

The museum brings together 300 works, including wallpapers, 'paint machines', digital animations, drawings and photographic collages

MACBA presents the first retrospective devoted to Thomas Bayrle's subversions of Pop Art

Title: *Thomas Bayrle. I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore*. **Official opening:** Thursday, 5 February 2009, at 7.30 pm. **Exhibition dates:** From 6 February to 19 April 2009. **Curator:** Chus Martínez. **Organised and produced by:** Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona (MACBA).

Not only Mao before the masses, but also dozens of housewives armed with brooms, scores of Gillette razors and hundreds of Mon Chéri chocolates. In a play on perceptions in which nothing (or everything) is what it seems, in the midst of a profusion of food tins, cleaning products, cars, reinforced concrete buildings and motorways that populate the works of Thomas Bayrle (Berlin, 1937). Under the title *Thomas Bayrle. I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore*, the Contemporary Art Museum of Barcelona (MACBA) presents the first retrospective devoted to this artist's artist. His work is a precursor of nanotechnology, urban ecology and the digital revolution, and he is considered a leading representative, along with Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, of the Pop Art movement in Germany where his exhibitions were scorned for years. Instead, Bayrle carved out for himself a career as a teacher of artists, "beyond the river of influences", at the Städelschule in Frankfurt.

Though acclaimed as one of the voices of Pop Art in Germany, the truth is that Bayrle's ironic, repetitive, almost grotesque visual displays ultimately subvert the paradigms of the Pop movement. His works are practically psychedelic maps constructed from mosaics of images and hallucinatory to a point far beyond pop's hypnotic and surface effects. A trick—a strategy, in reality—with a clear purpose: to denounce the excesses of mass culture.

In what is almost a contamination of the space, four original wallpaper applications turn the ramp, the tower and the white walls of the MACBA building into a feast of colours and forms, whilst 300 "paint machines", 16 mm film collages, digital animations, graphic works, cardboard sculptures, watercolours, drawings and photographic collages take the visitor on an artistic journey that spans more than forty years. This is not the typical retrospective: it begins

where it ends, or ends where it begins. “You let things fall, from one hierarchy to another, and then you put them together again. The world is not a fixed image. It is always necessary to blow up the universe of things, or to reduce it to a grain of sand or into molecule clouds in order to reconstruct it in the imagination”, warns Bayrle.

Bored with life in her native Kansas, Dorothy Gale leaves her home behind her to enter the fantastic land of Oz, whose inhabitants include witches, a tin man without a heart, a talkative scarecrow and a cowardly lion. “I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore”, she confides in Toto, her dog, having been carried away by a tornado to come down to Earth, at last, in a land “over the rainbow”. Dorothy is the main character in *The Wizard of Oz*, one of the most popular fables of the United States, is based on a children’s novel written by L. Frank Baum in 1900 and translated into practically all languages. Under the title *I’ve a Feeling We’re Not in Kansas Anymore*, the Contemporary Art Museum of Barcelona not only presents, for the first time, a large collection of Thomas Bayrle’s works, but also highlights the artist’s ability to take us to a different place in his work, a place far from what has become familiar, where we can consider how humans and the technology they invented can create or destroy the meaning of things.

Thought is Bayrle’s ultimate goal, whether as artist or as teacher. His work dallies with an aesthetic—that of Pop Art—but only as a resource that enables him to shape that first impulse towards objectives that go far beyond, and even subvert, any given aesthetics or style. Humanism, politics, science, consumerism, work and pleasure have figured prominently as subject matters throughout Bayrle’s artistic career, and at the same time as he invites us on a journey “over the rainbow” in search of new meaning, he urges us to “enter into crisis”. That is, to question reality in order to discover other horizons on all the fronts of human knowledge, and to explore the role of the individual and how he or she belongs to the group. Bayrle’s work revolves around key contemporary debates, such as globalisation, religion and technology; hence his constant references to Mao, social revolution, sexual liberation, etc.

The exhibition opens and closes, like a concentric circle, with works from the 1960s and ‘70s, some very rarely seen, as they are scattered amongst numerous private collections. Even before entering the exhibition rooms themselves, visitors will note that something has changed in the museum’s architecture: a huge, fragile wood and cardboard structure standing more than four metres in height welcomes spectators at the MACBA entrance. Its title, *SARS Formation* (2005), alludes to the virus associated with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), whose first outbreak occurred in China in 2002, quickly spreading all over the world. However, *SARS Formation* is also a huge model of motorways whose snaking network of lanes intertwines over and over again in a metaphor of a society which, whilst working ceaselessly, is constantly renewed. When we reach the ramp, we are confronted by Bayrle’s wallpaper *Kartoffelzähler* (‘Potato Counters’, 1967), with its clear reference to the introduction of potato growing in China.

