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„To document something which does not exist.“

Vilém Flusser and Joan Fontcuberta: A Collaboration¹

„Ever since the fifteenth century, Occidental civilisation has suffered from the divorce into two cultures: science and its techniques – the ‘true’ and the ‘good for something’ – on the one hand; the arts – beauty – on the other. This is a pernicious distinction. Every scientific proposition and every technical gadget has an aesthetic quality, just as every work of art has an epistemological and political quality. More significantly, there is no basic distinction between scientific and artistic research: both are fictions in the quest of truth (scientific hypotheses being fictions). Electromagnetized images do away with this divorce because they are the result of science and are at the service of the imagination. They are what Leonardo da Vinci used to call ‘fantasia essata’. A synthetic image of a fractal equation both a work of art and a model for knowledge.”

Vilém Flusser, *The Photograph as Postindustrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs*

In this paper we would like to focus on the friendship and intense collaboration between Vilém Flusser and Joan Fontcuberta. The Flusser-Archive in Berlin possesses a short epistolary exchange that we would like to analyze and discuss in detail. It contains, in fact, valuable information about common projects, theoretical exchanges and personal matters. To clarify a few important points we have asked Joan Fontcuberta for a short interview which we have included in this paper. After this first more general introductory part we want to discuss the reciprocal theoretical and creative interest that brought Flusser and Fontcuberta together and the different texts resulting from this.

Joan Fontcuberta is not only a remarkably inventive and original photographer he also published a series of books about the art of photography and its philosophical implications. On several occasions Fontcuberta wrote about Flusser from a theoretical point of view. In the *Suplemento Annual Enciclopedia Universal Espasa-Calpe* 1981-1982 one can find a few passages about Flusser’s philosophy of photography which are very much to the point. In 1997, furthermore, Fontcuberta published *El Beso de Judas. Fotografía y Verdad* – The Kiss of Judas. Photography and Truth – dedicating it to the memory of Flusser. In this book one can find a few more comments on

¹ This text is also the result of a collaboration and a Flusserian enterprise of translation and retranslation from Spanish to English, English to Spanish and back again. Andrea Soto Calderon took care of the Spanish version and Rainer Guldin of the English one.

Flusser as well as a short passage on the philosophical intent behind the photographs collected in Fontcuberta's *Herbarium* for which Flusser wrote the English and German introduction. Flusser also wrote two essays – *Releaser* and *Counter-vision* – that were never published. The first text should have been published in Fontcuberta's journal *PhotoVision* and the second was part of a common project envisaged by Flusser, Fontcuberta and Müller-Pohle. We have published these two texts in this issue along with the letter exchange between Flusser and Fontcuberta and the short philosophical fiction *Bibliophagus convictus* which had originally been conceived for *Artforum* and for which Flusser asked Fontcuberta to take a few pictures. A discussion of this textual net not only clarifies the common theoretical background linking Flusser to Fontcuberta, it also allows to present a few more facets of Flusser's complex and manifold philosophy of photography.

Dear Joan – Cher Vilém

The small corpus of letters and cards that Vilém Flusser and Joan Fontcuberta exchanged between 1984 and 1988 consists of thirteen texts altogether: seven letters by Flusser all typed in English, as well as four handwritten texts in French, among which one postcard, and two typed English texts by Fontcuberta. Two letters by Flusser – written on the 26th January and 4th April 1984 – to which he alludes in his letters of the 9th February and 11th June 1984, are missing. The single texts have been numbered from 58 to 70 in the upper-right hand corner. The suggested chronology, however, does not always hold up to closer inspection. In fact, 68 should precede letter 67 and this for logical reasons. In text 67 Fontcuberta accepts Flusser's request of photographing his imaginary *Bibliophagus convictus* formulated in letter 68. A short summary of the content of the single texts will shed some light on their common interests and collaborations.

1984 is probably the most intense year of Flusser's and Fontcuberta's collaboration. The letter exchange of this year includes 7 of the 13 texts with the addition of two more letters by Flusser that were most probably lost. Edith and Vilém Flusser visited Fontcuberta in Barcelona and Christina and Joan Fontcuberta spent some time in Robion. In the first letter (text 58) written on the 2nd February 1984 Flusser refers to a previous letter he had written on January 26th in which he had asked Fontcuberta to send him some tickets for a trip to Barcelona which was planned for mid February 1984. Flusser also briefly informs Fontcuberta about his trip to Naples suggesting to invite the Director of the French Institute to Barcelona. In his answer (text 59) – the handwritten card does not have any date – Fontcuberta describes a visit to Arles and Marseille referring to a previous visit in Robion and excusing himself for not having had any time to visit them during his stay in the South of France. In the third letter of the 10th April 1984 (text

