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Joel Anderson and Wiebke Leister: <u>Pro-Photographic Gestures</u>
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> "Every photograph is a portrait in the sense
> that every situation shows itself
> to be 'aware' of being photographed."
> (Vilém Flusser, 'The Gesture of Photographing', 83)

> "Photographer: a person who attempts to place,
> within the image, information that is not predicted
> within the program of the camera."
> (Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 84)

It could be said that both Roland Barthes and Vilém Flusser were interested in accounts of the 'pro-photographic'[1] – those acts that are occurring in the slice of the world that is placed in front of the camera eye before it becomes 'image'. Its mise-en-scène. This practically refers to everything that appears before the camera and how it is arranged, including composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, lighting. Protagonists and their actions constitute a pro-photographic event in front of the camera in a pro-photographic space that can be seen from the camera, while the position and angle of the camera determine the perspective and point of view of the audience of what eventually appears in the image. While the camera alters how we perceive the photographed scene, it turns the actor into a character by splitting the image from its referent in the world.

Both Barthes and Flusser observe three participants and agencies that are part of this continuously changing photographic situation from which the medium of photography can be directly observed and examined. But while Barthes is famously concerned with the photographer, the photographed and the *viewer* of the resulting image,[2] Flusser stresses the photographer, the photographed and an *observer* who is looking at the act of photographing taking place. In fact, Flusser is not interested in interpreting photographs, but in looking at 'The Gesture of Photographing' as a philosophical gesture and how it becomes available to us by way of the apparatus.

Cultivating his reader's sense of embodiment, Flusser puts us in the position of this third person who watches the movements of photographer and photographed as a way of observing photography's mode of production. As Nancy Ann Roth describes: "Flusser memorably describes a photographer moving around a person who is being photographed, changing distances, angles, lighting, asking the sitter to adjust the pose. In the argument, we, too, move, from the position of the photographer to that of the subject being photographed and on to that of an observer of the scene, noticing how each kind of awareness affects the other. Through observation, we establish that the photographer's decisions –

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[1] 'Pro-filmic', after French 'profilmique', 1970s cinema.
[2] *"Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the act of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice".* (Barthes 2000, 10-11) *"Four image-repertoires intersect here: In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words: a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture".* (Barthes 2000, 13)

his position, his interaction with the subject, his critical relationship to his own activity – are all free decisions, articulating his way of being in the world." (Flusser 2011, X)

According to Flusser, the three interrelated positions that characterize the described gesture of photographing can equally be observed for a gesture of philosophizing: the search for a position, the manipulating of the scene to be illuminated, and an aspect of self-reflection (Flusser 2011, 77-8, 83). This search for a critical position as an unfolding of methodical doubt not only reveals the photographic gesture of seeing as a philosophical gesture, but also formulates a philosophy of photography, a 'theoria', that simultaneously observes the world, changes the observed phenomenon and is affected by it (Flusser 2011, 82-3). And since observation always changes the observer, the photographer's presence manipulates the situation, but it also affects him/her while trying to take up a position, which expands on the above quoted sense of portraying embedded in every photograph as an element of camera-awareness.

Flusser frequently describes photography as a means of *translating*, specifically the translation of concepts into images. He always wrote in serval languages, working on different drafts at the same time; an open-ended process of nomadic fore- and back-translations. Hubertus von Amelunxen summarizes: "Every translation signifies the space-between, the gap, the historical chasm or the repression of history; translation is the most cautious form of communication since there is always the inherent admission of a certain departure and uncertain arrival." (Flusser 2000, 88) We could perhaps argue that different languages are similar to different media, with words from various languages not meaning the same thing, each possessing its own atmosphere, a universe in itself. But Flusser reminds us that it is also language that commands and programs us beyond its different modes of translation. (Flusser 2011, 22) Analysing the relationship of gesture and affect as part of his phenomenology, he stresses that gestures 'symbolically represent' something, while 'affect' expresses states of mind *translated* into bodily gestures (Flusser 2011, 4-5). For him, gestures are the stuff of communication passing between people. In this context, he is less interested in whether or not a representation of an affect is 'authentic' or 'false', but rather if the observer is 'touched' by the effect of its symbolic articulation in the form of an aesthetic construction. As an example, he describes that a bad actor in a bad play would always convey emotions in a 'false' or 'inauthentic' way, because, even though he might really feel them, their representation would remain 'untrue' or 'aesthetically dishonest' to the materials of this particular art form.

"Thinking expresses itself in a whole range of gestures," so Flusser. But today "we need to think in video, in analog and digital models and programs, in multidimensional codes." (Flusser 2011, 24-5) At the same time, he says, it makes no sense to try and 'free' ourselves from the machine-driven world, that "we cannot live without the apparatus or outside of the apparatus", because our lives are already implicated in their program analysis (Flusser 2011, 16-7). And since any gesture of human labour has been replaced by automatic functions, people themselves feature as rather absurd functionaries of a function, as robotized attributes of the machine. But even though the gesture of the photographer is always entwined with the apparatus, the photographic gesture claims a potential space of freedom because the experimental photographer actively tries to determine the apparatus in order to outwit the camera's program, forcing it to produce unpredictable images, exposing the cracks of representation. In Flusser's words: "Freedom is the strategy of making chance and necessity subordinate to human intention. Freedom is playing against the apparatus." Necessary, "because it is the only form of revolution left open to us." (Flusser 2000, 80-2)

This portfolio of photographic gestures shows the photographer 'at work'. It looks at forms of posing in and as acts of photographing that constantly change through the invention of new technologies and apparatuses, the use of mobile phones and digital cameras that never miss a shot, show 'results' on

the spot and offer 'editing' as part of its many functions. Snapshots of people with cameras in different situations, with the quality of anecdotal ready-mades, mapping that performative space between the photographer and his or her object, by an observer looking onto that scene. Possibly asking if the photographer has indeed become an absurd figure as we watch him aiming for or circling around his subject, sometimes rather contorted in his or her effort to serve the camera's function – or if photographers are able to remain critical functionaries who make playful use of apparatuses and the programs embedded in them to produce meaning with a duty of reflecting on their own intentions that counter those programmed within.

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