

## Photography and Beyond: On Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*

The following short pictorial and textual contributions by Mark Amerika, Sean Cubitt, John Goto, Andreas Müller-Pohle, Michael Najjar, Simone Osthoff, Nancy Roth, Bernd-Alexander Stiegler, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Siegfried Zielinski explore the practical and theoretical relevance and actuality of Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, first published as *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* in 1983. It has been translated into more than 14 different languages.

These observations are based on the following questions:

What is the theoretical and practical relevance of Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, written more than 25 years ago and translated into many languages?

What was the impact of Flusser's conception of photography on the artistic practice of photography and image-creation internationally?

Beyond Flusser: What is the status of photography and images within the present context of digital cameras and 3-D film?

What new theoretical parameters and models enliven the scholarly debates on and artistic engagements with photography and images? How do theories of the (technical) image promote interdisciplinary scholarship?

Rainer Guldin and Anke Finger

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## Mark Amerika, Applied Flusser

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Flusser, in *Toward A Philosophy of Photography* writes: “The task of the philosophy of photography is to question photographers about freedom, to probe their practice in pursuit of freedom.” Here, the photographer is not just someone who uses a camera to take pictures, but is a kind of hybrid who is part science fiction philosopher and part data gleaner. In my own work, I apply a kind of Flusser “theory filter” to transform the photographer into what I term a *digital thoughtographer*, one who is using emerging media apparatuses to expand the concept of writing. In this way, the gesture of writing is reconceived as a live, networked performance where the artist morphs into a *remixologist* who creatively postproduces images that are magically conjured up by playing with their fingers on a computer keyboard. Of course, the questions Flusser asks us to consider are, “How is the envisioning gesture being directed?” and “Where are the fingers pointing?”

While directing my recent feature-length “foreign film,” *Immobilité*, which was shot entirely on a mobile phone, I was reminded how my tactical use of new media technologies relates to Flusser’s ideas that “one can outwit the camera’s rigidity,” “one can smuggle human intentions into its program,” “one can force the camera to create the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative,” and “one can show contempt for the camera” by turning away from it as a thing and focusing instead, on information. In other words, freedom for a new media remixologist such as myself involves “the strategy of playing *against* the camera” as photographic device. But how?

In *Immobilité*, I investigate the present state or status of writing in a world rapidly being overrun with networked and mobile images. Instead of allowing these images to take over the world, take over *my* world, without me having any say in it as a writer, I instead accept the challenge of intervening in the automated process of making and distributing images that the apparatus channels *for* me. This is the struggle new media artists must accept as their own as they probe their practice in pursuit of freedom.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Amerika’s *Immobilité* has been exhibited internationally. For more information, you can visit the website at [immobilite.com](http://immobilite.com)

## Sean Cubitt, What is a photograph?

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It is an image created and distributed automatically by programmed apparatuses in the course of a game necessarily based on chance, an image of a magic state of things whose symbols inform its receivers how to act in an improbable fashion (Flusser 2000: 76).

Vilém Flusser's definition is comprehensive, if densely packed. From the standpoint of the camera, the heart of the photographic apparatus, human users are mere functionaries. The real work is done by the camera: users only play with it, but their play extends the capacities of the apparatus. From the perspective of the photographic apparatus, society is only a feedback mechanism for improving its functions. Automation is intrinsic to the apparatus. Once designed, the camera operates according to the program written into its structure. This automation not only abstracts values from the world, but reconstructs the world as information. (Flusser 2000: 39) Following Shannon and Weaver's (1949) mathematical definition of information as a ratio between probabilities, Flusser sees the camera seizing not the world but an abstract 'state of things': data. Information depends on the balance between repetition and novelty. The human user and the world the camera observes only add improbability, chance, to the mix, increasing the amount of data which it can convert into photographs. The 'magic' of the definition describes the way photographs, in their abstraction, produce images, not of the world but of concepts (such as 'states of things'), concepts which then program society 'with absolute necessity but in each individual case by chance'. (Flusser 2000: 70) Photographers are functionaries of an apparatus which, if analysis is extended back far enough, reaches into capital, corporations, politics and economics, a nested series of black boxes each governed by an elite of functionaries who nonetheless are prisoners of their own apparatus. Designed to work without human intervention, cameras program both photographers and viewers in a determinist vision which comes close to Jean Baudrillard's (1975) apocalyptic vision of society as self-replicating code.

For Flusser, codes embedded in any apparatus feed on human use to produce new combinations to assimilate into the apparatus itself. This more general application of the word apparatus includes not only the mechanical device but the ensemble formed by manufacture, clubs, publications, galleries, newspapers and magazines, people and their institutions. Flusser's 'apparatus' is an

institution: an ordering of social interactions which produces its own type of language (discourse), its own mode of knowledge, its own idea of truth. Unhampered by moral judgements external to its own operation, its goal is maximal efficiency. The apparatus operates in and as a regime of power, in much the same way as the clinics, asylums and prisons investigated in Michel Foucault's early writings.

According to Flusser, before photography, all thought was verbal. Photography, he argues, is a visualization of language. Digital photography, by extension, extends the verbalisation of perception by mathematising it. We know from Saussure (1974) that language is based on difference: that difference is negation: X is X because it is not Y. Language's intrinsic capacity for negation extends to negating what is empirically or perceptually given. Thus language asserts human independence from what is given to it by way of environment. Numbers are an outgrowth of language. From counting, number has developed to be abstract, counterfactual, independent, and negating – the same qualities as language itself. The calculus, mathematical logic and the mathematics of algorithms stem from the negation of the semantic content of sentences. Number and algorithm, as formalised in computer languages, are also institutions. Even though they do not obey exclusively the same rules (for instance, of generative transformational grammars) as natural languages, they share language's fundamental capacity for negation.

