Conversation between Oliver Zybok and Volker Hildebrandt
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Z: For more than 15 years now, you have been occupied with the "Bildstörung".

**H: With pictures, or to be more precise, with the structure of pictures – which
to my mind is the most significant of our time.**

**Z: What do you mean with "Bildstörung"? That term is commonly understood
as a technical term for a problem in the age of television, a disrupted TV
broadcast, a screen...**

**H: Let's make it very simple: Let us not try to understand the technical
prerequisites or the philosophical ramifications, let's just look. Let us look at a
visual phenomenon that exists neither in painting nor in photography or film:
flickering, the ant heap, the snow, to, once again, evade the term "Bildstörung".
This seeming chaos of points that light up and go dark again is the basic
structure all TV images are made of. If we assign a color and a particular
brightness to each of these flurrying dots, we produce a particular image. If this
is repeated interminably, an innumerable number of picture is produced.
If we order these pictures in a sequence that more or less makes sense, we get:
television. "Bildstörung" exists only since TV exists, and it is the only real
innovation
for the world of pictures that TV brought. And everything that is even remotely
connected to television is based on "Bildstörung".**

**Z: Then, the pictorial phenomenon of Bildstörung", on which, according to you,
the entire picture system is based and which might even be synonymous with the
entire TV system for you anticipates the much-reflected effects. After all,
Television has caused
profound changes in society that have triggered discussions in the past decades
– over such keywords as "amusing ourselves to death", communication theory,
techno-image,
simulation and speed.**

**H: We have all read about it, some more, some less. I am not a critic, though, let
alone
a philosopher or sociologist. I think about image structure and express myself in
pictures. I am not a perception theorist. Maybe I am a perception practitioner,**

and I am making the attempt to - literally - point out structures that come to my attention.

Z: You are painting "Bildstörungs" in the classic way, using brush, paint, canvas. Is this an adequate way of representing the subject?

H: I belong to the first generation that has grown up with television. In the beginning, however, it was not as dominant as it is today. I am not at all under the spell of the smooth surface. In addition: when I am concerned with something, or when I am trying to make somewhat objective statements, a certain distance has to be kept. I find it difficult to say something about TV with the means TV offers. On the one hand, you are a slave to technique...

Z: the same is true for the painter...
H: ...it is not a technique, though, that is based on "bildstörung". On the other hand:
even if you produced TV images - even if you call them video or computer image –
the perception of the viewer will be shaped by habits of looking that have in turn also been shaped by television.

Z: Nevertheless, some of your images could be seen as viewdata on "Bildschirm-text",which was, after all, an early version of the Internet.

H: Back then, I had a so-called "Leitseite". It would be called a homepage today. I delivered "Bildstörungs" into the users' homes as part of an exhibition developed solely for that purpose. That was surely not in keeping with the philosophy outlined above.
But there is another aspect pertaining to the issue of painting in a traditional manner.
It was a conscious decision to produce my work by hand and thus in a very slow manner compared to the technological production of pictures. In the area of technology - which, after all, structures our life – generational changes happen ever more quickly.
It would be hopeless for art to try to keep up the pace of these developments. In the moment when art reflects the status quo, it is old hat. If, however, you are not forced to take part in that rat race for contemporaneity, you not only gain time to deal with the truly important things – you are almost forced to do it.

Z: Neither do I believe that an artist should be ahead of his time - which human being could possibly be? – nevertheless, shouldn't he be at least up to date?

H: Up to date does not have to mean up to the hour. Technology's task is innovation:
improving and enhancing possibilities. It is pressured to a large extent by the fact that an improved quality of the product is the best argument for selling it on the market.
A new generation of computers has to be able to do more than the preceding one.
A car is a better means of transportation than a carriage. In art, that is not the case.
A Rauschenberg is different from a Rembrandt, but not better. Art reflects life - reflects indeed, in the double meaning of the term. Or, to quote Bazon Brock: it is art's task to supply tools for mastering the everyday. If I stick to that image, then art's pictures today have to be tools for mastering the everyday flood of images. That surely would not work if they just streamed along.