60) Flusser thanks Fontcuberta for the invitation to the symposium on *Mediterranean Photography* in Barcelona – “[...] a stimulating event and I shall have to digest all the impulses I received during our meeting.” – and confirms Fontcuberta’s invitation to the Avignon festival – *Le Vivant et l’Artificiel* organized by Louis Bec – in the July of the same year. In this and the following letter (text 61) of the 11th June Flusser writes about his text *Releaser* that was supposed to be published in Fontcuberta’s *PhotoVision*: “I promised you an article for *PhotoVision*. You will find it enclosed here: ‘Releaser’. I hope you will find it suitable for publication.” The essay was not published and never mentioned again in the letter exchange. We will deal with its content later on. In this letter Flusser again asks about the whereabouts of another letter he wrote on the 4th April: “The post services are terrible these days.” Flusser and Fontcuberta met again at the Avignon event in early July. Fontcuberta and his wife also visited Edith and Vilém Flusser in Robion as one can deduce from Flusser’s letter of the 13th July (text 62): “[...] it has been a pleasure to have met you and Christina here, to have shown you some aspects of Avignon, and to have played chess with you. We must do it more often.” The letter includes the German and English introduction to Fontcuberta’s *Herbarium*: “I hope it will suit your purpose. If not, please write and I shall change it according to your suggestions.” In his letter of the 8th August (Text 63) Fontcuberta thanks for the introduction to *Herbarium*: “I do believe it is very sharp and will fit perfectly. I will send a fotocopy [sic] to Andreas [Müller-Pohle] soon and I am convinced he will agree.” Fontcuberta had already written a short text on Flusser’s philosophy of photography: “Recently² I have written a piece for the annual supplement [sic] of the *Enciclopedia Espasa* [...] and I comment your photographic theories. Even your portrait – the one I took in Barcelona – will be reproduced. I will send it when printed.” In his P.S. Fontcuberta is alluding ironically to Flusser’s concept of program. “I am using a new electronic typewriting machine and I feel this time the ‘program’ is very useful!” In the following letter of the 7th September (text 64) Flusser writes about Fontcuberta’s text in *Enciclopedia Espasa* and his own introduction to *Herbarium*: “I am flattered and filled with pride that you have written a piece about me for *Enciclopedia Espasa*, and am expecting with great pleasure to see it. As for my own piece about you, (‘uma mao lava a outra’³), I hope it will soon be published.” Flusser asks Fontcuberta to visit him again in Robion as well as about the possibility to be invited by the University of Barcelona: “if only that we might meet and play chess?” The letter contains more information about Flusser’s plans for the future: trips to Liège, Bielefeld, Rio de Janeiro and Buffalo.

² The photography included in Fontcuberta’s contribution to *Enciclopedia Espasa* was taken during the Barcelona symposium, that is, in February 1984. It is not quite clear what ‘recently’ means in this context (see also footnote 14).

³ One hand washes the other.

For 1985 only one hand-written card by Fontcuberta dated 16th January (text 65) has been preserved in the Archive. Along with the card Fontcuberta sent a copy of *Herbarium*. “Ici je t’envoie un des premiers exemplaires de mon livre. Je veux passer chez vous bientôt et, j’aimerais m’arrêter et parler un petit peu; alors j’amènerais [sic] des exemplaires additionels [sic]. En plus, je dois te demander comment tu veux que je te paye ton magnifique texte. [...] J’essai encore d’organiser un truc à l’Université pour toi mais la situation est très conflictive [sic] pour le moment.” As in many other cases, Flusser makes use of his network of friends not only to keep up a theoretical and productive dialogue, but also to publish his texts, to be invited to conferences and to find a job in an academic context.

In 1986 the main topic is Flusser’s attempt to have Fontcuberta take some pictures of his imaginary hybrid insect, the *Bibliophagus convictus*. In a letter of the 1st January (text 66) Flusser thanks Joan for his text in *Enciclopedia Espasa*: “I was flattered. You have succeeded in putting my thoughts concerning photography in a nut shell.” Flusser also mentions a meeting in Berlin and the possibility of another visit to Spain on occasion of the publication of the first Spanish translation of *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* – For a Philosophy of Photography. This letter also contains the theoretically most significant sentence of the whole letter exchange, the very basis for Flusser’s proposal to take some pictures of his philosophical chimera. “Angelo Schwarz [...] told me you are one of the most important photographers, because you understand what photos are about: to document something which does not exist. Do you agree?” In a second letter written on the 2nd September Flusser asks Fontcuberta for his collaboration in the *Bibliophagus convictus* project: “I am about to write a scientific paper on ‘Bibliophagus convictus’, possibly to be published by Andreas. [...] which is to be published shortly both as a boo[k] an[d] floppy disk).⁴ Would you be interested in photographing that animal? [...] I know I can trust your capacity to document this animal as faithfully as you document plants, and I hope I can seduce you to do it. Best wishes, and please let us collaborate on this project.”

As in the previous letter, Flusser makes use of the word ‘document’ in a highly ambivalent and ironical sense. To document means to certificate and to prove, but it also refers to written evidence, that is, to a textual codification which is exactly what photography in Flusser’s view is all about. Photographs, like all other technical images, do not show reality as it is, but are based on texts, that is, on the programs inscribed in the apparatus, in this case the camera. Using ‘to document’ in this second literal sense Flusser ironically shows what the alleged objectivity of photography dissimulates: its fundamentally inventive and constructive dimension. The word ‘faithfully’ has to be read in the same ironical sense: The camera is not faithful to the reality it depicts but to the programs animating it and to the intentions of the photographer himself. Flusser, fur-

⁴ Flusser is referring here to the text *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge* first published in 1989.

thermore, is referring here to Fontcuberta's *Herbarium* project – “as faithfully as you document plants” – and by asking him to document an imaginary animal is in a way also anticipating Fontcuberta's future project *Fauna*.⁵ We have included in this issue some pictures from both projects.

Fontcuberta's answer follows on the 15th September (text 67): “Your invitation to illustrate your ‘Bibliophagus convictus’ seems very exciting to me and of course I agree. The thing is now time. I will be in Israel and Portugal for several workshops and only back to Barcelona in December. Could you wait til[l] then? Even so, I am not absolutely sure to have a chance to work on that project then, since I for[e]see I will be quite busy [...]” We will come back to this project and its theoretical implications in detail later on.

The last two texts are a handwritten card and postcard in French by Fontcuberta. The first (text 69) bears the date 13th 88, with an illegible month indication. Fontcuberta mentions the birth of his daughter Judith, the exposition of his photo-work *Fauna* at the MOMA in New York that in the same year travelled to the MIT in Boston. “Est-ce-que tu as écrit finalement une pièce pour ‘Artforum’? J’aimerais recevoir une copie [...] de ta conf[é]rence à Leinefelden, même en allemande. Peut-être je peux la publier ici. D[é]but octobre j’irai à Marseille et si j’ai le temps je vais vous rendre visite.” The last item of the letter exchange (text 70) is a post-card of a spiral galaxy with an illegible French postmark. Fontcuberta writes: “Je me trouve parmi les gens qui t’aiment et t’admirent [...] Je vous embrasse tous le deux!”

