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From Abstraction to Concretion:
A Brief Overview of the Exhibition Project BODENLOS_Vilém
Flusser and the Arts

The term 'art' in Flusser's writing is ambiguous. He published his philosophy for years in the newspaper *O Estado do São Paulo* under the guise of art criticism. The artworks and artists he wrote about, however, were often pretexts for excursions into his irreverent cultural-historical and communicological critique where the practice of artmaking became indistinguishable from any other technical endeavour. Clearly, 'art', the Latin translation of *technē* reclaimed in Flusser's writing its philosophical purpose.

We began work on the project “BODENLOS: Vilém Flusser and the Arts” wishing to explore the role art and artists played in the life and work of Vilém Flusser and craft a presentation format which would function to manifest the vibrancy, multifariousness of Vilém Flusser's life and work in a museum space. We had at our hands, first and foremost the contents donated in 1998 by Edith Flusser, his widow, to Siegfried Zielinski, which eventually became in 1999 the Vilém Flusser Archive at the University for Media in Cologne.

The archive as it stood then consisted of all of Flusser's papers: manuscripts, drafts, his voluminous correspondence, and research materials, primary among these his “travel library” with the books he had in his study at the residence in Robion where he wrote many of the books he is famous for today. Over the years since 1999, friends and colleagues from the community have contributed video and audio recordings, posters, photos, memorabilia, even whole computers as well as art works dedicated to the inspirational intellectual companion who died suddenly in 1991.

The project was originally to make an “archive show” in the spirit of earlier shows at ZKM dedicated to thinkers of media “Max Bense und die Künste” (2010), “Paul Virilio und die Künste” (2006), Jean Baudrillard und die Künste” (2004), and “Foucault und die Künste”. All of these latter shows consisted mainly of glass display cases with paper-based documents. Flusser's thinking would not be held in glass cases. His thinking was performative, a boisterous wrestling match with his interlocutors, his forcefully articulate old-world German a compelling component to his disputations. We knew from the beginning that our exhibition would have to ring with the

sounds of his powerful Habsburgian brogue. And it would, in videos from Peternák, Bielicky and Farocki projected with sound, and in the four channel reworking of one of his Bochum lectures recordings by Anthony Moore.

Flusser famously complained that the art exhibition section of the São Paulo Bienal was more of an 'inhibition' where a lack of communication restrained the visitors into passive consumers. He advocated in his essay "Proposal for the organization of future São Paulo Biennals on a communicological basis"¹ breaking through "the isolation that menaces the cultural establishment" towards the doing away with "the barrier between arts and other activities." Nevertheless, in this essay he was not able to find a new form to replace the art exhibition.

Flusser's interaction with the São Paulo Bienal was a confrontation between his uncompromising social criticism and the intractable conservatism of a national arts festival and its municipal institutions. Flusser was brought on to the scientific committee in 1967 at the beginning of planning for the 10th Bienal. He was to asked to participate in a symposium on "the Integration of Sciences and Humanism"² and proceeded to attempt to redesign the Bienal from the ground up. Flusser envisioned a new organisation of the curatorial process, crossing disciplinary categories with new communicological agendas, going as far as to propose a new function for the biennale in São Paulo's and Brazil's intellectual landscape. This was nothing less than the blueprint for a new form of institution for the new society Flusser argued was emerging. This radical resocializing of the Bienal is palpable in the diagram derived from his notes by Lothar Hartmann and Clemens Jahn where art is only one of many core elements of concern.

Flusser's redesign of the Bienal is itself an artistic proposal, a reformulation of the institution into a dynamic space for meetings and encounters, exchanges of information, a new Acropolis for the post-history "fin-de-siècle" São Paulo. Flusser saw the traditional art displays of the Bienal as obsolescent, the real art of his age were to be found in posters, newspapers, magazines, television, popular films. In a review of the 16th Bienal he prepared for the Hamburg Art magazine "ART" he even included his address for people who thought that their work fit into his new schema to contact him immediately.³

Though Flusser's involvement in the Bienal began to wane in the 1980s, he soon found a new forum for his utopian institutionality. The Casa da Cor project, initiated by Brazilian filmmaker Philippe Henry, acquired a visionary and passionate advocate in Flusser. Colours for Flusser could provide direct empirical access to the increasingly important world of numbers.

1 V. Flusser, "Proposal for the organization of future São Paulo Biennals on a communicological basis", Vilém Flusser Archive 2184, p. 1.

2 Letter from Luiz Fernando Rodrigues Alves to VF on 19th December 1967, Vilém Flusser Archive, Bienal Folder 1/27.

3 V. Flusser, "Aspekte der XVI. Internationalen Biennale von Sao Paulo. (Für der Kunstmagazin ART, Hamburg)" (Vilém Flusser Archive 2531).

Numbers could communicate “democratically”⁴ but the fact that there were always intervals between them meant that they could not effectively represent the world⁵, whereas colours were already in the world of simultaneous and fluid processes. Through the studious immersion in colours, Flusser thought, people could come to explore unexpected inter-subjectivities, allowing them to generate 'new information' against the 2nd law of thermodynamics. Flusser imagined a space for such experiments to occur, a “colorarium”, and sketched out the kind of colour sequences that could be experienced there. “Alternative to the traditional Kantian “*Anschauungsformen*” time-space becomes time-colour”⁶.