China occupies a leading place in Bayrle’s work. An example is the “paint machine” —a kinetic painting— *Mao und die Gymnasten* (‘Mao and the Gymnasts’, 1965), produced before Warhol, Polke or Richter became interested in the Chairman. In the picture we see hundreds of tiny gymnasts behind a portrait of Mao, raising their arms over a sports stadium and up into the skies, or bending at the waist to touch their toes,

covering the field alternately with green and red. For Bayrle, Mao's China and Erhard's German Federal Republic were not so different. "Visually, the Communist mass parades, the gigantic dimensions of those 'living pageants', had much in common with the huge masses that milled around shopping malls in the capitalist countries", Bayrle pointed out, and in his work, unscrupulously transcending the ideological differences between them, marketing and Maoism become confused or interchangeable as two different faces of mass culture.

It was around 1966 that Bayrle got his hands on the first copies of *China in Photographs*, and he was instantly fascinated by these magazines whose pages were profusely illustrated with brightly coloured images in the style of the purest pop. "They were not only intelligent and grotesque, but they also contrasted with boring German magazines in which China was barely mentioned", he explains. The magazines strongly influenced his work, as can be seen in much of this exhibition.

Besides *Mao und die Gymnasten*, the show also features several other "machines", as Bayrle likes to call the object paintings he began to create in the mid-60s. These are mechanical boxes, toys painted in oil and equipped with strings that enable the characters to move on what is almost a fairground stage. In *Ajax* (1966), for example, dozens of housewives hold brooms and cleaning products in their hands and raise their skirts, and in *Super Colgate* (1965) a prototypical dentist gazes at us as the audience clean their teeth in a puppet theatre crowned by a pair of lips that sport the most perfect teeth. The piece is a critique of "the national obsession with cleanliness" that broke out in the post-war era "as if in an attempt to wipe out a recent, uncomfortable past", and of the "artificial super-luxury food" that abounded at the time, like a ploy to "compensate for all that war famine".

Call me Jim (1976) is another key work in this exhibition. "Call me Jim" is what the then director of Volkswagen said to his American counterparts in the 1950s during the company's first negotiations in the USA. Cuttingly ironic, Bayrle reflects the tense fascination that America exercised over Germany in those days. *Call me Jim* is accompanied by several other photographic collages on wood, produced in the late '70s and early '80s. Here Bayrle depicts different random landscapes that confuse the spectator, such as *Yamagucci*. The series is also composed by such works as *Japaner (Japanese)* and *Inder (Indians)*, populated by huge crowds of people whose identity is, despite the titles, impossible to determine. Another series of photographic collages is *Carlos* (1977), formed by four portraits of Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, for some is a famous left-wing activist and for others the most-wanted terrorist of all time, who was forced to live clandestinely, adopting countless disguises in order to survive and continue with his activities.

Imbued with the most innocent pop style, and outstanding amongst Bayrle's graphic work is the silkscreen *Glückslee* (1969). In the foreground a huge tin of condensed milk, of a brand that is eponymous with the title, is composed by myriad units of the self-same object and surrounded by as many miniature images of it. *Tiger übt* ('Tiger Rehearses'), showing a group of soldiers in formation, dates to the same year. Playing with perspective Bayrle invites us to view the scene from above, enabling us to see a tiger that is, without doubt, a reference to militarism and the Vietnam War. Another group of works which occupy an important place both in Bayrle's development and in this exhibition, alludes to the wave of sexual liberation that shook the 1960s, and in

which public representations sexuality becomes merged to the point of confusion with the purest intimacy.

The show also includes drawings, watercolours, two 16 mm films in which the shots are altered by the superposition of images, and digital films from the 1980s to the present, in which the artist uses the computer to generate his distorted images. Two other spaces are covered by Bayrle's wallpapers: the floor of the MACBA tower is occupied by *M-Formation* (1971-2008), featuring an enormous pair of legs open to reveal the female sex, formed by the same tiny images; and the walls are lined by *Jacke wie Hose* ('Jacket As Well As Trousers' 1970), an endless, vertical sequence of the same man and the same women taking each other's clothes off, over and over again. Finally, the external walls of the exhibition rooms are decorated by a photographic collage densely inhabited by rectangular buildings in black and white: *Rapport, Stadt-Tapete* ('Report, City Tapestry', 1997-2008).

