

Marc Lenot

Why has Flusser been important for me?

I must confess that, fifteen years ago, I didn't even know the name of Vilém Flusser. This demonstrates certainly my ignorance, but it shows also to which extent he is relatively unknown in France, although he lived there during the last fifteen years of his life. The intellectual conservatism and academic arrogance of many French art historians, photography historians and philosophers rejected him, his thinking and his style altogether; when "Towards a Philosophy of Photography" was finally translated in French in 1996 (after being translated in ten other languages, including Hungarian, Turkish and Czech), a professor writing in the (then) main review of history of photography criticized it violently, not for its ideas, but because it was just an essay without footnotes and bibliography.

I came across this French translation by chance in a bookshop, it was cheap (14€), and, out of sheer curiosity for this unknown author and this unknown book, I bought it on impulse. I had gone back to university a few years earlier and I was then struggling at the beginning of a thesis on experimental photography¹, trying to define what it was and not finding any help in dictionaries, encyclopedias or reference books on history of photography, where the concept was totally absent, or, in rare cases, tackled only from a technical viewpoint. At the same time, I was accumulating an important corpus of photographs from contemporary photographers that, intuitively, appeared to me as possibly "experimental", but without any clear definition. I was getting quite desperate in front of this corpus, feeling unable to structure it, to define it, to explain it.

Then I read Flusser's book, I understood his concepts of apparatus and functionalities, which were so different from everything else I had read in photography books (where almost everyone was only talking about the index, etc.), and I arrived at the last page: "With one exception: the so-called "experimental" photographers [...] They know that they are playing against the apparatus". And suddenly, it became clear: I could structure my work and write my thesis. Of course, I added later Déotte, Anders and a few others; but, basically, reading this penultimate paragraph of Flusser's book, my thesis was saved.

¹ Which led to my book *Jouer contre les Appareils. De la Photographie Expérimentale*, Arles, Editions Photosynthèse 2017.