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THE GESTURE OF PHOTOGRAPHY:
AN INTRODUCTION

Images are mediations between the world and human beings. Human beings "ex-ist," i.e. the world is not immediately accessible to them and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible. However, as soon as this happens, images come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create. Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, into the world "out there," which meanwhile itself becomes like an image—a context of scenes, of states of things… we can observe the process at work in the present day: The technical images currently all around us are in the process of magically restructuring our "reality" and turning it into a "global image scenario". Essentially this is a question of "amnesia". Human beings forget they created the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images…

VILÉM FLUSSER, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* (1983)[1]

[1] Vilém Flusser, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* (1983) (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 9–10.

> The existential interests of future men and women will focus on technical images… This gives us the right and the duty to call this emerging society a utopia. It will no longer be found in any place or time but in imagined surfaces, in surfaces that absorb geography and history… a pure information society.
> VILÉM FLUSSER, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985)[2]

How or in what ways does photography mediate our relation to the world? In the twentieth-century photography became a means by which to negotiate the everyday world and our existence within it, to define our immersion within and lived experience of the world—it has become inextricably associated with, or at the forefront of our understanding of, terms such as documentary or the real. Thus, by implication, photography has played a key role in mediating social relations, constructing a space of interpersonal dialogue—particularly in the way that we exchange and comment upon photographs (now more than ever in the digital age), constituting a point of interaction with others—and for the production and reinforcing of culture and identity. It has also enabled us to question the limits of conventional relations, to define new social groupings. On the other hand, photography has become an exploratory tool, the means to examine the environment, spatial relations and also to explore the natural and biological world and our place within it. Vilém Flusser commented that images, by which he was referring to what he called "technical images"[3] including photography, were supposed to be "maps"; in other words he saw their original purpose as being an instrument employed to orient ourselves in the world. At times, photography has also been a means through which to construct an inner world, to set ourselves apart from the world and express an alternative world of dreams and imagination. Flusser, however, came to develop a theory that photography was a new kind of image and one that indicated certain shifts— in the relation of humans to the image and therefore also to one another, to the world around and even in their own consciousness of self.

Vilém Flusser (1920–1991), the Czech-born, Brazilian philosopher, wrote his essay "Towards a Philosophy of Photography" (1983) to contribute towards the development of a specific philosophy of photography in the context that followed the development of theoretical writing about photography that emerged in the 1970s, though also in relation to the emergent field of "informatics," as he called it, or information theory.[4] His thesis was

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[2] Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985), trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 4. Hereafter Flusser (1985).

[3] Flusser's category "technical images" begins with photography, by which he generally refers to analogue photography though in the way he discusses it he anticipates todays' environment of digital images. He extends the category of "technical images" however to include film, television, video, computer and satellite images, as well as more broadly those images that we might now describe as digital.

[4] Vilém Flusser (1920–91) still remains a relatively unknown and under-examined philosopher and yet is fast becoming a crucial reference for readers of philosophy, critical theory, media studies and communications theory, linguistics, art and photography. He lived for 32 years in Brazil, having fled there aged 19 before World

that "photos, as they are now—namely sheets of paper or a similar material carrying information on their surfaces—are objects of post-industrial culture, one in which work is done by automatic apparatus" but that these insert themselves between the world and man, mediating our apprehension of the world.[5] Flusser comes to his complex attitude towards photographs by linking them with digital images and grouping them under the framework of "technical images", which allows him to analyse analogue photographs from the point of view of digital images, and indeed digital images from the point of view of analogue photography.[6]

For Flusser, the advent of photography—and the wider category of "technical images" (which he contrasted with "traditional" images such as cave paintings)—heralded a rupture or turning point in human civilization which had profound ontological and epistemological consequences equal to the invention of linear writing. While writing, Flusser argues, marked the advent of historical consciousness (in contrast to a pre-historical "magical" consciousness) that was similarly linear in its consciousness of time (diachronic), photography marked instead a shift to a non-linear (synchronic), post-historical consciousness, and to a world mediated by a new kind of image. Flusser explains, "when images supplant texts, we experience, perceive and value the world and ourselves differently, no longer in a one-dimensional, linear, process-oriented, historical way but rather in a two-dimensional way, as surface, context, scene."[7] Importantly he describes how these images are constituted in a radically different way to "traditional" images, as pixelated, or composed from a series of points on a surface, thus he emphasises their structure as being one of atomised information.[8]