From this an important point emerges: algorithms have the power to institutionalise perception. They bring perception within the ambit of (a form of) language. The empirically and perceptually given of the non-human environment, that excess of signifiers which is a danger to humans as much as a resource for them: that world is systematically negated, pixel by pixel, in the process of enumeration. Such might be the case too with drawing and analogue photography: that they neither name nor describe, but substitute for the reality they observe: the various schools of drawing and printmaking applied such 'grammars' (Ivins 1953) between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. But what distinguishes digital imaging from both drawing and traditional photography – especially as defined by the practice of Ansel Adams as exemplary technician – is a semiotic, but not a semantic, change. It is the nature of the process of automation.

However, 'the process of automation' is not a stable, definable entity, confined to digital code (what literally distinguishes digital imaging from drawing and photography is not automation, but the absolute precision, predictability, and finite limits, of its numerical grid). The broader history of photographic manufacturing has been about exploiting automation in the quest for the stability and certainty that automation provides, and the profit that derives from it. The process begins several

decades before Adams with Eastman Kodak's Box camera in 1888 – with its philosophy of 'you press the button, we do the rest' – and perhaps even earlier in the transition from wet-plate to dry-plate photography. Such incremental steps, via the Instamatic cassette cameras of the 1960s, and the progressive introduction of electronics into cameras in the 1970s, arrive at their destination in the 2003, when digital cameras began to overtake sales of analogue.<sup>2</sup> At this juncture, the grammar of objects and the previsualised composition are superseded by the enumerated and averaged accumulation of photographic data.

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<sup>2</sup> The Photo Marketing Association International statistics show 2003 as the year that total US digital camera sales overtook US analogue camera sales, and that this was the first country for this to happen in.

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## Andreas Müller-Pohle, Interview

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*Unter welchen Umständen haben Sie Vilém Flusser kennengelernt?*

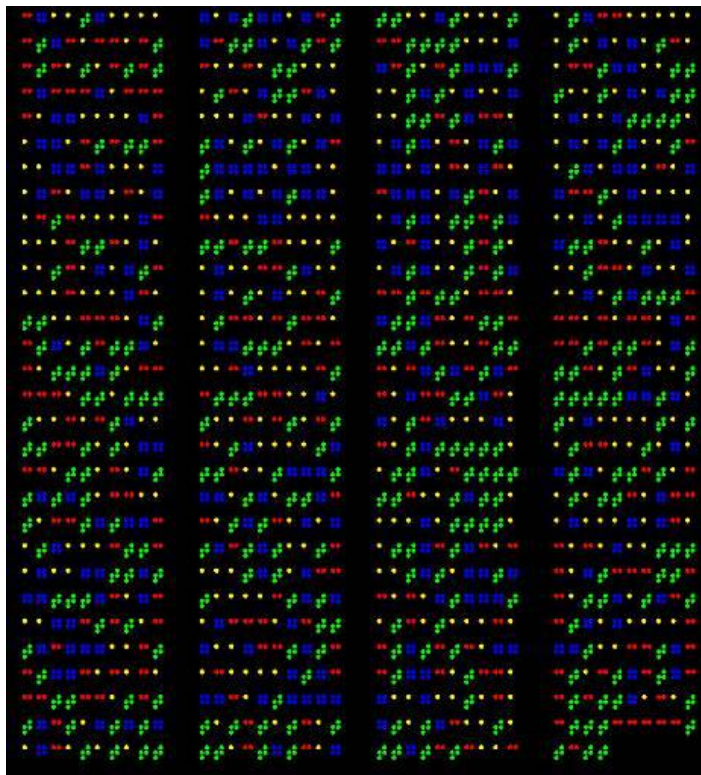
Das war Anfang 1981 bei einem Fotografie-Symposium in Düsseldorf. Wir waren beide als Referenten eingeladen, er zum Thema „Techno-Imagination“, ich über „Visualismus“. Ich muss vielleicht kurz beschreiben, wie die Fotoszene in Deutschland damals aussah. Es gab drei große Strömungen und eine hitzige Debatte um den „richtigen“ Weg in der Fotografie. Da waren einmal die Konzept- und Medienkünstler um den Kasseler Hochschullehrer Floris Neusüss. Dann eine orthodoxe Dokumentaristengruppe um Michael Schmidt in Berlin, die an das „objektive“ Foto glaubte und die Auffassung vertrat, der Fotograf müsse sich den Objekten unterordnen. Und eine dritte Tendenz, die ich als Visualismus bezeichnete, der es um ein erweitertes Sehen, also die Überwindung eben dieser dokumentarischen Dogmen ging. Nachdem Flusser seinen Vortrag gehalten hatte, war ich irgendwann dran. Der Saal war gut gefüllt mit Vertretern der Doku-Fraktion, die dann auch heftig über mich herfielen. Da stand Vilém auf, er hatte weiter hinten gesessen, was später selten vorkam, und sagte so etwas wie: „Ich danke Ihnen für diesen ausgezeichneten Vortrag. Nur schlage ich vor, dass Sie statt von ‚visualistischer‘ Fotografie von ‚phänomenologischer‘ Fotografie sprechen.“ Dann folgten ein Streifzug durch die Phänomenologie und Apparatetheorie . . . und Diskussionen bis tief in die Nacht. Am Ende gab es zwei Gruppen von Leuten, jene, die ihn ablehnten und verspotteten, und solche, die meisten von uns, die von seinem Blick und seiner Rhetorik und Lebendigkeit angezogen waren.

