea of algorithmic procedure that instigates a work and the manifestation or execution of a specific iteration. [...] Every iteration of a digital work is inscribed in the memory trace of the computational system in a highly explicit expression. Aesthetics is a property of experience and knowledge provoked by works structured or situated to maximize that provocation. The mediated character of experience becomes intensified in digital work.”¹⁴

Metaphorically speaking, it is at this moment of mediation and intensification that the foreigner, the other, engages in productive dialogue with the in-habit-ant, also an other, a moment where creativity becomes possible, and when Flusser, despite doubts and hesitations, sees the potential for a new creativity realized--most significantly, his call for “A New Imagination” (*Eine neue Einbildungskraft*), and his faith in humans capable of entirely poetic imagery in a digital age.¹⁵ This is also what his very last book, *From Subject to Project*, was about.

¹ Excerpted from Anke Finger, Rainer Guldin and Gustavo Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

² Vilém Flusser, “Vom Autor oder vom Wachsen,” in *Kunst Machen? Gespräche und Essays*, ed. Florian Rötzer and Sara Rogenhofer (München: Boer, 1991), 58. All translations by Anke Finger.

³ V. Flusser, *Zwiesgespräche, Interviews 1967-1991*, Göttingen 1996, p. 31.

⁴ See <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/08/2.htm>

⁵ See (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YIT1qFhJhk&feature=player_embedded)

⁶ (<http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/query/2009/11/15/lev-manovich-studying-culture-with-search-algorithms/>)

⁷ Cited in Rainer Guldin, “Kunst ist ‘poiesis’: sie er-schafft die Wirklichkeit.’ Überlegungen zu Vilém Flussers Kunstverständnis.” Unpublished manuscript, 2. For another excellent short exploration of Flusser and art see Simone Osthoff, “Introduction,” *Flusser Studies 08* (2009), <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/08/introduction.pdf>.

⁸ Vilém Flusser, “The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs,” *Leonardo*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1986), 331.

⁹ For readers of German, a good summary of Flusser’s ideas on art is available in Florian Rötzer, *Philosophen-Gespräche zur Kunst* (München: Boer, 1991), 140-170.

¹⁰ Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 145.

¹¹ See Gerald Geilert, *OCTOBER-Revolution in der amerikanischen Kunstkritik* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2009).

¹² Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 435-436.

¹³ Letter exchange between Miller and Flusser, available from the Flusser Archive at the University of the Arts, Berlin, Germany.

¹⁴ Johanna Drucker, *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 182.

¹⁵ For a thorough discussion of Flusser’s technical image see Rainer Guldin, “Iconoclasm and Beyond: Vilém Flusser’s Concept of Techno-Imagination” in *Studies in Communication Sciences 7/2* (2007), 63-83; and Oliver Fahle, Michael Hanke, and Andreas Ziemann, eds., *Technobilder und Kommunikologie: Die Medientheorie Vilém Flussers* (Berlin: Parerga Verlag, 2009).