War II, and then in the 1970s relocated back to Europe, as a result his texts were written in various languages and are only now being translated so that the Flusser known in Brazil is joined up with the Flusser known in the German-speaking and French-speaking worlds and all are made available to readers of English. His stature is fast becoming aligned with contemporaries with whom he interacted as a peer—Roland Barthes, Marshall McLuhan and Umberto Eco among them. His writing on photography, and what he categorised as "technical images," belong to his later years following his return to Europe yet draw upon his earlier basis in phenomenology and linguistics. Importantly he disagreed fundamentally with Barthes' interpretation of photography, constructing an alternative philosophy oriented towards information theory.

[5] Vilém Flusser, "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs", 329. Hereafter Flusser (1986). In this book, see page 56.

[6] Siegfried Zielinski and Peter Weibel with Daniel Irrang (eds.), *Flusseriana: An Intellectual Toolbox* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015), 388.

[7] Flusser (1985) op. cit., 5

[8] Flusser's designation of photography as an apparatus which points towards a post-industrial and post-historical complex meant that for him an historical or industrial analysis, such as that offered by Marxism, was not "valid'. See Flusser (1983), 24, and Martha Schwendener, *The Photographic Universe: Vilem Flusser's Theories of Photography, Media, and Digital Culture*, PhD. Thesis (City University of New York (CUNY), 2016), 144 n. 509, available online at http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/693/ Nevertheless, it may be more accurate to think of photography as on the cusp of a post-historical and post-industrial world.

Through his analysis Flusser, "envisioned" a new era in which life would be dominated by images as a means of conveying information—though more or less useful according to the amount of new information they contain; his view was of a utopia of possibilities, but was also clear about the magnitude of the shift in human consciousness that this would produce. In his book *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985) which followed on from *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser is unequivocal about viewing this not-so-distant future in a positive light: "I raise the prospect of a future society that synthesizes electronic images. Seen from here and now, it will be a fabulous society, where life is radically different from our own. Current scientific, political, and artistic categories will hardly be recognizable there, and even our states of mind, our existential mood, will take on a new and strange coloration… Many aspects of this fabulous new social and life structure are already visible in our environment and in us."[9]

In his explanation, Flusser highlights the role of the camera as an apparatus and its effect on the material properties of photographs; the apparatus "transforms the effects of photons on molecules of silver nitrate into photographs."[10] He conceives of photographs and electronic images alike as "mosaics"—combinations of points on a surface and classes photographers as "envisioners"[11] (devoting a chapter to the gesture "to envision," he distinguishes photographers from functionaries or workers through their ability to visualise, or envision). Describing how this manifests itself in the physical properties of a photograph that allows a comparison to be drawn with, for example, television images, both of them kinds of technical images, he says:

Technical images are envisioned surfaces. When we look at a photograph with a magnifying glass, we see grains. When we get close to the television screen, we see points. It is true that the photograph is a chemical image and the television an electronic one and that we are dealing with different ways of structuring particles. But the basic construction of particles is the same… The point is that all technical images have the same basic character: on close inspection, they all prove to be envisioned surfaces computed from particles.[12]

[9] Flusser (1985) op. cit., 3 Flusser writes this in a section that opens the book which is titled "Warning" but which he wrote after the book was completed. In a typically paradoxical gesture, he goes on to contrast "negative" and "positive" utopias: "Taking contemporary technical images as a starting point, we find two divergent trends. One moves toward a centrally programmed, totalitarian society of image receivers and image administrators, the other toward a dialogic, telematic society of image producers and image collectors. From our standpoint, both these social structures are fantastic, even though the first presents a somewhat negative, the second a positive, utopia." Ibid. 4

[10] Ibid. 16

[11] "Producers of technical images, those who envision (photographers, cameramen, videomakers), are literally at the end of history… The world in which they find themselves can no longer be counted and explained: it has disintegrated into particles… This mass must be computed to make the world tangible, conceivable, comprehensible again… the whirring particles around and in us must be gathered onto surfaces; they must be envisioned." Ibid. 31

