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Louis Bec's Sulfanogrades and Andreas Müller-Pohle's *Robots*.

Andreas Müller-Pohle is a familiar name to anyone who has to do with Flusser's legacy. He was a major ally in Europe when the Flussers moved back from Brazil, publishing several of his works, and almost singlehandedly making him known in Germany. As a photographer and as a publisher he has put Flusserian provocations into practice, and we are very grateful he has offered to contribute to our special edition.

Rainer Guldin has already illuminated many Flusserian themes in his review¹ of Müller-Pohle's *Robots*.² I will add only a few lines in connection with the work of Flusser's great friend and collaborator, the zoosystematician Louis Bec. Bec conceptualized, imagined and rendered in exquisite detail, drawings reminiscent of those in early anatomical atlases, fantastical beings which in extreme environments alien to humans. The Vampyroteuthis drawings, now legendary among Flusserians, were a product of their long weekly dinner discussions at Bec's house in Sorgues or at his and Edith's house in Robion. Bec's Sulfanogrades were beings who lived in a sulfurous environment. He scientifically designed the creatures from the insides out, imagining what vital organs would be needed to survive in this environment, and how these would communicate, and eventually worked outward to the skin and outer appearance. This kind of methodical fantasy (*fantasia essata* as Flusser calls it³) which follows an inner order, drawing on a rich history of anatomical science can be performed in a pinch with ML image generation, as Andreas Müller-Pohle's recent *Robots* demonstrate. The paradoxical fusion of scientific rigour in Bec's concepts with the absurdity of its aesthetic manifestation, proposes for Flusser a possible escape from techno-accelerationist entropy and, in a Spinozian mode, a utopian hope in synthetic human intelligence.

Flusser arranged for Bec to present sculptural installations of these Sulfurous beings, at the 16th Sao Paulo Bienal in 1981 (see fig. 1), which, in a previous exhibition, the room was so filled with actual sulfur that the fire department had to be called to attend to the incendiary events. In his catalog text for Bec's exhibition, Flusser writes: "The Sulfanogrades are dangerous because they are politically

¹ See this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

² In this issue of *Flusser Studies* we publish an extract of the book containing the bilingual introduction (Robotische Spekulationen/Robotic Speculations), the bilingual afterword (Über dieses Projekt/About this Project), as well as eleven pictures. Three pictures are published separately.

³ See Francesco Restuccia, *Fantasia essata: Behind Flusser's Theory of Imagination*, in *Flusser Studies* 37, May 2024.

engaged. Engaged against the supposed cold objectivity of a science and technology that wants to assume the governance of society. The sulfonamides concretely proclaim (concretely, because they are there, visible, touchable, smellable) that there is no way to separate the aesthetic, scientific, and political dimensions of human action, under penalty of such action becoming inhuman. The Sulfanogrades concretely proclaim the inhumanity of all “pure art”, “pure science”, and “programmed ethics”. They concretely proclaim the challenge of thinking and acting in favor of a society that allows man to simultaneously articulate his artistic, scientific, and political dimensions, inseparable because they are the dimensions of human existence. Therefore, sulfonamides are not “science fiction”, that utopia at the service of various establishments. On the contrary, they are “fictitious science”, science that knows itself to be a figment of the mind, at the service of a society more worthy of man.”⁴

As with Vampyrotheus, and recalling one of his earliest texts, the History of the Devil, humanity is best understood through its negation, in this case, in the form of an alien being living easily in conditions no living human could endure. Rainer Guldin notes this mutual, dialectical notion of human, which emerges with an inhuman alter ego.

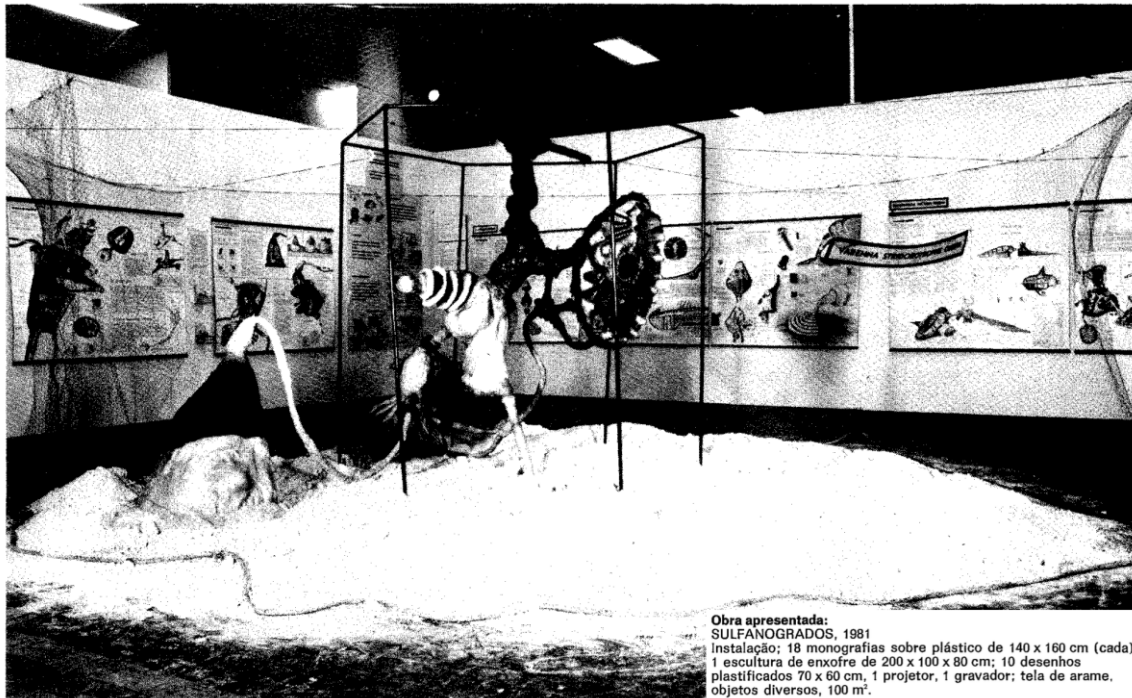


Figure 1: Louis Bec's Sulfanogrades at the 16th São Paulo Bienal in 1981

⁴ Vilém Flusser, from the general catalog of the XVI Bienal do Sao Paulo, p.77.