It is not quite clear when exactly Flusser and Fontcuberta met and how this meeting was possible. According to Fontcuberta⁶ they probably met at a symposium in the University of Aix-en-Provence where Flusser held a speech and later on again through Andreas Müller-Pohle. According to Andreas Müller-Pohle⁷, photographer and editor of *European Photography*, Vilém Flusser and Joan Fontcuberta got to know each other personally in Barcelona in 1984.⁸ Flusser and Müller-Pohle had been invited to a Symposium about photography and the Mediterranean organized by Joan Fontcuberta. Müller-Pohle and Fontcuberta knew each other since the late 70ies. 1980 Fontcuberta had been guest-editor of a special issue of *European Photography* dedicated to Spanish

⁵ See text 69. *Fauna* was also published in 1988 as *Dr. Ameisenbaufen's Fauna* in collaboration with Pere Formiguera.

⁶ See the interview included in this essay.

⁷ Andreas Müller-Pohle kindly answered a few questions by e-mail in January 2012.

⁸ In his card most probably written in early 1984 (text 59), however, Fontcuberta refers to an earlier visit in Robion: „Je n’ai pas eu [...] l’occasion cette fois de vous rendre visite.” Another possibility could be that this card was written later on.

Photography.⁹ In September 1983 Müller-Pohle published *Transformance* in Fontcuberta's *PhotoVision*, a series of pictures accompanied by an introduction by Vilém Flusser.¹⁰

According to Fontcuberta, the last meeting with Vilém Flusser occurred when he visited in Barcelona together with Joan Costa some of Gaudí's buildings.¹¹ According to Müller-Pohle, he Flusser and Fontcuberta were invited in September 1991 to the Third Israeli Biennale of Photography in Harod.¹² They went together on a day-trip through the occupied territories down to Jerusalem. Flusser died two months later in a car accident. Fontcuberta gave Müller-Pohle the negatives of a few pictures he had taken of him and Flusser during their trip.

The small text-corpus discussed here is most probably incomplete. It allows, however, to draw a few conclusions as to the general dynamics of their friendship. After a first very intensive phase of meetings and exchanges in 1984 the relationship stagnated for some time until Flusser revived it in 1986 with the proposal of a new project that unfortunately was not realized. In the last part of their friendship the personal aspect, the meetings and the dialogues played a central role as there were no more common projects to be realized. In the following interview with Fontcuberta some additional aspects are introduced and a few uncertainties clarified.

Interview with Joan Fontcuberta (February 2012)¹³

1. How did you get to know Vilém Flusser and his wife?

I think it must have been at some symposium or speech by Flusser at the university of Aix-en-Provence, and later on, through Andreas [Müller-Pohle]. Andreas contacted me in 1978, he was the editor of a journal called *Fotografie* and asked me if he could publish some of my work. From then on we were in contact. When he founded *European Photography*, Vilém was one of the habitual collaborators.

2. When did Flusser visit you in Barcelona and when did you visit him in Robion?

In 1984 I invited Vilém to Barcelona to give a speech in the context of a symposium on *Mediterranean Photography*. So, we already knew each other. My book *Herbarium* that was published in De-

⁹ *European Photography*, (Vol. 1, nr. 2, 1980). On the photographers Manel Esclusa, Pablo Pérez-Mínguez, Joan Fontcuberta, Ferran Freixa, Humberto Rivas, Josep Rigol, Toni Catany, Rafael Navarro, Jaume & Jordi Blassí, Fernando Herraez, Koldo Chamorro and Mariano Zuzunaga.

¹⁰ This text along with a few pictures by Andreas Müller-Pohle was published in Flusser Studies (see <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/10/transformance.pdf>).

¹¹ See the interview included in this essay.

¹² „The Persistence of Memory“, Third Israeli Biennale of Photography, Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Israel.

¹³ The answers were originally in Spanish. Translation by RG.

ember 1984 contained an introduction by Vilém. I guess that in the months before we were discussing the subject. I don't remember my first visit in Robion. Perhaps it was when Louis Bec organized in Avignon the exposition *Le Vivant et l'Artificiel* in which I took part.

3. *When did you last meet him?*

I think it was when he visited Barcelona and we were together with Joan Costa showing him different buildings by Gaudí because he had explicitly asked for this.

4. *How were the collaboration and the friendship with Vilém Flusser?*

We didn't have a very frequent contact but I admired him as a *maître-à-penser* and learnt quite a lot from him.

5. *Flusser wrote a text (Releaser) for your journal PhotoVision which, as far as I know, was never published? Why?*

I can't remember.

6. *You wrote a text about Flusser that was published in Enciclopedia Espasa. Could you give us some more details about this publication (year, month etc.)?*

I have to check this and will get to the question later on.

7. *Do you think that we could republish this text in Flusser Studies?*

Yes, of course.

8. *In October 1980 you were guest-editor for Müller-Poble's European Photography. What were the criteria behind your choice of photographers?*

The idea was to look for authors whose work was capable of translating the political evolution of the country leaving the dictatorship into a new aesthetics.

9. *What was the aesthetical program of Spanish Visualismo?*

Visualismo was a term created by Andreas. It referred to experimental forms of representation exploring the ways opened up by the historical avant-gardes (Bauhaus, constructivism, futurism, etc.). There was no specifically Spanish *Visualismo*.

10. *What was Müller-Poble's role in your collaboration with Flusser?*

Andreas had a very close relationship with Vilém. If Vilém was a teacher to me, he was a guru for Andreas. Andreas always informed me about Vilém's latest ideas and projects.

12. *Which parallels do you see between your vision and practice of photography and Flusser's point of view?*

A very creative way of thinking, non-conformist, against the grain of common opinion. He was sharp, clear and complex at the same time. In all modesty, I would also like to be that way! Vilém was one of the most intelligent people I have ever known.

13. *We also have some problems reconstructing the time line, as in some of your letters to Flusser the date is missing or incomplete. In one of your letters to Flusser you speak about being in Arles and an exposition in Marseille. Could that have been spring 1984?*

I have to check that.