[12] Ibid. 33

For Flusser the camera is an example of an apparatus and the apparatus is, necessarily, "programmed," so that in the case of the camera every photograph taken is merely the result of the possibilities inherent in its programming. Nevertheless, it is the role of the experimental photographer, in his words, to "outwit the camera's rigidity" and "smuggle human intentions into its program that are not predicted by it" and thus "one can force the camera to create the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative".[13] In Flusser's view, there are three kinds of photographic images: those made by fully automated apparatuses such as a satellite (or perhaps a CCTV camera); those taken by amateur photographers (certainly now the most abundant); and those produced by professional or rather "experimental" photographers. Flusser classifies them according to the "information" they provide and this is how he separates out the work of experimental photographers such as artists—it is this kind of photography that is included in this show and even though in some cases professional or experimental photographers seek to emulate amateur photographs they do so, as Flusser might say, in order to produce new information about such images. In Flusser's terms, in the philosophical game of photography "freedom is playing against the camera."[14]

Flusser's philosophy traverses phenomenology and communications theory and his theory of photography spans this philosophical trajectory. While his concern with human consciousness stems from European phenomenology, which informs and persists in his later writing and attitudes even when his interest moves towards the ideas that dominate his later work in communications theory, he employs this in order to account for a new information society. [15] Returning to the roots of phenomenology, the terminology of which constantly surfaces in Flusser's writing, for this exhibition we have drawn from Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) the notion of the life-world (*lebenswelt*). For Husserl, the life-world could be conceived as a universe of what is self-evident or given, a world that subjects may experience together—a form of quotidian reality perhaps suggesting the everyday. According to him, human consciousness was developed in the a priori

[13] Flusser (1983), 80

[14] Ibid. 80

[15] Flusser rarely gave citations or footnoted sources in his texts—making them more readable than other academic or philosophical writings—but he makes clear the roots of his philosophy in phenomenology by frequently employing terms such as "life-world" (*lebenswelt*) or "being-in-the-world" (*in-der-welt-zein*) coined by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), his most important predecessors within the German-language foundations of phenomenology. That word play is a characteristic of Flusser's work might also be said to be rooted in the love of neologism that characterises the writing of Husserl and particularly Heidegger, but it also comes from his broader interested in linguistics, and the idea of language as a form of play or game that is clearly indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). Lastly, there is an important relationship between Flusser's thought and the work of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). Flusser openly acknowledged the importance of Heidegger, as well as his initial aversion to a thinker associated with Nazism, in an interview he gave in 1988. He also states that he first encountered Heidegger's philosophy during the war when he had already been forced to flee to Brazil. See Schwendener, op. cit., 140, n. 497.

cultural context of the "anonymous" world of ordinary lived experience. The concept of a life-world was also crucial for Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), though he termed it simply "world" (*welt*), in his formulation of the question of "being-in-the-world," and particularly his presentation of this as being in a world of objects that are present-at-hand. For Heidegger, all consciousness is consciousness of something; there is no consciousness cut off from an object. Nor are there objects without some consciousness beholding or being involved with them. Flusser employs both Husserl's life-world and Heidegger's being-in-the-world within his writing. Though Flusser brings his own terms into play in order to distinguish the development he aims to describe through an analysis of photography and technical images; both "universe" and "telematic society"indicate the shift.

In this exhibition the idea of being, and of human consciousness of being as contingent on the world, is examined through three other notions drawn from philosophical-phenomenological thinking, namely the social world (*mitwelt*), the environment or world-around (*umwelt*) and the inner or own world (*eigenwelt*). Thus, organised into three principal groupings of images, this exhibition will examine the role that photography has played in communicating what it means to exist, examining how we exist with others and how we develop an independent existence and a sense of our own self; in each, photography acts as a way to reflect on the challenge of being in the world. In the exhibition, the social world is conceived as the world of social, cultural and familial relations but also as the world of media communication and economic relations. The environment or world-around is seen in the widest interpretation as both the landscape and built environment but also the world of objects that surround us on a daily basis—the "tools"of everyday existence—in part this is drawn from Heidegger's notion of the tool, though Flusser makes it clear that he excludes the camera from the notion of tool as it is an apparatus and in his view tools belong to the age of the industrial revolution while the camera is post-industrial—the photographer is not a worker, and should avoid becoming a functionary of the camera, but is instead closer to a programmer or a gamer seeking "undiscovered virtualities" in the camera "programme". This section on environment also explores the notion of dwelling (important for both Heidegger and Flusser) and of buildings as tools for dwelling, as well as moments of entropy and decay.[16] The inner or own world is perhaps the most difficult on the face of it for photography to represent, if we think of photography as a record of the real[17], but it has been nevertheless a persistent theme within photographic representation since its inception—from moments of contemplation, distraction, disengagement and daydream to the world of the imagination made manifest through photographic means, or otherwise as a reflection on aesthetics or creativity.