Bayrle's "superforms"

Obsessive repetitions of tiny images that form the same image, in gigantic dimensions, on the canvas. Micro and macro. Cell and body. Pixel and image. In Bayrle's work it is difficult to decide whether the "superform" (a term he has coined himself) represents its units or simply absorbs and instrumentalises them; whether the whole system behaves differently or, perhaps, in the same way, as the sum of its parts. His is a poetics of individualisation in which his canvases recreate these epidemics in a play of osmosis with the spectator. His works merely describe, and it is up to the viewer to imbue them with one meaning or another.

Bayrle lives and works in Frankfurt - the periphery, as he likes to say. "I am a localist and during the Cold War, Frankfurt—unlike boring Berlin—was important as a communications and information centre. It was a journalistic, literary, jazz city... but it produced hardly any fine art. I felt like art's lone ranger here because, compared to Cologne, Düsseldorf, etc, there was nothing. There was a group of concrete poets, formed by the likes of Franz Mon, Bazon Brock, Charlotte Poseneske and Peter Roehr." It was during these years that Bayrle founded, with Bernhard Jäger, the Gulliver Press, a small company devoted to publishing artist's books, lithographs, posters and portfolios, as well as working with writers who actively participated at Frankfurt Book Fair, many of them engaged in concrete poetry. Once again, repetitions and "superforms".

The "irrational nature of the excessive and obsessive growth" of mass culture is a *leitmotiv* that runs through much of Bayrle's work. Despite the influences of concrete poetry, conceptual art and Pop Art, he has always rejected dogma. "When it comes to movements and schools, I'm not sure where I fit in", he says. Although has always been linked to pop art and despite the fact that his work provides a dense testimony to the history of Pop's reception in Germany, Bayrle cannot be defined as a Pop artist. It is simply that it is through his connections to the movement that he finds his own language. Rather than mass production, Bayrle is interested in the individual and the individual's relation to the mass, and in the breaking open of all hierarchies.

Bayrle's work could be called an attempt at musical annotation. "I was able to change many contradictory things through rhythm", is how he sums it up. An apprentice at a textile factory from 1956 to 1958, the artist remembers how "In those days, I didn't realise how valuable the experience would later be as a metaphor of my work". The "rhythm and blues" of the huge machines, eight hours a day, and the "shuddering of tractors, the whirring 16-cylinder engines of the huge trucks and the frenetic beating of the metal grips on the leather belts" left a deep mark on him. "My conscious intelligence faded away and, after a while, my sensory perception and my memory began to link the factory's hell to the repetitive chants of monks... The finished product—the fabric—represented the totality, a whole: a society or a collective. A single thread represented something like individuality. That is where I got the idea that the "social" fabric is made up of individuals who are woven together but cannot move". Later on, between 1968 and 1972, Bayrle worked as a graphic designer for large companies such as Ferrero chocolate and Pierre Cardin. He remembers a visit to the Mon Chéri factory from those times: "All those chocolates that spewed out of the machines. I was amazed, excited, horrified, all at once, and decided to explore that absurdity".

► **Performance: Fendercats**

To mark the opening of the exhibition *Thomas Bayrle. I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Any More*, the artists Sergej Jensen and Stefan Müller will give a 30-minute performance forming part of the retrospective itself. Both Jensen and Müller are former pupils of the German artist, and this performance seeks to render homage to Thomas Bayrle's outstanding work as a teacher for 30 years at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, during which he influenced an entire generation of young artists. In the piece, Jensen and Müller link sight to hearing, turning sound into an instrument capable of modulating space. Radio Web MACBA (RWM) will broadcast a special programme devoted to the performance, including an interview and an audio work created especially for the occasion.

Thomas Bayrle. *I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Any More*
From 6 February to 19 April 2009

Official opening: Thursday, February 5, at 7.30 pm

■ CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM FROM BARCELONA (MACBA). Pl. Àngels, 1. 08001 Barcelona. www.macba.es

■ CONVERSATION between Thomas Bayrle and Lars Bang Larsen. Friday, February 6, at 7.30 pm. MACBA Auditorium. Admission free.

■ SHOWING OF THE FILM *Rote Sonne (Red Sun)*, 1969, Rudolf Thome. Thursday, 12 February, at 7.30 pm. MACBA Auditorium. Admission free.

■ WORKSHOP with Thomas Bayrle. March 23-27, from 5 to 8 pm. Registration: March 2-14. MACBA Lecture Room 2. Admission free.