14. *Another letter in French is dated "le 16 Janvier". You write about sending "des exemplaires" to Vilém and refer to a text by Vilém: "'magnifique texte". Were you referring to your book Herbarium and Flusser's bilingual introduction? Could it be January 1986? Or was it 1985?*

Indeed, it was *Herbarium* and it was January 1985.

15. *In a third letter, dated September 15th, you refer to Flusser's invitation to take a picture of Bibliophagus. In the second part of the letter you refer to several plans: Israel, Portugal and a stay in the USA in the ensuing year. Could it be the 15th September 1986?*

Yes, I assume it was September 1986.

16. *We would also have very much liked to see a picture of the Bibliophagus. How come this part of your collaboration did not work out? Was it due to tight time-schedules?*

I didn't manage to take that picture, yes, it was because of lack of time.

17. *Another letter is dated 13th ... 1988. What month could that have been? In the letter you speak about Fauna in MOMA and a further exposition in MIT towards the end of the year.*

Yes, 1988.

18. *And finally there is a postcard of a Whirlpool Galaxy in which you wish Flusser a happy birthday. There is no date and only an illegible postmark. The card was posted in France. You write: "Je me trouve parmi les gens qui t'aiment et t'admirent ..." Could it be May 1990?*

I don't know.

19. *Flusser loved to play chess with his friends. He mentions this in a letter to you written in July 1984. What was your own experience?*

I had a few games with him. I think he always won.

And: Feel free to add anything else that seems important to you.

At a certain point Andreas, Vilém and I thought of developing the concept of *Contravisión* that I had suggested and about which I had already written on various occasions. Shortly afterwards Vilém already sent us a proposal of a possible essay, a wonderful essay. I don't know if you have this text, I still have the original. In 1996 I was named artistic director of the International Festival of Photography of Arles and I decided to organize a program called *Réels, Fictions, Virtuel* as a homage to Roland Barthes, Vilém Flusser and Jorge Luis Borges. In the same year I published the book *El beso de Judas. Fotografía y verdad*, and dedicated it exclusively to the memory of Vilém.

The celebration of this festival was the reason for an estrangement between me and Andreas. I asked Andreas to suggest ideas for a few possible activities in order to organize together a symposium or something else about the work of Vilém, but he – who considered himself to be the major specialist (and he definitely was) – felt hurt that I had not asked him explicitly to organize an exposition of his works.

Greetings

Joan

Joan Fontcuberta's philosophy and practice of photography

Vilém Flusser's and Joan Fontcuberta's vision of photography have a lot in common. Both see its importance more on an ontological than aesthetical level. Moreover, they are both interested in the medium that makes this particular type of technical-images possible, as well as in the specific sensibility this medium articulates and the historical coordinates that go with it.

As already mentioned before, Fontcuberta wrote a short piece on Vilém Flusser that was included in *Enciclopedia Espasa-Calpe*. In this text Fontcuberta presents a short analysis of the situation of photography in the early 1980ies and the changes it had gone through in the previous ten

years focusing on the importance of the new technologies and the epistemological and ontological consequences they implied for the reception and practice of photography.¹⁴

The *Enciclopedia* is structured around a series of different thematic nubs organized in alphabetical order. Fontcuberta's contribution can be found under the concept of photography and is articulated into three parts: general considerations: the technological syndrome – the *Mavica*¹⁵ and other technical innovations; the cultural context and its main manifestations – the world of publishing houses; the market of photographic works and the changes occurring in the Spanish context. Fontcuberta reflects on the ways technological innovations revolutionize composition schemes and perspective, as well as on the habits of perceiving movement. The famous Leica photo camera produced in 1925, for instance, profoundly modified the notion of artist: “the vision of a solitary romantic artist, still valid in the 1970ies, seemed no longer acceptable in an era of accelerated dissemination of information and massification of images created by pushing buttons.”¹⁶ From here stems his interest in analyzing the importance of technology not only from an aesthetic but also from an ethic point of view with particular attention to the changes that this has operated within society at large.

In this context, Fontcuberta introduces a short reference to Flusser. “For Flusser the photographer symbolizes the human being immersed in modern society, subjected to a new form of alienation: programming. Humanity is surrounded and lives in function of simple and sophisticated technological gadgets (from the simple household appliance to the complex computer), conceived for certain ends and run by certain programs. These programs help to create new programs until the origin and sense of the chain are utterly lost. We only know – using a cybernetic interpretation – that in this system of ‘black boxes’ an *input* produces a certain *output*. Nowadays, freedom has to be defined as the rejection of programs. The photographer, continues Flusser, is an individual manipulating the programmed apparatus in order to produce a certain type of image (the standardized ‘camera picture’). The work of avant-garde photographers should, therefore, articulate a triple subversion: subversion of the camera program (its internal routine structure allowing for very limited expectations); subversion of the ontological *status* of the photographer (that is, the question of naturalness and the function of photography); and the subversion of the

¹⁴ According to the letter exchange, the publication in *Enciclopedia Espasa* should have taken place in 1984. Fontcuberta writes two more entries for the *Enciclopedia* in 1983-1984 and 1985-1986 but he cannot possibly be referring to these, since the publication about which he writes to Flusser in his letter of the 8th August 1984 includes a picture that Fontcuberta took during Flusser's stay in Barcelona the same year. And the only entry in the *Enciclopedia* including a picture of Flusser is the one published in 1981-1982.

¹⁵ Mavica (Magnetic Video Camera) was a brand of Sony cameras using removable disks as the main recording media. The first commercial electronic still camera was produced by Sony in August 1981.