*Hatten Sie schon Texte von ihm gelesen?*

Nein, er war uns allen völlig unbekannt. Meines Wissens war dies auch sein erster Auftritt in Deutschland überhaupt. Die Fotografin Erika Kiffel, die das Symposium organisierte, hatte ihn vorher bei einem Vortrag in Wien erlebt und war so hingerissen von ihm, dass sie ihn umgehend nach Düsseldorf einlud.

*Welche Rolle spielte dabei Ihre Arbeit als Fotograf?*

Ich arbeitete damals an einem Projekt, das ich „Extractions“ und später „Transformance“ nannte. Es umfasste 10.000 zufällig aufgenommene Fotos, aus denen anschließend eine Auswahl zu treffen war. Vilém fand das sehr interessant und wollte es der Biennale von São Paulo, in deren Beirat er war, vorschlagen. Aus irgendeinem Grund ist daraus nichts geworden. Aber er hat dann zwei Texte über diese Arbeit geschrieben, einer davon erschien als Essay in meinem Buch „Transformance“, das im folgenden Jahr erschien.



*Andreas Müller-Poble, Blind Genes (2002)*

*Wie ist es zur Publikation von „Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie“ und später zum Projekt der "Edition Flusser" gekommen?*

Ich hatte Vilém Flusser schon in Düsseldorf zur Mitarbeit bei meiner Zeitschrift „European Photography“ eingeladen und Anfang 1982 einen ersten kurzen Text mit dem Titel „Fotografieren als Bildermachen“ veröffentlicht. Er schickte mir zahlreiche weitere Texte zu allen möglichen Themen, immer zwei bis drei Seiten lang, die mich ziemlich umhauten. Als ich dann im Sommer



nach Südfrankreich fuhr, wo er wohnte, kam mir der Gedanke, ihn zu fragen, ob er seine Fototheorie nicht in einem kleinen kompakten Büchlein zusammenfassen wolle. Wir saßen in seinem Arbeitszimmer in Robion, ich stellte die Frage, und ich sehe noch heute vor mir, wie er vor Begeisterung aufsprang und sofort eine erste Gliederung des Buches vorschlug, auch den Titel hatte er bereits parat. Kein Jahr später war das Buch da, und es wurde ein großer Erfolg. Der Hintergrund der „Edition Flusser“ ist allerdings nicht ganz so lustig.

*Inwiefern?*

Bei seinem Tod 1991 lagen in meinem Verlag insgesamt fünf Flusser-Titel vor: „Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie“, „Ins Universum der technischen Bilder“, „Die Schrift“, „Vampyrotheuthis infernalis“ und „Angenommen“, letztere drei ursprünglich zusammen mit Volker Rapsch bei Immatrix Publications herausgegeben. Andere Verlage waren auf Flusser aufmerksam geworden, darunter Fischer, Merve, Steidl ... und ein Jungverleger, der wohl ein gutes Geschäft witterte und es verstand, sich große Teile des Nachlasses zu sichern. Es wurde eine „Gesamtausgabe“ angekündigt, von der auch einige Bände erschienen sind, aber irgendwann hatte sich der Mann übernommen und zurück blieb ein Scherbenhaufen. Mir behagte der editorische Stil dieses Verlegers überhaupt nicht, sein eigenmächtiges Ausschlichten von Manuskript-Versionen, die aus dem mehrstufigen, mehrsprachigen Arbeitsprozess Flussers herausgerissen und als Endprodukte verkauft wurden. Ich rief also die „Edition Flusser“ ins Leben, um den bis dahin erschienenen Einzelwerken eine Klammer und den neu hinzukommenden Titeln eine Perspektive zu geben. Heute umfasst sie zehn Bände, und ich glaube sagen zu können, dass die Essenz des Flusserschen Denkens darin enthalten ist.

*Haben Flussers Theorien Ihre Herangehensweise an die eigene Fotografie in irgendeiner Form beeinflusst oder verändert?*

Seine Theorien und seine Methoden aus Phänomenologie, Etymologie und so weiter haben mein Denken grundlegend beeinflusst und verändert, meine künstlerische Arbeit allerdings eher weniger, jedenfalls nicht unmittelbar. Das trifft sicher nicht nur auf mich zu. Flusser hat uns zum Denken angeregt, er war ein philosophischer Lehrer, aber kein Kunsterzieher. Seinem in „Angenommen“ vorangestellten Aufruf an bildermachende Künstler, sie mögen seine Szenenfolge „in Videobilder

umcodieren“, sind kaum mehr als eine Handvoll Leute nachgekommen, und, ehrlich gesagt, mit wenig überzeugendem Erfolg.