■ PERFORMANCE: *Fendercats*. By Sergej Jensen and Stefan Müller. Thursday, 5 February, at 8.30 pm.

■ GUIDED TOURS (included in admission price). Weekdays, at 6 pm. Saturdays, at 12 noon and 6 pm. Sundays and holidays, at 12 noon.

■ TIMES. Weekdays (Tuesdays closed, except holidays), from 11 am to 7.30 pm. Saturdays, from 8 am to 8 pm. Sundays and holidays, from 10 am to 3 pm. Tuesdays closed, except holidays. Mondays, open.

Foreword

Bartomeu Mari, director of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

With equal parts fascination and loathing, the aesthetic of abundance was celebrated and criticized by art produced in the second half of the 20th century. Starting in the late 1950s, the proliferation of print media and, consequently, of advertising led to the perception of a world where identical objects were repeated, invading the daily life of a West that was submerged in the miseries of the postwar. In European art, material abundance would inspire ironic visions that were openly critical of the excesses of production and consumption. The aesthetic of daily life would become the background and the theme of art practices based on cultivating the image, on "detouring" the seduction methods used by advertising and entertainment, which were starting to merge. In the context of the Cold War, the political sphere, on fire due to the conflicts in Asia, cast doubt on the sense of prosperity and contributed to an awareness of political realities that went beyond the limits of nation states. In the 1960s and 70s, people weren't talking about globalization, and production and consumption were experienced in terms of local industries and markets. However, the 1974 oil crisis began to change this vision.

Thomas Bayrle's work appeared in this context and it partakes of this cultural climate of fascination and repulsion in the face of the consequences of industrialization. Unlike the American and British artists working at that time, though, the object of his interest was not the serially produced and marketed product. What captured Bayrle's interest were the individual and the tension attendant on his insertion in a group, in a community...in the masses. Since then, his art has dealt with an aesthetic at the service of a poetics of individuation. In order to counteract the tendency towards uniformity, towards repetition, Bayrle proposes the disruption of hierarchies, of orders and of balances. To this end, he has formulated almost psychedelic maps of images-mosaics that are hyper-realistic and highly hallucinatory. Bayrle's composite images recall the hypnotic projects of Pop Art: they respond to the whirlpool of the visual with tensions that go from the microscopic to a universalist vision of long series.

I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore is the first retrospective exhibition of Thomas Bayrle's work. It includes work produced beginning in the 1960s up until the present, in order to present the specificity of a language and a unique artistic methodology that are key to understanding the history of the reception of contemporary art from the 1960 and 70s until today. The work of Thomas Bayrle is a surprise. It is often described as the clearest example

of the Pop Art tradition in Germany in the 1960s. Indeed, the influence of Pop Art is as undeniable as it is hard to grasp in the face of another powerful and productive concept in his work: "recreation."

Thomas Bayrle's work reinscribes the popular tradition within another tradition, one that is somewhere between concrete poetry and conceptual art. The image is less an icon than a form of writing. His art does not set out to analyze consumer society or take stock of the symbols of contemporary society. Images, people and objects in his work are a way of grasping the new human being. Assembling a catalogue of generic images means constructing a policy about the essential by following very simple guidelines, like repetition, that distance us from any possible judgment: Thomas Bayrle's images show, rather than describe. We are the ones who, if necessary, must undertake a comprehensive analysis of what we are seeing and, as such, his work is very much like musical annotation. The aim is none other than to create a new mode for perceiving the real, for educating the senses as well as the intellect through a definition of values as devoid as possible of meta-texts, of academic or academic-journalistic conversation. And hence Bayrle's success in the artistic community which, long before curators, collectors and institutions, saw him as a figure key to an age when few dared to define life and the possibilities of the creative imagination on their own terms.

Thomas Bayrle is an interpreter of images if that idea is understood very literally: an interpreter is one who deciphers and communicates, who translates between different languages – image and word –, but also between different media: collage, photography, oil painting, watercolor, drawing, film, graphics. An interpreter is, in essence, a performer. It is someone who organizes material to give it intelligible life.