Z: The rasters in your works follow the concept of "Bildstörung". I want to come back to the carriage. A glance at art history makes pointillism come to my mind instantly.
Seurat's paintings picture reality. Does that hold true for your works as well? Or do they picture pictures, do they plagiarize the pictures of reality?

H: My work pictures TV reality, which in turn pretends to picture reality. What was the world to Seurat is the TV world for me. But I have to give you an answer in three parts. When I paint "Bildstörungs" in their pure state - when I deal only with the overall pictorial structure at the basis -, this is, applied to Seurat, the fragmentation of light into individual colored dots, the manifestation of a new perspective and a new world view. When I cover objects with that raster or, in a pointillist manner, take highlights of TV history...

Z: ...like, for instance, the German soccer world champions of 1954 or the series of TV celebrities...

H:...and repaint them, then, in a fashion, I apply the structures of "Bildstörung" just like Seurat applied his rather scientific knowledge in his pictures. Third, when I make the obstructed pictures of pay TV mine, I am making, in terms of art history, the big step from Seurat to Duchamps.

Z: You present the cut-up pictures of pay TV as still photographs. As is usual in coded programming, you see schemes of what the uncoded pictures show. The viewer has to use his imagination to retransform them into a "real" picture - the viewer himself becomes a decoder.

H: These are the only pictures in the entire complex of Television that challenge the imagination. Reason enough to elevate their status. In addition, they are true TV images - they grow out of the basic structure of "Bildstörung", and, also, they are obstructed consciously.

Z: Thus almost doubling your theory.

H: Precisely. The people who pay for decoders pay for not having to use their imagination. In this respect these are wonderful metaphors of the entire system. Plus, they are seductively beautiful, though obstructed, and in that manner, pointed examples for my theory.

Z: Since the rise of the mass media, demands and viewing habits have changed. A democratization of pictures has taken place, climaxing so far in the internet. The quality of pictures is measured by their mass compatibility. Is there a quality of the mass?

H: Every producer of goods will measure the quality of the mass in terms of mass purchasing power. Business equates quantity and quality. In the case of pictures, it is the mass, the frantic speed of their occurrence that prohibits a priori the possibility of ascertaining whether there might be an image with quality among those that rush by.
The system has inherent mechanisms that make critically judging it impossible. Ratings measure quality. Again: quantity becomes quality: "Bildstörung". The mass compatibility of technological images has been explained convincingly by Neil Postman:
everyone is able to understand them, no previous knowledge is required. That, however, means of course that they have to be fabricated in a fashion that makes everyone understand them and be fascinated by them. Democratization through techno-images?
Vilém Flusser has made that issue so clear – I need not add anything.

Z: In the case of your newspaper pages - covered with the raster – there is always one original headline or copy fragment that becomes an element of the finished work.
"Bildstörung" turns into interference of language – due, no doubt, to the impact of the mass media. Here, we reach another level, communication theory. In this context, Jean Baudrillard has introduced the concept of paradoxical communication. There is no communicating in communication. Maybe communication is simply a possibility to act out one's own indifference. Pictorial or textual information could just be ways of dealing with one's own ignorance, distance or laziness.

H: If I may bring in Neil Postman once again: the visual media are responsible for the decay of literacy. This process makes their critics go mute, one after the other. A perfect system. As for today's communication: Norbert Bolz has reported at a Schloß Morsbroich symposium that his research has shown that at most 5% of what is communicated today makes any sense at all. That in a time when communication is a growing market! Sometimes I see headlines or slogans in papers that touch on or elucidate one of the aspects of that entire complex. Or those that in their tentativeness remain absolutely void of meaning.

Z: In the brevity this context unfortunately demands we have talked about some aspects of your work. We have elaborated a little on your opening statement on "Bildstörung"
as the most significant visual structure of our time. Is there anything fundamental that needs to be added?

H: I am sure that "Bildstörung" one day will become the characteristic label for the era
from the mid 20th century to the far future. Just like there was the stone age, there will be the age of "Bildstörung". We experience its beginning right now. However, technological improvements make "Bildstörungs" on TV rarer and rarer. This is an appeal to classify them as historical monuments.

(Translation Christoph Ribbat)