As a preface, addendum or appendix to the three sections discussed above, is a smaller group of works brought together in a section that is titled after Flusser's summary essay on photography "The Photograph as

[16] There is also a sense, as Martha Schwendener observes, that Flusser shares in Heidegger's belief that "language is the house of Being." Schwendener, op. cit., 142

[17] Martha Schwendener points out the concept of the real and photography's relation to it was a subject of dispute in the 1970s and 1980s, the context in which Flusser and his contemporaries were writing.

Post-Industrial Object", that together question "What is a photograph?" These works address some of the characteristics of photography that Flusser proposes in his statements about it and its philosophical status —the way photography acts as a meaningful or significant surface, a prototype for technical images or screens that are "envisioned surfaces" and "mosaics assembled from particles," that mediate the world and provides information in a radically new way impacting on human consciousness and transforming it to constitute a completely new era— which he called the "telematic society". This section will help us get closer to Flusser's attitude towards photography, extending beyond a simple phenomenology of the photographic image, and understanding photographs not so much as images of the world but instead seen as images of concepts. Flusser says in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* that "concepts no longer signify the world out there (as in the Cartesian model); instead the universe signifies the program within cameras" and "the task of a philosophy of photography is to expose [the] struggle between human being and apparatuses in the field of photography…[and] can be a starting point for any philosophy engaging with the current and future existence of human beings."[18] This, then, is critical for Flusser because it detaches such images from notions such as the real and instead of making the mistake of confusing them with objective representations, reveals their status as images to be criticised (rather than transparent windows on the world), and moreover it reveals that technical images are images that encode concepts in a new way. Flusser's view is that in the photographic universe, the world has become a function of the photograph.[19]

Flusser looked towards future developments in our relation to digital images and his thinking provides an important early attempt to deal with complex issues that are now a large part of global culture governing human existence, consciousness and relations; though it did so as Flusser stresses through a "critique of the present," a present on the "cusp" of a new society.[20] Flusser joins photography with electronic technologies such as television and digital media, drawing a continuum between the pixilation of analogue photography in the grains of the photographic emulsions and the digitally pixelated image—making us aware of the "blizzard" of zeros and ones that define digitized or binary encoded information behind those pixilations. Thus considering photography in the light of Flusser's philosophical perspective reveals how we have reached a world in which images are no longer valued and shared as objects, as in traditional forms of photographic prints, but are valued and shared as information. Classic photography can now be seen in its historical place as a "post-industrial object" but one that has in large part been superseded by the "technical images" of the electronic and digital world—images that have a material presence only on one or more forms of hardware they are viewed upon (for example on a laptop or smartphone) but

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[18] Flusser (1983), in the chapter "The Photographic Universe," 68

[19] Ibid. 10. The discussion in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* regarding how images signify is an engagement with Roland Barthes and that latter's assertion of photography as denotative rather than connotative—even though Flusser never mentions Barthes. Flusser, contrary to Barthes, stresses how images "provide space for interpretation".

[20] Flusser (1985), 3

which in essence exist in an immaterial realm of information predicted by Flusser.[21] As Flusser later concluded "this will involve not only a transvaluation of all values but a mutation in human existence."[22]

While Flusser's principal philosophical writings on photography and technical images don't discuss or even name particular photographers as examples, he did write regularly for both *Artforum* and *European Photography*, as well as occasionally for other publications such as *Leonardo*, writing sometimes in general but also on the work of particular photographers and artists whose work reflected his perspective on photography including Fischli and Weiss and Joan Fontcuberta.[23] Other artists and photographers have looked to Flusser's philosophy as a means to develop their work, and for whom he has become a kind of touchstone, in some cases he became the subject of the work itself—for instance Fred Forest's film *Gestures* (*Les Gestes*) 1972–4 made in collaboration with Flusser took as its subject Flusser smoking his pipe and speaking as a way to explore the phenomenological notion of gesture.[24] In this exhibition it has been more relevant to include Harun Farocki's filmed conversation with Flusser, *Catch Phrases—Catch Images: A Conversation with Vilém Flusser* 1986, which shows the two discussing the way that the front page of the German tabloid newspaper *Bild Zeitung* is composed, its deployment of images and text to sensationalise the news, as a way into Flusser's thinking about the "universe of technical images"—such filmic portrayals are themselves self-reflexive instances of an artist consciously "breaking" the programme. That experimental photographers must deconstruct the apparatus was taken more literally by the "Pictures Generation" photographer Christopher Williams in his images of spliced cameras. While Williams has frequently cited Flusser as a key reference for his work, he nevertheless embraces the idea that he as photographer is a "functionary" of the camera's "programme" making this clear by frequently using the word "Program" on the covers of his catalogues.[25] With Flusser's writing as a guide, this exhibition draws from and examines the rich spectrum of photography included in the Isabel and Agustin Coppel Collection. The exhibition includes a wide range of photographic practice as well as a selected number of moving image, slide and new media works that

