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VILÉM FLUSSER Fred Forest, or: The meaningful dialogue.

The artist is a person who emits his most private and vital experiences in the form of messages to be received by those who surround him. He does so for two purposes: (a) to influence others in their own private and vital experiences, and (b) to get the response of those influenced by him, and to thus change his mode of experiencing and acting. In order to achieve his purposes, the artist manipulates certain phenomena, (for instance: stone, or canvasses, or words, or sounds), and thus transforms these phenomena into media to communicate his message to his fellows. Now this role of the artist tends to be forgotten for the following reason: The phenomena the artist manipulates resist to his efforts to change them, and this resistance absorbs the interest of the artist. He consequently tends to believe that it is the phenomena which concern him mostly, and that his "social commitment" is subsequent and accidental to this concern. But, obviously, in this believe the artist is mistaken. And where it only for the fact that art itself is a social phenomenon and cannot even be thought outside the society in which it is being articulated.

Fred Forest is one of those who have not fallen victim to that romantic mistake, and who are fully conscious of their role as artists in the present context. The consequences of this deliberate acceptance of the role of art in the present situation are numerous and logical, and some will be mentioned:

(a) The phenomena to be manipulated: The classical materials to be changed into media must be abandoned in favor of others more appropriate to present forms of communication. This involves several problems. One has to do with classification. Traditional artists are classified according to the material they handle: sculpturers handle stone, painters canvasses, architects building material, poets words, composers sounds, and so on. But how is one to classify those who handle the press, or TV, or video-tapes to emit their artistic message? The danger is that for lack of classification those messages might not be recognized as artistis. Another has to do with the content of the message. It is obvious that content of message is closely linked with its form, the repertoire with structure, the symbols with syntax. Now each material imposes its own structure on the message it carries. The new materials Forest must logically use impose a structure on the messages he emits which is new, and there is the danger of the messages not to be understood by the receiver because of this newness. Lastly there is the problem that might be called "the problem of the oeuvre". Classical materials, after being handled, allow to be exhibited in a permanent form. (Even if those materials themselves are ephemorous like words or sounds, in the permanent form of manuscripts or partitures.) But the materials Forest uses do not allow such "eternisation". They lead, necessarily and deliberately, to ephemorous manifestations. The danger is that the processual character of these manifestations might not be perceived by

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the receiver of the message. These dangers show how curageous is Forest's endeavor.

(b) The way phenomena are to be handled: Every material offers resistance to human effort to change it. For the classical materials tradition has elaborated appropriate techniques to overcome this resistance. These techniques can be learned, (for instance at art schools, musical academies and so forth), and can be constantly improved on. But for the new materials Forest has chosen there are no techniques elaborated by tradition. Forest himself must invent them. But there is more to it. In classical materials the resistance offered is mostly in the material itself, and it is the material itself that must be manipulated. (For instance: marble or the words of a given language must be changed against their "nature".) But in Forest's materials it is not so much the materials themselves that resist his effort but it is the people who own and live on those materials who resist his effort. (For instance: not the newspaper or the TV channel itself, but the editors of the newspaper, and the directors of the TV channel.) This imposes techniques on Forest which have no true paralel in the past, and require extremely new approaches from him.

(c) The reception of the message: Classical artists are not fully aware of the problem. They just emit their message and then wait passively for a response to come, (and are unhappy, if it does not come, but do nothing about it.) Forest however must take responsibility for the reception. He must, in fact, program his message in such a way that responses are provoked, because this is his purpose. Now this has another, and far more important, aspect. For the classical artist the response, if it comes, takes mostly the form of an answer to the artist himself, (like criticism and honors). The effect the message might have within society itself is outside the artist's competence: "havent fata libelli". Not so with Forest. His main concern is exactly with the effect of his message on society, and also with the structure of this effect: he aims to provoke excentrically progressing dialogues among his receivers. He must therefor program his message in a way to deliberately provoke this to happen. (He does not exhibit a stone, he throws it into a lake in order to provoke waves that propagate his action.) This is a revolutionary attitude, and Forest knows it.

(d) The attitude of the receiver: For the classical artist the receivers are an anonymous public. It can take or leave his message, and it can either consume his message passively, or react to it one way or another. There is nothing the classical artist can do about it. But Forest aims exactly at fighting the anonymity of the public. He wants to give each receiver his own name, and provoke him to be himself in face of Forest's message. To assume himself and act as a man, not as a passive consumer. Now this is the most difficult and most inspiring aspect of Forest's endeavor. Because he expects every one of us to be on his level. Therefore to take

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in Forest's events requires a radically new attitude in the face of the artistic message. We are no longer allowed to just passively contemplate, with must assume ourselves as human beings. What Forest asks of us is almost just as difficult as what he asks of himself, and there lies the "beauty" of what he is doing. A new kind of beauty, and it is ourselves who must discover that it is there, or it is not there. We are the ones who give it its beauty.

There is no doubt in my mind that Forest's is one of the very few ways art can be made meaningful again in our present situation. Because it is one of the very few ways to render it dialogical again, and free it of the omnipresent discourse that is changing our society into totalitarian oppression. One does not know what will become of the efforts of Forest. They may be suffocated by the lack of echo that is characteristic of a society whose voices are muffled by the shouts of commandeering loud-speakers. But again they may in fact provoke the excentric response he is seeking. Should this happen, he may be, in fact, one of the elements in our surroundings that will change it for the better.