*Ist Flussers Ansatz immer noch auf der Höhe der Zeit?*

Welch eine Frage! Er ist nicht nur auf der Höhe der Zeit, sondern noch immer unserer Zeit voraus. Er war und ist ein großer Visionär. Nehmen wir „Ins Universum der technischen Bilder“ von 1984 – das ist doch eine Philosophie des Internet, noch bevor es das Internet als gesellschaftliches Phänomen überhaupt gegeben hat. Nehmen wir seine Apparatetheorie, die den Schlüssel zu den großen heutigen Krisen bereithält, von der Klimakrise bis hin zur Finanz- und Währungskrise. Allerdings dürfen wir Flusser nicht dogmatisch lesen, „textolatrisch“, das wäre gar nicht in seinem Geiste. Sondern eher so, dass er uns einen Gedanken- und Methodenschatz hinterlassen hat, den wir kreativ weiterdenken sollten.

## Michael Najjar, Zu Flussers Einfluss

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Flusser's Theorien prägen meine künstlerischen Arbeiten, seit ich im Jahr 1990 das Privileg hatte, in Berlin an einer seiner Vorlesungen teilnehmen zu dürfen. Die visionäre Kraft seiner Philosophie ist gar nicht hoch genug einzuschätzen, zudem muss man bedenken, dass sie zu einer Zeit entstanden ist, als es noch kein Internet und keine Digitalisierung des Mediums Photographie gab. Besonders fasziniert hat mich immer die Idee der emergierenden technischen Bilder, die in der telematischen Gesellschaft die Informationsvermittlung und die Wahrnehmung unserer Welt bestimmen. Flusser hat diese Emergenz als medienimmanent identifiziert und zu einem sehr frühen Zeitpunkt eine Entwicklung prognostiziert, die erst mit dem späteren Aufkommen des Internets Realität wurde.

Meine Werkgruppe *Netropolis* (2004-2006)<sup>3</sup> ist deutlich von dieser Thematik beeinflusst. Die exponentiell zunehmende Verdichtung der Datennetze in den urbanen Megacities sowie die stetig anschwellenden Datenströme zwischen den Städten führen zu einer Kompression von Raum und Zeit und damit zu einer Auflösung ihrer linearen Struktur. Eine Entwicklung, die Flusser der zunehmenden Zirkulation von Technobildern und ihrer zugrundeliegenden codierten Textinformation zuschreibt. Erst die Nulldimensionalität der technischen Bilder erlaubt ihre ubiquitäre Omnipräsenz und die damit verbundene Aufhebung des traditionellen Raum-Zeit-Gefüges. Mit den verdichteten und interagierenden Städteporträts der *Netropolis*-Serie habe ich versucht, diese globale Entwicklung sichtbar und spürbar zu machen.

Eine Weiterentwicklung dieser Gedankengänge findet sich in meiner aktuellen werkgruppe *High Altitude*. Bei den auf den ersten Blick als klassische Landschaftsfotografien wahrgenommenen Bildern handelt es sich tatsächlich jedoch um die Rematerialisierung von Datenströmen aus der Finanzwelt. Aufgrund der hochverdichteten Netzstruktur zirkulieren in der Börsen- und Finanzwelt gewaltige Geldströme in Echtzeit um den Globus. Sie werden als Zeichen und Graphiken transmittiert, die wiederum auf einen komplexen Kode referieren. Diese Graphiken sind Flussers Definition zufolge bereits Technobilder. In *High Altitude* werden zwei technisch generierte Bilder, Photographie und Graphik, miteinander verschmolzen und damit auf ein erweiterte Komplexitätsebene geführt. Die Emergenz zweier technisch erzeugter Bilder muss zu einer Neubewertung des fotografischen Bildes führen, das sich nur scheinbar auf eine reale Situation, tatsächlich jedoch nur auf codierte Textinformation im Sinne Flusser bezieht. Dadurch oszillieren die Bilder auf einem schmalen Grat

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<sup>3</sup> Vgl. dazu <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/newyork.htm> und <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/sanpaolo.htm>

zwischen Realität und Simulation. Das fotografische Bild verweist nicht mehr auf einen realen Bezug, sondern basiert auf einer Signifikantenkette, Zeichen verweisen über mehrere Ebenen hinweg auf andere Zeichen. Die Bildkonstruktionen aus *High Altitude* visualisieren damit das, was Flusser in seinem Stufenmodell der Kulturgeschichte als Entfremdung des Menschen vom Konkreten bezeichnet.

Wie man sieht, liegen meinen künstlerischen Ausdrucksformen in hohem Masse Flussers philosophische Gedanken zur Photographie, bzw. zum technischen Bild zugrunde. Zugegeben, der implantierte *Flusser-Kode* ist nicht ohne weiteres für jeden sichtbar, zur Dechiffrierung sollte man ins *Universum der technischen Bilder* eintauchen.



Michael Najjar, "dax\_80-09" (from the series *high altitude* (2008-2009), 202 x 132 cm, courtesy of the artist, studio la città gallery)

## Simone Osthoff, *Blind Sight: Flusser and Photography*

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In the summer of 2009, the California Museum of Photography showcased *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists*, which included images by twelve of the most accomplished blind photographers in the world. Even without seeing their pictures, we wonder what they might reveal about vision, photography and imagination. Can blindness “throw some light” on visual representation and upon the nature of photography? Or was this exhibition another conceptual provocation against “retinal” art?

