

Introduction

Uncharted territory

The main aim of this special issue is to open up a discussion on the notion of colour and its many theoretical implications by providing a series of guiding essays along with the relevant letters and texts, most of which have not been published before. It deals with a period of Vilém Flusser's life and a part of his work and thinking which so far have unfortunately received very little, if any, attention. *Flusser Studies* hopes that this first proposal,¹ with its truly Flusserian, multilingual, and transversal approach, will be able to sidestep some of the highly repetitive and to some extent even sclerotic current discussions that focus uniquely on media theory, and that it will provoke some reactions and, above all, lead to further research projects on the subject. This also means moving back to the very beginning of *Flusser Studies*, after seventeen years and 34 issues.

In the programmatic introduction to the first issue, we pointed to the dangers of canonization which no writer or philosopher, not even one with the quirks and eccentricity of someone like Flusser, has been able to elude in the long run. Flusser's early success as a philosopher was "linked to the technological euphoria of the early nineties, a short period in which new means of communication such as the Internet and cell phones merged with the process of globalization. Flusser's reception surfed that wave, and – for a short time – his texts seemed inspiring, if not prophetic. With publications such as *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, Flusser appeared to promise a 'revolution' triggered by the computer age, by a new era of images, and by international dialogue. This dialogue was enhanced via computerized networks and assured reconceptualization of society, human interaction, democracy, and identity. After his death in November 1991 – at the height of his career – his lively reception slowly began to slacken and shifted to a more muted canon of quasi post-romantic or post-idealist positions on the promise of the Internet and computer technology. However, many readers from a considerable variety of disciplines have since recognized and acknowledged the limited treatment Flusser's works have received; in fact, it could be argued that Flusser's reduction to a media philosopher and to a media 'prophet' of the early nineties has gravely

¹ The upcoming issue on the *Angenommen* project will continue in this innovative and hopefully thought-provoking direction.

side-lined other and perhaps more important topics and texts of his prolific career. In essence, Flusser's oeuvre presents a daunting case of undiscovered territory [...]."²

In "A few things I didn't know about Vilém Flusser"³, David Batchelor⁴ gets to the very heart of this issue: "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 guess this is also true for many readers of this issue. The subject of colour and the project of the House of Colour are an undiscovered and still mainly uncharted territory of Flusser's intellectual landscape.

The issue opens with six contributions by visual artists: David Batchelor, Henry Lewis, Lizzie Calligas, Andreas Müller-Pohle, Jürgen Ostarhild and Jean-Baptiste Perrot. The different pictures are accompanied by short textual commentaries. Lizzie Calligas comments on her inspiring watercolours in "Exercises / Patience" and Andreas Müller-Pohle reflects on "Black-and-White as a Code".⁵ The accompanying pictures are from his "Perlasca Project" (<https://mueller-pohle.net/projects/perlasca-pictures>). Henry Lewis' "Double Tag" from the series "Breathing" shows the effect of the artist's exhalations, observed and captured before they disappear and are forgotten. Jean-Baptiste Perrot's "Accidents" are the result of an industrial defect of some digital cameras that appears randomly after several months of use and Jürgen Ostarhild's "ColorHueState" are digital colour fields created by upcycling the continuously produced data of blockchain technology.

The first part of the issue, "On Colour", also contains the essay "Small Data Photography. Mit weniger Daten mehr erfahren (Getting to Know More with Less Data)" by Vera Schwamborn accompanied by some of her pictures and an introduction to the subject of colour in Vilém Flusser's work by Rainer Guldin: "Coloured technical images": On the Role of Colour in Vilém Flusser's Work". Schwamborn reflects, both in her text and her pictures, on the possibility of overcoming the redundancy of digital colour photography by using a mobile phone. Guldin's essay focuses on the connection of black and white in photography and discourses on "racial" differences, the role of greyness in culture and politics, the presence of colour in nature and Flusser's use of colour in a redefinition of the notion of technical images.

Some of Flusser's most interesting early texts on colour have also been republished or published for the first time in this issue. The main subjects are the role of colour in postmodern times ("L'irruption du techno-imaginaire"), colour and art ("A. Bonnier Cor de Rosa"), black and white

² "Introduction", <http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/introduction01.pdf>, p.1.

³ See this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

⁴ For Batchelor's comments on the colour grey see R. Guldin, Coloured technical images: On the Role of Colour in Vilém Flusser's Work in this issue of *Flusser Studies*

⁵ See also "O negro será de cor" and "Preto e branco" in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

photography and the cultural symbolism of blackness (“O negro será de cor”, “Preto e branco”, “O preto é belo”, “Schwarz ist schön”), as well as the role of colour in nature and in a possible ecology of the future (“Ecologia multicolorida”, “Vom Unfärben der Grünen”, “Bunte Tiere”, “Disney Land colors”). These different essays not only show the originality of Flusser’s approach but also the thematic breadth of his interest in colour moving from the colourful new world of post-modernity to a critique of the colour metaphor in the germanic ecological movement.