[21] In his later writing on the technical image, Flusser separates analogue photography from the category of "technical images" that are electronic or digital, suggesting that it occupies a transitional position.

[22] Flusser (1986), op. cit., 329

[23] The exhibition *Without Firm Ground: Vilem Flusser and the Arts*, staged in 2015 at ZKM, Karlsruhe and Akademie der Kunste, Berlin, with the cooperation of the Flusser Archive at the Universität der Künste, Berlin, and was organized by Baruch Gottlieb, Siegfried Zelinski, Peter Wiebel and Daniel Irrgang.

[24] One facet of Flusser's thinking involves the theorization of the gesture—a phenomenological term—and photography itself is addressed as a gesture, albeit one that captures other kinds of gestures and transforms them into surfaces. See Vilém Flusser, *Gestures* (1991), The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2014, see especially "Gesture and Affect: The Practice of a Phenomenology of Gestures" and "The Gesture of Photographing". See also the chapter "The Gesture of Photography" in Flusser (1983) op. cit.

[25] Between 2011 and 2015 it featured prominently on six different publications.

are part of the "photographic universe" or the "universe of technical images". More clearly, as stated above, it focuses on the area of "experimental" photography that Flusser considered to be especially 'informative'. It will encompass the work of many major figures of twentieth century photography as well as introducing some lesser-known practitioners.

While initially Flusser states photographs are "images which have been produced and distributed by automatic and programmed apparatus according to a game based on chance informed by necessity, and have been distributed by these same methods" he goes on to contradict this as an acceptable definition and instead defines photography as an act, or gesture, of phenomenological doubt. [26] The gesture of experimental photography resides in playing the game in order to confound the programme and discover the unexpected —this is the freedom of "playing against the apparatus". This exhibition seeks to examine the notion of a philosophy of photography or, borrowing Flusser's way of putting it, it seeks to "make a contribution—informed by philosophy— to the debate on the subject of 'photography'."[27] It will show how photography became a key means for the development of human consciousness in relation to the world, offering a way to understand a phenomenology of photography, and will also reflect on the question of the philosophical status of photography at the moment when Flusser was writing, beginning with "Towards a Philosophy of Photography" (1983) and continuing with "Into the Universe of Technical Images" (1985)[28] and summarised in the article "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs" (1986) included in this volume, a moment when the transition from photography as an object to photography as an immaterial presence in the digital age was beginning to occur.[29]

[26] Flusser (1983), 55 and Schwendener, op. cit., 152–3

[27] Flusser (1983) Ibid. 7 Or, in a different translation, to "contribute to a discussion about the subject 'photography' in a philosophical spirit." This alternate translation can be found at: www.photographsdonotbend.co.uk/Vilem%20 Flusser-TowardsAPhilosophyofPho.pdf

[28] Flusser considered this book-essay to be a "continuation and amendment" of the arguments of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Flusser (1985), 3 It was followed by *Does Writing Have a Future?* (1987), which is considered the third in a trilogy dealing with related issues. The first book is the only one that focuses in depth on photography while the latter two deal with the development of technical images and their impact.

[29] As Martha Schwendener has pointed out in her PhD Thesis on Flusser's "Photographic Universe" he was writing at a time when he had returned from Brazil to Europe and when photography had become the subject of a "theoretical boom" through the writing of Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Michel Tournier and others, along with a wider focus on photography within French institutions in particular. See Schwendener, op. cit., 119. It is in the wider context that the 1987 special issue of the journal *October* dedicated to photography was also published, which included the 1963 article by Hubert Damisch "Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image" republished in this volume.