The colorarium, as the grander House of Colours project was never realized, a pharaonic project so radical it could not have a fixed architecture in the conventional sense, yet was intended by Flusser to persist in the built space of Sao Paul to provide an institutional support for a long term study of colour codes. In the ZKM version of the exhibition, we attempted to concretize his design for a “Colorarium”.

Flusser understood the popularization of video technology in the early 1970s as heralding new inter-subjective possibilities. Fred Forest and Flusser's collaboration “*les Gestes du professeur*” is an energetic attempt to develop a method to philosophize using a new inter-subjective medium, one where the carefully chosen words of the philosopher of technical images are inextricably fused in bodily gestures. Here again we see Flusser reaching out from his fundamental disappointment in the Enlightenment project of literacy into a new utopian discursive space of gestures.

In the tapes made by Forest we see Flusser half-naked, his thinking inextricable from his body and its gestures. Flusser points out towards the camera, to the visitors watching in a future place and implores them to criticize his gestural philosophy using their gestures, promising that Forest will reincorporate their critical gestures into the discourse. Forest asked that we build a CCTV camera into his installation for that purpose.

The same kind of dialogical requirement was built into the two computer-based works we rehabilitated for the exhibition: “die Schrift” and the Flusser Hypertext. Flusser went about his new digital collaborations with the same avid interest in elaborating new ways of philosophizing using the new media. *Die Schrift*, published on two 5” floppies, what would be called today an ebook, also allows the reader to intervene in the text and generate own version. The Flusser Hypertext likewise allows readers to annotate and even “ask a question” to the professor.

The rehabilitation of *Die Schrift* and the Flusser Hypertext and the work to reproduce them in

4 V. Flusser, “In Search of a Colour Code” Casa da Cor Conference August 10, 1988 (3-COR-13-1941) p. 21.

5 V. Flusser, *Zwiesgespräche*, European Photography Göttingen 1996, p.29.

6 V. Flusser, report to P. Henry “Color Coders ad memoriam” 29th January 1989 Vilém Flusser Archive CDC 32-4.

a form that, while providing the contextual aesthetics of the late 1980s computers on which they first appeared, would be robust enough to maintain their responsivity day after day in an exhibition, was, to my mind one of our proudest accomplishments. The work was led by Philipp Tögel with the invaluable assistance of the BWFLA team at the Universität Freiburg.

I would like to ask the professor what he thinks of our exhibitions. Certainly, he would criticize us. But he would certainly also appreciate especially the many rich conferences which play off the exhibition, our series of dialogical guided tours, the Nomadography, the speculative genealogical network of Flusserian thinking and the two publications we were able to generate, despite working under the prevailing austere conditions of reduced public spending on the humanities. The *Flusseriana*, a glossary of Flusser's terminology in his three main languages German, Portuguese and English should provide a useful reference point for researchers and especially translators of Flusser for years to come. And we have planned to make it even more dialogical; the Flusser-Wiki will bring together the global Flusser community to discuss and interpret his particular and precise formulations across in every language region.

The exhibition and the *Flusseriana* represented a precious opportunity to reconnect with those who knew Flusser. Edmar de Almeida produced a new tapestry and Dieter Jung produced a biographical hologram especially for our show. Joan Fontcuberta, Gabriel Borba, Ottavio Donasci, Herbert W. Franke, Andreas Müller-Pohle, Michael Bielicky, Jürgen Claus and especially Fred Forest and Louis Bec provided their works and support of the exhibition, as did the families of Niobe Xandó, Harun Farocki and Jean Otth. Over a hundred contemporary scholars of Flusser from around the world contributed to the *Flusseriana*, the catalogue and exhibition texts. 25 years after his death, Vilém Flusser still generates enthusiasm in the people that knew him as well as in the newer generations of artists and thinkers who generously provided works for the show in homage to Vilém Flusser.

As I close this brief and premature review of our exhibition which today is still running at the Akademie der Künste Berlin, it remains for me to take some space on the page to inadequately thank those I haven't mentioned yet (and some, please forgive me, I will certainly forget to mention) who were essential bringing Vilém Flusser and the Arts from abstraction to concretion, foremost, the indefatigable Daniel Irrgang and our team at the Vilém Flusser Archive, Nadja Krüger, Monai de Paula Antunes, Marion Kliesch and Martina Spidlova, Yara, Phillipa, Tina, Antonio, Camila Garcia in Brazil, Sarah Maske, Peter Weibel, Andrea Buddensieg, Henrike Mall and the excellent team at the ZKM, Ulrike Roesen, Johannes Odenthal, Mechthild Cramer von Laue, Julia Bernard, Simone Schmaus and the wonderful team at the AdK, Clemens Jahn the design mastermind, and most of all, I mention him again, the initiator of the project and the engine behind it, Siegfried Zielinski. I would especially like to dedicate this small essay to the

memory of Edith Flusser who supported us but sadly was not able to join us to celebrate Vilém at the culmination of our efforts.