¹⁶ Suplemento Anual Enciclopedia Universal Espasa-Calpe S.A [1981-1982], p.343. Translation by RG.

usual meaning of the concept of freedom (that is, the amplification of the restricted limits imposed by the program).”¹⁷

And in the same encyclopedic entry Fontcuberta adds: “With respect to the automatization of the equipment, changes are taking place within the systems of focusing, mediation and exposure; that makes it possible to foresee that Nikon will actually create a new reality: the possibility to dispose of a totally automatic mediation and shooting device with an opening priority, an optional priority of closure or a combination of both. [...] With automatic focusing and exposure there is no possibility of a technical mistake; this amounts to an irrefutable confirmation of Vilém Flusser’s theory”¹⁸

The project that Fontcuberta intends to pursue in *El Beso de Judas. Fotografía y Verdad*¹⁹ is a radical questioning of the naturalness and function of photography – the second subversion proposed by Flusser. It is, therefore, particularly significant that he dedicated the book to the memory of Vilém Flusser. Here his intention – as he was going to confirm later on in his *Cámara de Pandora - Pandora’s Camera* (Fontcuberta 2010) – is to expose the constructive naturalness of photography. Fontcuberta asserts that the history of photography is marked by a dialogue between the will to get closer to reality and the difficulties encountered in doing this. This tension is deposited in two historical sediments: truth and memory. Despite this, for Fontcuberta photography does not consist in offering visual truths about the world, or in ensuring precise visual information: “all photography is a fiction that presents itself as true” and “photography always lies, lies instinctively, lies because its nature does not permit it to do anything else.” (Fontcuberta 1997: 15)²⁰

In this way, Fontcuberta’s photographic production could be understood as an attempt to free photography from the tyranny of the object that has exercised a nearly absolute hegemony, “as if the history of photography had been the history of that which can be photographed.” (Fontcuberta 1997: 21) In *la Cámara de Pandora* (Fontcuberta 2010) he asserted that nowadays the circulation of images is more important for the construction of their meaning than their actual content.

Fontcuberta radically questions the traditional belief that in photographs the object depicts itself and, therefore, also the notion of objectivity that the images are flaunting. His critical effort intends to “bury the fallacy that the photographic procedure is ‘natural’, ‘automatic’, ‘spontaneous’, without any cultural and ideological filters.” (Fontcuberta 1997: 27) He discusses the status

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 344. Translation by RG.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 346. Translation by RG.

¹⁹ On the cover of *El beso de Judas* we can find one of the photographic inventions from *Herbarium*. It is the last picture ‘Flor Miguera’ and it probably refers anagrammatically to Pere Formiguera with whom Fontcuberta published *Dr. Ameisenhaufen’s Fauna*.

²⁰ All the following passages quoted from the work of Joan Fontcuberta have been translated into English [RG].

of the photographic, drawing attention to the intentions that structure its uses, and to its interpretative repertoire that ranges from scientific verification to poetic fabulation.

To take pictures, consequently, before being an account is a reinvention of reality. In this sense, Fontcuberta's photographic production is animated by a sort of genealogic picturing method that could be characterized as an attempt to visualize or extract the invisible from human inventions. His work questions the experience photography provides and the relationship we establish with pictures, disseminating the meanings that are anchored in the image-object relationship. "[...] the umbilical cord between image and object is broken" (Fontcuberta 1997: 51), writes Fontcuberta, pointing to the fragility of all meaning.

Fontcuberta wants to question the ontological foundations of photography by describing its character and the criteria that define it, but instead of setting up a structure and pointing to the impossibility of using photography as evidence of the real, he goes on to show the gap that this non-evidence generates. This release from the limited expectations that this kind of image generates opens up the possibility to move beyond the standard concept of image. Through a method of systematic manipulation the creation of improbable pictures is achieved. As Flusser would put it: the higher the level of improbability the greater the possibility of freedom. The image has to break free from its reduction to simple visibility.

Visibility is no longer the determining criterion. A series of processes and other theoretical reflections are involved in its production (see Fontcuberta 2010: 12). Fontcuberta's photography is animated by the intention of visual counter-argumentation with all the paradoxes that such an expression implies. Walter Benjamin attributes to Bertolt Brecht the statement that the camera is fundamentally reduced to showing the superficial appearances of things while their profound reasons for being remain hidden (see Fontcuberta 1997: 96). Fontcuberta recognizes that images are not always appropriate for certain abstract issues. Very often they are not telling us anything about relations of exploitation, class struggle, collective aspirations and injustices. In accordance with the use we make of photographs, however, they can reveal stratifications of memory that permit to penetrate their surface.

The Dadaists introduced a creative method playing with chance and the fortuitous which was subsequently elaborated by Tachisme, Abstract Expressionism with the practice of *dripping* and by cybernetics that introduced the notion of 'noise' (Fontcuberta 1997: 109) a concept that plays also a central role in Flusser's philosophy of communication. In the same way, Fontcuberta uses manipulation as a theoretical counterpoint focusing on the decisive moment as a defining value and the importance of 'noise' (Fontcuberta 1997: 83) in his pictures.

Photography begins for him with the search for a new social location: "[...] the search for alternatives to the conventional photographic regime is inscribed within the frame of a critical ap-

proach to the ‘perfect’ apparatus, predestined to generate a one-dimensional graphic production. The way Vilém Flusser understands it, the photographer faces a severe quandary engaging in a symbolic battle: to recognize his status as a functionary of the apparatus, giving in to its routines, or to rise up and defend his freedom. The combative gesture of rejection and the dignity of opposing the program, however, are more important than any results, even if these, at times, impress us with their false power.” (Fontcuberta 1997: 110) Fontcuberta’s photographic gesture is a belligerent gesture of refusal. He suggests manipulation as a style with a series of decisions that configure the graphic result. For him to create means to construct by deploying a manipulative rhetoric. He creates a rhetoric of fiction that allows him to structure his experience of reality: “it is only by deceiving that we can reach a certain truth, it is only by using conscious simulation that we can get closer to a satisfying epistemological representation.” (Fontcuberta 1997: 107) Based on his reading of Daguerre and Bayard, he concludes that fictional representations expand the flexibility of our imaginative ability.

Vilém Flusser on photography and fabulatory philosophy

As already mentioned in the beginning Flusser’s friendship with Joan Fontcuberta found its expression in a series of texts Flusser wrote between 1984 and 1988. Three deal specifically with photography and were expressly written for Fontcuberta – *Releaser*, *Counter-vision* and the introduction to *Herbarium*. The fourth, *Bibliophagus convictus*, was conceived for *Artforum*, but originated in a philosophical context partially influenced by Fontcuberta’s thinking. We would like to discuss the content of these four texts and their relation to Fontcuberta’s own view of photography.