Flusser’s *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* first published in 1983 approaches photography from a similar “blind viewpoint” and without concern for criticism framed in terms of form and content, medium and message, truth and ideology, and other such antinomies that separate documentary from pictorial photography. While pointing out that technical images are historically and ontologically different from traditional images, Flusser questioned common assumptions about the “objective” window into the world, and the “direct” impression of light. He explored the *gesture* of photography in relation to words, and to how it changes our relationships to each other or translates the four-dimensionality of the phenomenal world. Time, so central to photography, for instance, is, for him, far from concerns such as the “decisive moment.” Instead, he examines the concepts of *image*, *apparatus*, *program* and *information* within the time continuum that gave birth to the human thought and its history of progress (which in an early book he called *The History of the Devil*).

*Towards a Philosophy of Photography* is a synthetic book that contains not only Flusser’s earlier concepts on language and history but also his theory of gestures and thinking in translation. It states that the “black box” is to post-history as the invention of writing is to history, which in turn displaced the magic powers that images possessed in pre-historical times. The continued interest in Flusser’s ideas in the twenty-first century attests to their vitality and original ways of provoking and instigating us. And if his discussion of photography ignores formal aspects as well as the vertigo of image multiplication, it is only to engage with the abyss of invisibility, familiar to, among others, blind photographers and visionary philosophers.

## Nancy Roth, *The Photographer's Part*

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Near the beginning of his justly celebrated essay *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 2000), Roland Barthes introduced a means of breaking the whole vast topic – photography – into parts. He proposed three figures: the photographer (*Operator*), the one being photographed (*Spectrum*), and the viewer (*Spectator*). In keeping with the phenomenological purpose that informs this essay (arguably more palpably than in others of Barthes's writings), these figures stand for three potentially distinct aspects, or forms of consciousness of photography. Barthes declared himself unable, on the grounds of insufficient experience, to enter into the first figure's position, that of the photographer. He did have experience of the second – he had been photographed. His comments from this standpoint seem largely to confirm a view from the third position, however, namely that of the writer and reader of the essay, a receiver, judge, categorizer who is affected – or not – by photographs.

Near the beginning of his still under-celebrated essay “Die Geste des Fotografierens,” –“The Gesture of Photographing” – (Flusser 1991), Flusser, too, proposed to consider his topic through three figures, and in keeping with the phenomenological shape of his thought at all points, these three present potentially distinct ways of being conscious of photographing: the photographer, the photographed, and a third figure carefully observing what the first two are doing. As in Barthes's essay, readers “see” the events mainly from the third position, that of the writer-observer. But Flusser and Barthes are not actually writing about the same thing. As Barthes is looking at photographs, Flusser is looking at *photographing* (the word is a gerund, marking an activity rather than a thing), a visible *gesture*. Flusser was hardly any more an actual photographer than Barthes was. But by framing his topic as a gesture, a particular kind of movement between states of consciousness and states of affairs, Flusser was able, in a way no other writer on photography has been, to take the photographer's part.

Virtually all of the voices that have substantially shaped contemporary photographic “orthodoxy,” not only the historians, but critics, including Benjamin (1968), Barthes (1981), Sontag (1978), even Szarkowski (1966, 1978) – an accomplished photographer – *wrote* as receivers and judges of photographs, from the position Barthes designated the Spectator. Flusser did as well at some points, notably in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Flusser 2000, 60). But even there, he provides space for a movement of thought, a potential shift or expansion of consciousness beyond that

position. There is a passage in which he reflects on a photograph of the war in Lebanon, for example (Flusser 2000: 60). Flusser anticipates readers' likely conclusion that the image has an ideological significance, then goes on to question the adequacy of any photograph to the construction of ideologies on the grounds that ideologies require linear, rational thought. He proposes instead that the photograph has a magical effect and draws an irrational response, probably below conscious awareness, that it suggests powerful, dangerous forces that need to be appeased (all of this would seem to be what Barthes set aside under the term *studium*, the ordinary perception and understanding of a photograph that anyone might have). Flusser opens two distinct positions to the reader, that is, two that Flusser himself seems fully capable of appreciating, of temporarily sharing, even as he moves into yet another position, critical of the first two. In fact Flusser's writing, in the "Gesture" essays and elsewhere, could well be understood as "shots" of specific objects in particular circumstances, views that not infrequently overlap, or show the same object from a very different angle, at a different scale, or in a set of relationships that may appear "inconsistent" with other shots, although in the context of photographs, alternative standpoints are more likely to draw positive commentary than a charge of inconsistency.

Flusser's voice is distinctive among serious writers on photography in many ways, but I think above all for its recognition of the photographer as the writer's peer, as someone who, like a philosopher, searches for a position with respect to objects in the world, tests it, perhaps returns, changes again. In "The Gesture of Photographing," he quite explicitly compares the movements of a photographer around a chosen subject to "moves" of philosophical thought around a chosen object, that is, the setting up, testing, choosing from among various possible positions, points of view – the process any one of us might use to reflect on ourselves in relation to the world. He concludes that photographing is a gesture of seeing, what the ancient Greeks called *theoria*. Only for the really ancient Greeks, the visible gesture would have to have been speech, and for the slightly less ancient Greeks, writing; only we have the option of transforming, or translating the gesture without recourse to language – through the gesture of photographing.