The second part of the issue, “Karl Gerstner, Philippe Henry, Gottfried Jäger and the Project of the *Casa da Cor*” focuses on Flusser’s friendship with Karl Gerstner, Philippe Henry, Gottfried Jäger and the interdisciplinary cultural project of The House of Colour in São Paulo, to which Flusser was a conceptual advisor between 1987 and 1989 (see also the interview “Um alfabeto de azuis e amarelos”⁶). Biochemists, philosophers, architects, stylists, and people from the world of fashion, as well as computer scientists and artists were invited to explore the field of colour from different points of view. About the same time, Flusser got to know the Swiss designer, typographer, author, and artist Karl Gerstner (July 2, 1930 – January 1, 2017). Their intense friendship and collaboration as well as their involvement in the project of the *Casa da Cor* led to a reformulation of Flusser’s notion of the technical image and its digital version in terms of colour. This should be of particular interest to all Flusser scholars who work in the area of technical images, computer simulations and the digital world at large.

The first contribution „Transparente Gegensätze – Logische Auflockerungen. Von den Abenteuern eines Bild-Ingenieurs und poetischen Konstruktivisten (Transparent Contraries – Loosening Logic. On the Adventures of an Image Engineer and Poetic Constructivist)“ by Dorothee Bauerle-Willert provides a short but comprehensive view of Karl Gerstner’s work and life. Martha Schwendener’s essay “Colourful Dialogue: Vilém Flusser, Karl Gerstner and the *Casa da Cor*” takes the reader a step further highlighting the essential aspects and personal connections between Flusser and Gerstner and their collaboration in the project of the House of Colour. In “*Colorarium*: The Exchange of Letters between Vilém Flusser, Karl Gerstner, Philippe Henry and Gottfried Jäger”, Rainer Guldin leads the reader even further into this fascinating still uncharted territory of Flusser’s thinking. An interview with Philippe Henry, the organiser of the project of the House of Colour, by Diogo Bornhausen, Rodrigo Petronio, and Rodrigo Maltez Novaes – “Diogo Andrade Bornhausen, Rodrigo Maltez Novaes and Rodrigo Petronio, Sobre a Casa da Cor – Entrevista com Philippe Henry” – provides further information about the people involved and the different stages of the project.

⁶ We thank the journal for the possibility to republish this important text.

The letter exchanges between Vilém Flusser and his friends Karl Gerstner, Philippe Henry (see also his short text “From a Universe in Colors toward a Color Universe” in this issue of *Flusser Studies*) and Gottfried Jäger have also been published along with all other essential texts. Flusser and Gerstner dedicated a very personal and intimate short essay to each other and their friendship: “Karl Gerstner” and “Vilém Flusser und die Farben” that Gerstner wrote and published after Flusser’s death. Further texts related to the subject of colour published in this issue are: “Farben statt Formen” and its unpublished English version “Coloration replacing formalisation”, as well as “Farben verschlüsseln” and “Postmoderne Farben”.

The issue also includes all the relevant texts that Flusser wrote in connection with the project of the *Casa da Cor*, which are made available here to the reader for the first time. Some of these texts are transcriptions of video interviews or conferences: “Reflexões sobre “A Casa da Cor a construir em S. Paulo”, “Casa da Cor, (reflexões complementares) “, “Mesa redonda”, “A cor no mundo pos-moderno”, “Codigo de cores”, “Video palestra” “Casa da Cor, S. Paulo”, “In search of a colour code”, “Why the house of colour in São Paulo?”, “Reflexões em torno da Casa da Cor”, “About a House of the Color”, “Imagens em cores”.

Reconstructing the events of the project of the *Casa da Cor* from Flusser’s point of view, the different collaborations, and friendships, as well as the letters exchanged between the participants, and the various texts, which have been slumbering in the two Flusser Archives in Berlin and São Paulo, showed that Flusser redefined and expanded some of his late theories on digital images in terms of colour. It has also revealed that the origin of many important texts published in Germany in the early 1990ies by the editor Bollmann can actually be traced back to the House of Colour. The reconstruction of the subject of colour in Vilém Flusser’s work out of the *membra dissecta*, the fragmented textual landscape, thus, also implied a recontextualizing and textual reconstitution of a series of essays that had been published separately or together under new titles after Flusser’s death. This fragmenting and dispersing editorial practice, which is in part justified by Flusser’s own pragmatic handling of his texts, went at the expense of the project of the *Casa da Cor*⁷, which has been all but ignored in recent debates on Flusser’s work and life.

As in most issues of *Flusser Studies* there is a section dedicated to “Open contributions” (part three): Marina Bortoluz Polidoro’s and Augusto Neftali Corte de Oliveira’s “Provocar uma falha no aparelho: arte e contraideologia” – “Inducing a failure in the apparatus: art and counter-ideology” and Steven Humblet’s “We shall be your favorite disappearing act!” complemented by video stills and the video performance “Playing a Photograph”, a telematic dialogue between a

⁷ See R. Guldin, “Coloured technical images: On the Role of Colour in Vilém Flusser’s Work” and “Colorarium: The Exchange of Letters between Vilém Flusser, Karl Gerstner, Philippe Henry and Gottfried Jäger” this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

photograph and musical performers from the Royal Conservatoire, initiated by the conceptual artist Clare Strand.

I want to thank Muriel Gerstner for her collaboration in the past few months leading up to the publication of this issue and for allowing *Flusser Studies* to publish pictures, letters and texts both by Gerstner and Flusser. I also want to thank Gottfried Jäger for allowing *Flusser Studies* to republish “Postmoderne Farben”. Finally, I want to thank Philippe Henry, Diogo Bornhausen, Rodrigo Petronio, and Rodrigo Maltez Novaes for the interview done expressly for this issue.

Rainer Guldin, Vienna and Lugano, May 2023