Releaser is a phenomenological reflection on the pushing of buttons, automation and the effects of the apparatus, but also a philosophy of photo-camera releasers. In this essay Flusser makes frequent use of wordplay in order to articulate the ambivalence contained in media in general and in apparatuses in particular: the different meanings of ‘to release’ – to let go, to discharge, to liberate – and the ambivalences contained in the words ‘mediation’, ‘media’, ‘immediate’, ‘immediacy’. There is something uncanny, even suicidal about releasers, because once pressed, we lose control of the processes they have released. Flusser stresses their “extraordinary quickness”²¹ and stupidity. Releasers do not need any intelligence as they have already been programmed. When we push a button we do not *release* its intelligence but the intelligence of its programmers. Another aspect of releasers is their immediacy. Tools mediate between us and the

²¹ V. Flusser, *Releaser*, p. 1.

world we live in. Before we use them, however, we have to make a decision as to how and when to use them. With buttons this time sequences collapses into a single instant. “The extraordinary quickness of push buttons no longer permits the ancient distinction between decision and act, and therefore between subject and object. Angels are said to differ from men in that with them decision is action, ‘free will’. To photograph is an angelical gesture. Let me therefore call photographers ‘hell’s angels’.”²² In his ironical description Flusser captures the contradictory character of the photographer summing up his ambivalent position between functionary and artist. Photographers are *hell’s* angels because their actions of free will run the risk of being ultimately enslaved by the apparatus and they are *hell’s* *angels* because the new technology of photography opens up new possibilities of freedom that transcend simple representation. Another important attribute of releasers is that they generally come in groups, in families, key boards, for instance. “These buttons are somehow married to each other. The button on my photo camera is a bachelor.”²³

In the short text *Counter-vision* – a sketch for an essay in collaboration with Müller-Pohle and Fontcuberta – Flusser explores the relationship of eye to hand in the practice of photography attempting a definition of the notion of counter-vision, a term created by Fontcuberta who had used it for the first time in 1977 in an essay published in the journal *The Village Cry* (Fontcuberta 1997: 184). Flusser delineates a challenging view of photography and what it can do to change the way we look at the world. The text was part of a common project that unfortunately never grew beyond its initial phase. It was probably intended as a basis for future discussions.

Flusser defines five aspects of the term: counter-vision is intentional, it is not a simple critique of vision – such as blinking or closing your eyes –, it is practical because it has to do with hands, it is the “vision of visual intention [...] not a vision of the world, but a vision of vision” and finally and most importantly “the intention of countervision is to discover the various meanings which vision gives to the world, and thus, by implication, to discover other possible meanings to give the world.” Flusser speaks of countervision as an “inverted intention”. And adds: “For countervision the center of attention is no longer occupied by things, but by our relation to things. Countervision intends to see how we are related to things, how we give meaning to them. [...] In sum: the intention of countervision is to see our-being-in-the-world, not the world itself. Therefore countervision is ‘abstract’, in the sense of having its attention abstracted from the things of the world. But it is ‘concrete’, in the sense of focusing its attention to our concrete existence.” Flusser proposes to work both on a theoretical and practical level studying pictures that made use of inverted intention. For Flusser and Fontcuberta photography is not about reality and

²² Ibidem, p. 2.

²³ Ibidem, p. 2.

its representation but about the way we see and thus relate to things and the role the camera plays in all this.

Fontcuberta's *Herbarium* was published by *European Photography* in 1985. In botany, a herbarium is a collection of preserved plant specimens. These specimens may be whole plants or plant parts, usually in a dried form, mounted on a sheet. The single pages do not only follow a pre-defined chronology, each herbarium is also supposed to possess an alphabetical list of contents with corresponding page numbers. For a scientific herbarium it is important that each plant be arranged so that one can immediately see all the main characters of that particular species. Furthermore, each specimen must have a label on its own sheet, including taxonomic denomination (at least family, genus and species) along with information as to the date and place of collection. In this sense, Fontcuberta's book is only a herbarium of sorts, a *mise-en-scène* of a scientific collection of plants. It contains 28 pictures of what, at first sight, appear to be exotic plants. There is, however, no recognizable pattern organizing the succession of the different plants, no page numbering and no alphabetical list. Each plant possesses a double Latin name in the best taxonomic tradition of the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus. Binominal nomenclature is a widely accepted scientific principle to define the name of a species. These names, however, are more similar to Edward Lear's ironical nonsense botany published in 1872. To simulate a common snowdrop Lear uses, for instance, a dinner bell calling his plant most appropriately *Stunnia Dinnerbellia*. Fontcuberta's use of Latin names, however, is more subversive as its apparent scientificity resists in most cases a closer inspection. Only the trained eye of the botanist would detect the fraud at first sight: *Bifilia mastegata*. *Erectus pseudospinosus*. *Tiskovina navigata*. *Liconorvus punxis*. *Cascallus ferragossus*. *Pirulera salbitana*. *Cala rasca*. *Supratex boradatus*. Some names, however, show their constructedness right away. Fontcuberta probably created the names according to different strategies: introducing a strange sounding element alien to the botanic context (*Rasputina eclecticica*, *Braohypoda frustrata*), playing with the relationship of text and picture (*Cornus impatiens*, showing a prurient erectile beak peaking out of a longish vertical blade or *Karchofa sardinae*, a dry fish bone topped by an artichoke or, finally, *Dendrita victoriosa* – dendrites are branched projections of a neuron conducting electrochemical stimulation received from other neural cells to the cell body –, the plant is called *victoriosa* because topped by two longish bony fingers forming a v-sign), straining acceptability with weird linguistic combinations (*Barrufeta godafreda*) or homophonic word play (*Fungus mungus*). The pictures themselves work more or less along the same lines, that is, some look more realistic, more believable than others, and even after the fundamental constructedness of the single plants has become apparent because they have fallen to pieces, the overall impression is still of something basically organic. This, however, is also deceitful, as Fontcuberta explains in *El Beso de Judas*. In the following quotation Fontcuberta also takes