Flusser does not explicitly say whether or how the images – photographs – that result from the gesture of photographing resemble more conventional written or spoken philosophy. In fact such a comparison would be inconsistent with his whole position with respect to photography. For such a comparison could only be made from the standpoint of the viewer (Barthes's *Spectator*) regarding an object. Flusser rather treats it, as he treats any form of communication, as a distinctive gesture, gestures being configurations of material and movements through which thoughts move from inside

to outside, from internal consciousness to perceptibility to others. He further sees each specific configuration – writing, drawing, filming, etc., as decisively shaping and limiting what can be thought in and through it. Photographs are acknowledged to share certain features with writing – particularly the stabilizing and preservation of a conceptual “move,” a thought, so that it can be returned to some consciousness (not necessarily the photographer’s own,) in some other time and place. He recognized the “Sprunghaftigkeit,” (roughly, the “by-fits-and-starts-ness”) of photography, for example, the alternation of reflecting and recording, thinking and action, as common to all communicative gestures, including his own writing practice.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes repeatedly lends photographs a voice of resonant, authoritative assertion: *this has been*. The verb is present perfect: like a word in a sentence, the photograph has a place in a continuum, a position in a linear chain of events. Flusser knows, acknowledges this way of understanding photographs: “... Most of us (including most photographers) are still caught up in historical, progressive, enlightened consciousness,” (Flusser 2002, 129), that is, an understanding that events have causes and effects, that the chain potentially stretches from the past moment of the photograph into the present. But he begs us to see photographs differently, as coming from, operating within a quite different universe, one more like a vast play of chance than an orderly chain of events. Photographs are, he says, realizations of specific possibilities within the camera’s program. Sometime he refers to them as projections into the future, sometimes as ritual instructions. Inasmuch as language remains serviceable at all for the purpose, Flusser’s photographs would not say “this has been”; perhaps they would speak in the future conditional: “If this is possible, I must...” And yet it takes a Spectator to make such an observation, to pursue the differences between the ways photographs encode relationships in space and time and the very different ways such relationships can be ordered in a sentence. Flusser probably would not have been very interested. Rather than the differences between things – even complex things like sentences and photographs – he reliably sought more exciting and potentially creative dialogues between gestures, responses, modes of awareness.

Flusser’s writing on photography is dispersed in multiple sites in multiple languages, diverse in its contexts, quite probably contradictory and, as always, frustratingly undocumented. And yet all of these seem like trivial objections in light of his singular gesture of reaching out, as a writer, into the photographer’s universe, acknowledging a world on the other side of a viewfinder and its value, in fact its critical importance to all of us. The theme of this year’s annual meeting of the Association for Photography in Higher Education (APHE) was “The Burden of Photographic Theory.” It is an



obvious reference to John Tagg's important work (Tagg1988), but also an expression of frustration. For this is a community of educators who keep trying to introduce theoretical texts, in my view written almost entirely by Spectators, to young photographers who do not, on the whole, identify themselves as Spectators.

This year, as Flusser would have turned 90, we have no doubt advanced further toward the universe of technical images he forecast in the 1980s (Flusser 1985). Perhaps the young photographers are displaying, as he would have predicted, a growing impatience with writing as such, a tendency to find critical thought alien and irrelevant, a preference for surface over depth. Perhaps. But it seems at most part of the issue. In my experience, young artists and photographers will read and write critically if they can grasp the terms of engagement, if they can "translate" the writer's situation into the conditions in which they themselves are living and working. Flusser's texts, in themselves, rarely provide this: they are always very clear, but nevertheless very succinct and abstract, requiring some effort to fill in a working context. Still, in contrast to the many deservedly-respected, foundational texts that construct our current understanding of photography, Flusser opened a new channel to photographers—a channel through which to speak and listen, or more exactly, to see and picture their gesture as theory. Flusser has given no more than a sketch, a suggestion that such a gesture of translating could, should, go in both directions, between verbal and visual universes. The rest is up to us.

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## **Bernd-Alexander Stiegler, Interview**

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*Was ist die gegenwärtige theoretische und praktische Relevanz von Flussers vor mehr als 25 Jahren geschriebenen und in mehr als ein Dutzend Sprachen übersetzten Buch Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie?*

Flussers Buch gehört dank seiner Assoziation von großformatigen nachgerade geschichtsphilosophischen Skizzen und einer eher phänomenologischen Beschreibung von Gesten und Operationen fraglos zu den Klassikern der Photographietheorie der Gegenwart – auch wenn die Hochzeit einer solchen allgemeinen Medientheorie vorüber ist und historisch filigranere und vom Material her kommende Studien die gegenwärtige Forschung bestimmen. Daher findet man heute seine Spuren eher in bildwissenschaftlichen Studien und im weiten Feld der Visual Studies, sprich in Überlegungen zum Status des photographischen Bildes als solchem, als in photographietheoretischen oder photographiehistorischen. Wichtig scheint mir nach vor der Impuls zu sein, der von Flussers Überlegungen für die Analyse der digitalen Photographie ausgeht. Weniger überzeugt heute die überaus breit angelegte nahezu kulturanthropologische Skizze.

*Wie hat Flussers Theorie zur Photographie und zum (Techno)Bild Ihre eigene künstlerische oder wissenschaftliche Arbeit beeinflusst?*

Flussers besonderes theoretisches Temperament macht eine Auseinandersetzung mit seinen Texten in materialorientierten kultur- und wahrnehmungstheoretischen sowie dezidiert photographiehistorischen Zusammenhängen, wie ich sie vor allem untersucht habe, schwierig. Mich interessieren daher seine Texte eher als sensible Indikatoren, um den Umbruch, der in der Photographie in den 1980er Jahren in Theorie und Praxis stattgefunden hat, besser verstehen zu können. Ich lese sie daher heute vor allem als historische Dokumente. Und in dieser Hinsicht sind sie überaus aufschlussreich.

