

**I'm painter
Ich bin Maler**

Every now and then I meet people here and there that I don't know. Sometimes, we get introduced to each other or handle this on our own. If it turns out they have never heard of my name, each time I'm a little astounded up to vexed. If the following small talk shows that the person or persons are otherwise reasonably nice und thus worth to stay, every time sooner or later the same, apparently genetically coded dialogue emerges. At one point I'm asked: "And what are you¹ doing?" My answer: "I'm a painter.", is responded by a complaisant face and a Jerry Seinfeld-style "Oh yeah?", sometimes accompanied by "that's interesting." And before I am able to think this interest could be directed to me, my vis-à-vis quickly continues: "My brother-in-law² is a painter too." The joy my newly known conversational partners obviously senses while hearing this piece of information obliges me to amiably attend to the depiction of what he or she paints that follows without respite. It begins with "Well, he/she paints pictures, now, how shall I explain them? That's really difficult. Maybe, the best way ..., do you know XX?" I say no. "That's also an artist from Cologne, I'm surprised you don't know him. He had an exhibition, about seven years ago, in the community centre of Köln-Kalk. You really don't know him?" I say no, trying to appease: "I hardly know anybody." "But he is friends with XX...!" Sorry, I don't know her either," I am forced to display my ignorance again. My vis-à-vis then regularly excuses me for my ignorance, particularly because I am able to make him feel like I would follow his further explanations very attentively, while I actually give myself over to the surroundings in fighting a burgeoning dislike. A well directed "Oh yeah" to which I add "but that's interesting" is very useful and helps me to arise my new friend's affection³.

¹ If my vis-à-vis is my age or older, they tend to call me Mr. Hildebrandt. Younger people, evading all etiquette, rather directly call me Volker, which instantly lifts my mood, because I feel I'm their age group, even so I might be twice as old.

² Alternatively, at this point other relatives of higher or lesser degree, ex girl- or boy-friends, the mail man, a neighbour or his sister who lives in New-Zealand, or teachers of varying qualifications of the relative's or acquaintances children are stated. Due to my long-time experiences, I am fully able to hold my face even for a long time, according to necessity. Signalling the utmost interest about the painting daughter, the painting son, up to friendly sympathy for the mother-in-law of the owner of the news stand from across the street.

³ Oftentimes it now happens that my vis-à-vis without warning starts calling me Volker what is supposed to hint at his deeply felt attachment for me, but what actually forces me to not only get my dislike under control, but also the henceforth activated urge to escape.

Thus, our conversation stretches out to three to twelve „Oh yeah? Well, that’s ...”, in other words: infinities. It’s unquestionable godly coincidence by which every once in a while, but in any way far too rarely, such a conversation is interrupted by the opening of a buffet or the cerebral apoplexy of an unknown colleague standing close-by and talking with one he just met. Or by somebody passing by who just grasps my arm and says: “May I take Mr. Hildebrandt away from you very shortly?” in order to pull me away without waiting for an answer, murmuring: “I just have to introduce you to Thingamabob.” Thanks to this deliverance, I gladly start a new, delighted chatter which quite soon leads to the question: “And what are you doing?”

But mostly I wait in vain for deliverance. And so the conversation proceeds its apparently prescribed course by my partner either suffering from an acute episode of rudimentary politeness and recalling his talk’s point of departure, or exhaustedly needing a break from it and thus asking: “So you are a painter. An what is it you are painting?” If at this point I am still in possession of sufficient defences, I pull out my card, refer to both of my homepages www.volkerhildebrandt.com and www.bildstoerung.com, mock an exigency not to be delayed and make my escape to the nearest loo. Unfortunately, at this time I am normally too weak for it. Thus, I answer truthfully: “Bildstoerung”, in the steady hope that hereby, the conversation comes to its sudden end. “Bildstoerung? Oh, that’s interesting”, my hopes now become atomised and the final chest hit is initialised and fired with the most harmless facial expression, only drudgingly concealing a mild shiver paired with a trace of totally inappropriate sympathy: “And can you make a living from that?” Toughened by time and against my new friend’s expectation, I do survive the assassination attempt and am able to answer with a scanty ‘yes’. “That’s interesting”, I can hear only faintly, and: “Good for you. You are very lucky.” What follows is a shorter or longer story of an artist my friend knows and who is not able to make a living from it⁴. But finally he recalls me and asks: “And who buys this stuff?” Without knowing the exact reasons for my actions⁵ I either reply: „Nobody“ or „Many”, while after all both answers have contrary to their obvious incongruity the same principal structure: they are wrong.