up the main point of Flusser's interpretation of the book as it can be found in the introduction, that is, the central meaning of the notion of information. „[...] the manipulation of the object [...] represents a more subtle *modus operandi* that transcends the simple bricolage of photographic montage. In this context we would have fictive constructions, that is, simulacra that take the place of other objects (as with cinematic doubles that are a substitution of a substitution), or of more sophisticated scenes, as is the case with the 'reconstructions' operated by many TV programs which have been the object of intense debate. In Italian one would say: '*Se non é vero, e ben trovato.*' Cinema and photography are the media that have actually opened up the field. Scale models of landscapes, cities, space ships or whatever make it possible to save a lot of time of make up in the laboratory and allow having a better graphic quality. In my series *Herbarium* (1982-1985) I offered a collection of pseudo-plants of different inexistent botanic species, a product of the imagination and not of biology. The hybrids presented [in the book] were not the consequence of a manipulation in the transmission of genetic but of the photographic information: the elements in front of the objective were small ephemeral sculptures constructed from industrial waste; there was nothing organic in them even if that was the conviction of the profane.“ (Fontcuberta 1997: 128-9)

The pseudo-plants from *Herbarium* are therefore deceitful in many ways. They suggest a patient scientific work of classification and look like ordinary dried plants from exotic gardens. In this sense, Fontcuberta's approach closely resembles Louis Bec's paranaturalistic project of zoosystematicism²⁴ with the difference that Bec's invented taxonomy is built according to strict rules. Both Fontcuberta and Bec, however, are animated by the same subversive spirit of scientific deconstruction aiming for a radical questioning of simple notions of reality and objectivity.

In his introduction to Fontcuberta's *Herbarium* Flusser draws attention to the concept of information that has become essential across a whole series of different disciplines, from biology to photography. In his introduction Flusser defines two specific points of view – metaphoricity and usefulness – to reflect about the convergence of science and art in Fontcuberta's 'botanical' pictures. He explores the frontier between the two domains constantly moving from one to the other, focusing on similarities and differences.

The concept of information, so Flusser, has been disseminated to other forms of discourse and become, at the same time, a field on which different disciplines meet and merge. Whereas biology studies changes in genetic information in order to design new plants, photography creates new information through chemical changes produced by light falling on specific surfaces. In this sense, the notion of information does not play quite the same role in the two different contexts. Despite this asymmetry Fontcuberta's photographs can give an answer as to the metaphoricity of

²⁴ See also <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/archive04.htm>

the notion of information within photography. “‘Information’ has become a crucial concept in various and quite distinct disciplines. And one may easily observe how these distinct disciplines tend to converge in that concept. For example, both biology and photography are basically concerned with information. Biology may fundamentally be considered the study of successive changes in genetic information from the beginnings of life on earth up to the present. This study is now beginning to give way to a technology – ‘gentech’ – which may in the future allow us to manipulate genetic information and ultimately produce entirely new species of plants and animals, including new ‘homo’ species. Photography, for its part, may be considered a technique which aims at producing information through the chemical changes provoked by light falling on sensitized surfaces. Naturally, biology and photography being quite distinct and usually unrelated, one may well ask whether ‘information’ means the same concept in both of these disciplines, or whether we use the term only metaphorically when applying it to two realms so distinctly different from each other. This is, I believe, a very important question in the present context. Joan Fontcuberta’s Photographs of plants may provide an answer. What we see here are new species of plants which have come about not through a manipulation of genetic information, but through a manipulation of photographic information. It may appear as though ‘information’ in both the biological and the photographic senses had coincided within these pictures. Fontcuberta seems capable of manipulating biological information through photographic procedures. We know of course that this is not ‘really’ true: the plants we see in Fontcuberta’s photographs are not ‘real’ plants, and they are ‘not real’ in two senses of those words. They are ‘not real’ because they partake only of the two dimensions of the photographic surface. And, they are ‘not real’ because – we see it if we look closely – they show something which has been manipulated by Fontcuberta with the obvious intention of deceiving us into accepting them as being ‘real’. Even so: although Fontcuberta’s plants are only symbols of plants, and although those symbols mean an artifice, a stratagem, a ruse (and although Fontcuberta’s plants are what is called ‘art’), there is something about them which suggests that they are relevant to the problem of ‘information’ within the botanical discourse.” (Flusser 1985) One of the main differences between the botanical discourse and Fontcuberta’s plant pictures is that Fontcuberta ultimately manipulates photographic and not genetic information. This manipulation, furthermore, does not take place on the same level. Genetic engineering is a direct manipulation of an organism’s genome using modern DNA technology. It involves the introduction of foreign DNA or synthetic genes into a specific organism. In this way, new life forms are created by changing the code, that is, the program. Fontcuberta, on the other hand, manipulates his assembled objects and most probably intervenes through choice of point of view, lightening, exposure and, finally, contrasting when printing the negative. In this

sense, the notion of information when transferred from the botanical discourse to photography becomes metaphorical.