*Welchen Einfluss hatte Flussers Vorstellung der Fotografie auf die internationale künstlerische Praxis der Fotografie und die Bildproduktion allgemein?*

Von seinem Einfluss zeugen nicht zuletzt die zahlreichen Bände, in denen sich kürzere Texte von

ihm finden und dann eben auch photographische Arbeiten, die mit dem Medium der Photographie zugleich dessen Grenzen auszuloten suchen. Die Frage der Photographie nach der Photographie ist letztlich eine, die Flusser maßgebliche Impulse verdankt.

*Welchen Status haben Fotografie und Bild innerhalb des gegenwärtigen Kontextes der digitalen Kameras und der 3D-Filme?*

Die Debatten über die vermeintliche Revolution der digitalen Photographie ist meines Erachtens viel zu sehr durch ontologische Fragestellungen bestimmt worden. Die Bedeutung der Photographie und von photographischen Bildern bestimmt sich nach wie vor durch ihre ästhetische, gesellschaftliche und imaginative Praxis. Und diese Bedeutung ist nicht nur ungebrochen, sondern interessanter, weil vielfältiger denn je zuvor.

*Welche neuen theoretischen Perspektiven und Modelle beleben die gegenwärtigen wissenschaftlichen Debatten zum künstlerischen Engagement mit der Fotografie und der Bildproduktion?*

Hier wären viele zu nennen: Photographie und Wissenschaftsgeschichte, politische Ikonologie, Visual History, Visual Culture Studies und Bildwissenschaft, Analyse von Ausstellungen, Zeitschriften, Text-Bild-Relationen u.v.a.m.

*Inwiefern fördern Theorien des technischen Bildes den interdisziplinären wissenschaftlichen Diskurs?*

Die bei der Antwort auf die vorherige Frage genannten Bereiche sind sämtlich notwendig interdisziplinär. Und auch die Literatur- und Geschichtswissenschaft, aber auch die Soziologie und Politikwissenschaft – um nur einige wenige zu nennen – entdecken nicht nur Bilder, sondern auch Bildtheorien und ihre Möglichkeiten.

## Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Groundless Provocation: A Note in Praise of Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography**

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No other theorist is so readily associated with nomadism, exile and homelessness as Flusser. His life story, which reads like the concentrated essence of a century that specialized in uprootings and expulsion, is contained in the title of his autobiography, *Bodenlos* – literally translated, groundless. Flusser was indeed a man without ground, a wanderer between worlds and languages; and the effusive energy and crafty humour of his texts cannot hide the sense of poignancy and loss that permeates them. Like Odysseus, Flusser could deliver a good yarn and captivate his audience, but unlike Odysseus he was condemned to stay at sea because *his* Ithaca had been destroyed when he was forced to leave it.

However, in colloquial German, including the Prague-inflected German Flusser grew up in, *bodenlos* is far more frequently used to indicate nerve, gall or impudence. *Das ist eine bodenlose Frechheit*, that is such unbounded cheek that you will never, as it were, get to the bottom of it. Provocations, mental slaps, startling twists of thought, brazen redefinitions of established terms, the stimulating insolence of originality – they are all as much a part of Flusser as his nomadic fate. In other words, Flusser was as much Marshall McLuhan as he was Flusser. (And it is this similarity of attitude, the shared determination not to let the reader rest for more than half a page that unites the two, not the facile technodeterminist label that media handbooks love to attach to them.) As in the case of McLuhan, the pain we experience when reading Flusser's texts should, ideally, not be located inside our head but around the joints where our mandible connects to the skull – it is a result of the constant dropping and lifting of one's jaw.

Take *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, arguably Flusser's best text, and one that should be read at the beginning and then again at the end of an engagement with his ideas. At first glance many ideas sound familiar: The difference between apparatus and "preparatus" (Flusser 2000: 21) comes close to the Heideggerian distinction between 'challenging-forth' and *Gelassenheit*; the notion that tools are the extensions of organs and theories recalls the (underappreciated) work of Ernst Kapp; to apprehend the growth of the tertiary sector as an epoch-defining phenomenon is indebted to Daniel Bell; Flusser's "hallucinations" (Flusser 2000: 10) resemble Baudrillard's simulations; the references to apparatuses as "Titans" (Flusser 2000: 74) evokes the spectre of the Jünger brothers;

the numerous references to photographers as lying in wait for visual prey read like an up-dated riff on Spengler's predator-infatuated *Man and Technics*; the difference between symbolic and technical mirrors Kittler's switch from styles to standards; and while Flusser may chide Horkheimer and Adorno for succumbing to ideological paranoia and 'second-order paganism' (Flusser 2000: 64), his account of the dialectical process linking conceptual and magical thought reads exactly like the dialectics of myth and enlightenment diagnosed by the Frankfurt duo. And the grand punctuations of a world history that is always already a media history, the most important of which is the shift from the linearity of writing to the magical circularity of images – is this not once again the trickster from Prague channeling the shaman from Winnipeg? Even if we take into account that Flusser did not read (and could not have read) all those mentioned above, it is difficult to avoid the impression that his reputation as a highly original thinker is in no small part due to the absence of footnotes.