⁴ Such as: „I know a colleague of yours who even lives in our street. My neighbours four houses further down let him use the little shed in the far corner of their property so he can live and work there. You know, he’s got no money ... , and if the winter is really cold, and he doesn’t have any money for the heater....., so three years ago, I bought one of his paintings....., it was supposed to cost 200 Marks, but I didn’t bargain, even so I certainly could have gotten it for 180....., it’s now in my outer office in Dusseldorf...”

⁵ Possibly the general weather situation plays a role or higher creatures with instable rules of conduct and Wendish moods command me.

But that is irrelevant, because both answers arise the same neutral facial expression at my new confidant that is only able to poorly cover the fear⁶ behind it. In an expert way, my vis-à-vis now sails around the lurking cliffs while inserting in a casual tone: “Van Gogh in his lifetime also...”, or: “I have been to the Dome and saw the window, I just don’t remember the name.” For want of further aspects worthy of consideration and because the opening of the buffet wears on, he again brings me into play: “Bildstoerung. How does that look like?” without being able to guess that hence I fall into some kind of trance, automatically starting my well proven standard speech brought into perfection over the decades⁷. Dramatization, with a facial expression at the suitable position ranging from seriousness over tongue-in-cheek wit up to open enthusiasm, I give a lecture on Bildstoerung. That we owe TV the only innovation for the field of pictures; that before TV, there was no Bildstoerung whatsoever, that it has manifold implications, that the German noun is so wonderfully ambivalent, that only for this reason it is worthwhile to keep this pictorial phenomenon not only on ephemeral pictures, but to valorise it, that...., that...., that My lecture usually ends by me telling the story of my proposal to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee which led to the fact that the Bildstoerung is now under protection of the World Heritage and ever since, every TV station is obliged to broadcast an hour of Bildstoerung per day. I don’t need to look at my new friend in order to know that after his initial, politely hidden boredom, towards the end pure enthusiasm is spreading that is given vent to by “Oh yeah? That’s highly interesting!”

⁶ With answer 1, it’s the fear needing to buy another painting next winter, this time due to the 1:1- currency changeover possibly even for 200 Euro. With answer 2, it’s the fear to not knowing an artist who sells many paintings and thus to stand there as a philistine or, far worse, to have missed the timely and thus cheap purchase of a work, because somewhere down the road one was lost in thought already at the buffet and didn’t listen.

⁷ In doing so, each time I feel deeply close to an easy-listening star like Al Martino who during his perhaps 50- year-long glorious career had to sing „Spanish Eyes“ a million times with steadily consistent enthusiasm.

“It was on everywhere, at the time I followed it with interest. Just great that it’s possible to watch an hour of Bildstoerung everywhere daily, even so I don’t benefit from it, I only watch at night⁸”. And my best friend goes on breathlessly: „I immediately bought three paintings of you, huge ones. Wasn’t easy to get them, because at the time everyone wanted them. Two are in my house in the lounge and in the living area, one in my Berlin office.” Whereupon in half of the cases with a buddy wink and a swift touch of the upper arm the questions are added: “Tell me, what do they actually cost today?” and “I’ve also got a couple of posters, can you sign them for me sometime or other?” My answer that the price varies and depends on the size cannot really satisfy, but is sufficiently compensated by my joyful willingness to sign everything and by the interim opening of the buffet. There is just enough time for one last question, accompanied by a cheerful “Haha, Alzheimer” which goes like that: “Er, sorry, what was your name again?”

⁸ At this point it is oftentimes included that the nephew or whoever of closer degree of kinship is suffering badly from the fact that the afternoon talk-show which is on paternity tests or the relationship problems of slum inhabitants had to be omitted for the white snow.

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