Besides discussing the status of the notion of information within the botanical discourse and photography, Flusser also deals with the question of the status of reality. This question is of great importance when it comes to the role of information in the botanic discourse whose process of scientific production also implies the introduction of error and misunderstanding. What makes photography look like biology is that in both the greater part of new information is actually produced by chance. The discovery of the importance of active intervention within botanical discourse especially when it comes to creating mutations leads to the detection of its game-like nature, of a game that ultimately lacks any meaning. Botanical discourse, furthermore, already applies the notion of game in agriculture and in other of its disciplinary areas. It is for this reason that the difference between botanic discourse and photography is for Flusser not as radical as it might appear at first sight. If there is a difference, then it is to be located in the moment of usefulness. "In order to produce a new species of wheat", writes Flusser with respect to the question of usefulness and operability, "one must first know what sort of new species one desires. For example, one may want a pest-resistant species. One must have a model of the desired species. One may then take the model and try to force nature into obeying that model. What does such a model look like? Well, very much like Fontcuberta's photographed plants, with this difference: a geneticist's model will tend to be 'operative' (that is, capable of being forced upon nature), and it will tend to be 'useful' (that is, capable of resulting in species advantageous to agriculture and industry). Fontcuberta's models are perfectly inoperative and perfectly useless. This is what makes them so funny. And this is why I consider Fontcuberta's pictures relevant to the problem of 'information' in biological discourses. They show, in a funny way, that what distinguishes scientific models from strictly artistic ones is the fact that scientific models are 'operative' and 'useful'. Both these words are ethical terms. They imply values. They are pragmatic. They are not in the least 'scientific' terms, in the sense that science is a 'value free' discourse. Fontcuberta's photographs are no less scientific than the scientific models, only less pragmatic. And this is very funny. Because, being less pragmatic, they may be considered 'purer'. And this poses an epistemological problem: Is there any sense in holding to the idea that the models of biological information are 'truer' than Fontcuberta's pictures? Or, is botany not a kind of reasonable (i.e., bourgeois) Fontcuberta?" (Flusser 1985) To sum it up: both art and science are looking for new surprising information, with the only difference that within a scientific context these new forms have to be above all useful. The point of view of operability is, however, a notion that does not arise from the scientific context itself but from a pragmatic and ethical dimension. Science and art are basically value free. In this sense, Fontcuberta's pictures are not less scientific than other pictures

from within the botanical domain. They are purer because less pragmatic and in being so they question the difference between art and science. Within a scientific context, however, and this is an aspect Flusser ignores in order to prove the fundamental convergence of science and art, there still are specific criteria of acceptability to be respected. Plants, for instance, have to fit in an already existing system of classification. This is definitely not the case with the invented specimens from Fontcuberta's *Herbarium*.

Flusser emphasizes Fontcuberta's transgressive impetus, his subversion of established values and the way his pictures introduce doubt as to the validity of scientific methods and the vast problems they imply. In this way, these pseudo-plants make fun of science, technology and concepts of naturalness while at the same time highlighting the tragic state of affairs of present times.

On the 2nd September 1986 Flusser asked Fontcuberta to photograph his 'Bibliophagus convictus'.²⁵ In the letter he presents the animal as if it were an exciting newly discovered species. Flusser ironically calls the essay he intends to write a scientific paper. The tone of the following passage is tongue in cheek, the same way Louis Bec's deep sea animals and Fontcuberta's fictional flora and fauna are: "It is a species of hymenoptera which has so far not yet been taxonomically defined. Something between an ant and a bee. It feeds on printed matter, and it keeps all printed information in the collective memory of the hive or the ant-hill. It[s] problem is that it breeds more quickly than the books and magazines multiply. Therefore it must somehow instigate writers to write more, and printers to print more quickly. A typically ecological problem. It has very prominent antennae, and it wraps itself within those antennae, ('convictus') meaning both the 'the convinced one' and 'the involved one'. It is of course a very cerebral insect, a sort of cultural termite. I am very much interested in seeing his world vision, (it[s] eyes are of course composite ones). One more thing: the species is of course a consequence of the invention of printing, but it must have had ancestors in the Middle Ages²⁶, and new mutations are to be expected, as it adapts to the information revolution." An interesting question that could be asked in this context is in which ways 'Bibliophagus convictus' was already inspired by the photographs of *Herbarium*.

Conclusion

According to Fontcuberta and contrary to what history has taught us, photography belongs to the field of fiction much more than to that of evidence. "Diogenes was searching with his lamp

²⁵ For a comparison and analysis of the different versions of the text see R. Guldin, *Philosophieren zwischen den Sprachen. Vilém Flussers Werk*, Munich 2005, p. 339-352.

²⁶ Flusser probably means bookworms. Another species worth documenting.

for the truth; today we leave home to look for it with our photographic cameras. The paradox lies in the fact that Diogenes' lamp cast light on things whereas the camera swallows this light. The camera does not necessarily light up our understanding, quite the contrary. As Flusser would suggest it is forced to deal with obscurity and shadow, with specters and appearances." (Fontcuberta 1997: 167)

In this way, by contradicting a certain visual order Fontcuberta is led to the formulation of his concept of *contravisión* (Fontcuberta 1997: 184) which – as he himself defines it – must be understood as a rupture with the routine²⁷ that control the programming of visual thinking: This rupture can be achieved by acting as a hacker attacking the vulnerable defenses of the system. *Contravisión* is supposed to pervert the reality principle assigned to photography. Flusser speaks in this context, as we have already shown, of inverted intention. *Contravisión* does not represent so much a criticism of vision as a criticism of visual intention. Counter-visionary photography invokes basically, a triple subversion: a subversion of the technological subconscious of the photographic system; a subversion of the ontological status of the photographic image and its distribution platforms; and, finally, a subversion of the general meaning of the concept of freedom masked by illusions of technocratic logical society. Basically this is the very program Fontcuberta attributes to Flusser and defines as the agenda of the avant-garde photographer in the passage from the *Suplemento Anual Enciclopedia Universal Espasa-Calpe* 1981-1982: the subversion of the program of the camera (its internal structural routines that define very limited expectations); the subversion of the ontological status of photography (the false realism and objectivity of photography); and the subversion of the meaning of the concept of freedom (calling for an amplification of the restricted limits imposed by the programs). As we know from Flusser's own enthusiastic reaction after reading Fontcuberta's short text this is pretty much the vision he would have gladly subscribed to. It is this astonishing theoretical closeness, on the one hand and their common interest for a philosophy and photography of fabulation, on the other, that prompted Flusser to call Fontcuberta one of the most important photographers, because he understood what photos are actually about: to document something which does not exist.

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²⁷ This notion is very close to Flusser's definition of Kitsch and his view of the deadening forces of the habitual.

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