Now, a quarter of a century later, Flusser's text reads like an odd mix of old and new. On the one hand, his insistence that we can only grasp what is going on in the world if we grasp what happens behind shutters, his debunking of human media mastery as no more than a negligible switch in a chain of switches, is every bit as post- or anti-humanist as the most hard-core of hard-core German media theory. On the other hand there is the notion that humans have the task to uncover the 'terrible' functionality of apparatuses "in order to get a hold over them" (Flusser 2000: 74). The tool-mastering subject returns; a subject that, inexplicably, is both *ex* and *super machina*. On the one hand Flusser's photographic universe is the world of the *Matrix* with no Neo, Trinity or Morpheus in sight. We are locked inside, programmed appendices, and rather than heroically confronting or reprogramming the system (our technologically layered *Umwelt*), it is a matter of collaborating with the system against the system, of having the system transgress its own boundaries by making it create something it was not programmed to create. The age-old philosophical quandary of a free will imposed by God so that humans may act on their own accord (and at their own risk) in a predetermined universe, is turned upside-down by allowing programmed entities called photographers and philosophers to operate both within and outside the program. On the other hand, then, as theoretical reflection becomes the functional equivalent of artistic exploration, the text retrieves the holy alliance of artist and intellectual – an alliance that to some is as outdated as the one created in 1815. Flusser is, no doubt, close to McLuhan's collapse of world-history into intermedial showdowns, yet he is seeing recursions where McLuhan discerns shifts and ruptures. Looking backwards, technical images are the second-order metacode of the textual metacode of images that encoded the world. While it bears a superficial similarity to McLuhan's observation that the content

of one medium is always another medium, this is Flusser's own leap from phenomenology to cybernetics. The growing divide opened up between subject and world by a series of media-technological recursions increasingly blurs the divide between the media-historical process itself and our reflection of this process. Both history and mind operate as non-trivial machines.

A mix, then, of old and new, right and left, pragmatic and rebellious. But then again – and Flusser's oeuvre is one long *then again* with its mixture of automatic reiteration and liberating deviation –, look at how he weaves all the strings together into a historico-philosophical tapestry only to pull it out from under our feet because it is nothing more than a point of departure for questions that must be answered elsewhere. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* is a philosophical funhouse, a seemingly stable structure composed of catapults, slides and trapdoors. Ultimately, Flusser does not write texts, he creates frames or portals that point beyond themselves by establishing the very difference between inside and outside, known and unknown. Surely no concept has been more abused during the last three decades of theorizing than *trauma* (the term has suffered its own meaning), but how can you not apply it to Flusser? It is as if the destruction of his roots is constantly re-enacted in the destruction of established mental habitats. Deracination returns as the imperative of defamiliarization: Flusser was thrust out of his world, now he is asking us to use trampolines as footholds to get beyond ours.

According to a well-known piece of industrial folklore, some non-Western tribes expressed great fear when first encountering photography: Having one's picture taken was akin to losing one's soul to the camera. Think of Flusser's book as such a camera. Photography, Flusser said in an interview, reaches down into the history and extracts something from the never-ending stream of events that is then fixed in a transhistorical region. His book, in turn, reaches into our never-ending stream of thoughts and fixes something – something we learn and which we therefore are no longer compelled to think. *Bodenlos* indeed: Like an Antaeus in reverse, we are provoked to jump, and we gather strength from being less connected to the ground we are stuck on.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> All page references are to Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

## Siegfried Zielinski, Interview

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*What is the current theoretical and practical relevance of Flusser's 'Towards a Philosophy of Photography', written more than 25 years ago and translated into many languages?*

The fact that the book is still read a lot by students and scholars demonstrates its character: Flusser's Photo-Philosophy - as it is often referred to - has become a classic. Besides Roland Barthes' CAMERA LUCIDA and Susan Sonntag's basic texts it has become one of the most important reference for the theory of photography and therefore media theory for the last decades. In style it is one of Flusser's most elegantly written books and a real monograph. That makes it very special within the many texts he has written.

*What was the impact of Flusser's theory of photography and the image on your own artistic work and / or theoretical research?*

Most important for me are his remarks on the possibility to use the apparatus against or in tension with its function. This idea reaches far beyond the special medium of photography. If machines are able to do our work, if they can do, in principal, without us, we have to re-think the artist's role within the art process. To just fulfill the function is not enough. Artistic creativity has to reach beyond the functionality of technology.

*What was the impact of Flusser's conception of photography on the artistic practice of photography and image-creation internationally?*

I think its greatest value is to support artists' and philosophers' braveness. After having read the book one is more willing and able to take a risk.

*What is the status of photography and images within the present context of digital cameras and 3-D film?*

It has not changed ontologically. We do not perceive the digital code, but finally an analogue image.

Ever since analog photography was invented, the notion of representation had already become very doubtful. Nobody believes seriously anymore that a technical image represents a reality outside of the picture. The dramatical changes I see mainly in the realms of production and distribution of images. They have become extremely accelerated. And what interests me a lot is an effect, which Flusser thematized when he discussed Video: the instantaneity of accessibility of the images. The production of a digital photography is completed without perceptible delay. This creates something that we call INSTANT ARCHAEOLOGY. One of my students, Annika Kuhlmann, is just writing a final thesis on that. Claudia Becker, who is now responsible for the Flusser-archive in Berlin, is writing her dissertation on the epistemological quality of the digital image. We have to develop Flusser's ideas further. This is our responsibility for the future.