Bayrle's work is part of an attempt to rewrite the relations between popular traditions, which are produced and disseminated on a mass scale, and the tradition of the unique, unrepeatable work of art. Creation and production come together in a career of over forty years, which in this exhibition, is analyzed in all its magnitude for the first time

The Means of the Method

Chus Martínez

Being aware of the world is not a result of the existence of the mind, but rather the mind in action. Intellect is not an eye that observes us from some vague place within, but, rather, the very fact of thinking. If, as Wittgenstein states, it is erroneous to believe that the mind-matter duality in any way reflects reality – it is, rather, a metaphor that serves to foster belief in the notion that thought, will and imagination are not made of the same substance as the world, objects and things–, we must search for a new logic by which to understand the relationship between the world and ideas. Nothing can happen beyond the real and the real can only be grasped through language. This means a revolution: since we cannot expect to find correlations between the world of ideas and the world of matter, our questions cannot hope to find an answer, but rather to become sense-making operations. Like untangling a knot, solving a problem involves changing the order of the known.

In the work of Thomas Bayrle, there is a constant concern with understanding the reality that emerged after the Second World War, specifically the new relationship between man, word/image and world. At that moment, the codes for perception and self-perception through which we locate our relations of intelligibility with others and with the world entered a previously unknown dimension. The modes by which our morals, aesthetics and politics operate – as well as our economies of need and desire, and even of social imperative – underwent a radical transformation. Thomas Bayrle's art is situated in that whirlpool of change in paradigm; it asks how, from artistic practice, we can approach problems related to the interpretation of the world, on the one hand, and to the interpretation of the modern subject, on the other. How do we address the world in a time that could be described as post-word?

It would be incorrect to describe Thomas Bayrle as simply the “voice” of Pop in Germany. His work must be understood as active thought within the family of concerns mentioned above. The immediateness of Pop's artistic syntax provides his work with a code of reference and apparent ingenuity, the perfect attitude for a project whose ambitions go beyond a critique of capitalism. Bayrle's fascination with the Pop movement results from its trust in images, its daring approach to symbols as well as its startling ability to insert itself historically in the here and now. This new code of images – the legitimacy with which it emerged and the vitality that it generated– provoked a revolutionary fascination, giving Pop images a social and political dimension regardless of their content.

The work of Thomas Bayrle is undeniably informed by a reaction to this breadth of new possibilities. Nonetheless, Bayrle's use of certain Pop resources –the lack of perspective, the intentional approach to the representation of objects, types and chromatism– is more a trick than an authentic interest in keeping the spirit of Pop alive in Europe, specifically in Germany. “Trick” here means a strategy that seems to acquire the unique and stable meaning characteristic of the Pop movement to deal with questions of order, knowledge and aesthetics that have nothing to do with that movement.

For Bayrle, the task of art is reordering, time and again, the stuff of the real in search of a meaning for both the subject him- or herself and for future societies. Take, for example, *Stadt* (1977), a photographic collage that shows the view of a city, a forest of buildings clustered together. This is a black-and-white urban space, a dense mass composed of multiple habitational units, an inventory of rational spaces to be inhabited, in which to lead a modern life. It is an ordered, rational space, an organic web through which thousands of men and women circulate every day as they go to and from their jobs. The space repeats because its functions repeat: facilitating transit and maximizing resources (light, color and repetition). This is a unique city that conceals many differences.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Bayrle produced a number of works that dealt with this theme. These pieces are all photographic collages on wood with landscapes that could be called entropic: forests of reinforced concrete (*Yamagucci*, 1981), streets through which a mass of people with indeterminate identities circulate (*Japaner*, 1981). Indeed, these could all be the same person, just as these cities could consist of the same building: a single model that, if repeated enough, generates a neighborhood or group. This discourse is not foreign to modernity's architectural aspiration of providing rational solutions at once generic (that is, that respond universally to the needs implicit to scientific-technical advances) and committed to the specificity of each situation. Unit, module and capsule are the terms of a grammar certain to come against unambiguous elements that cannot be divided, elements that can be endlessly combined to adapt to what is required at each moment. The hope of encountering these elements is what sets the machine in motion. The logic of production is a logic of components to which the men and women who inhabit this space are also subjected. They are slaves of the system, apparently incapable of effecting changes in the machine.

In this state of things, the appearance of the portrait of Carlos – four portraits, in fact, all made in 1977 – is eloquent. The image of a Latino man in his thirties, with all the trappings of the 1970s, appears on a background that, once again, is a city, a vast mass of buildings that take up the entire frame. The man portrayed in this work is, for some, an important leftist activist and, for others, the most wanted terrorist of his time. Carlos is not his real name, but the alias of Illich Ramírez Sánchez, the son of a well-known leftist lawyer who was born in Venezuela in 1949. Sadly, he is famous for, among other things, the attack on the headquarters of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in Vienna on October 20, 1975, an attack that led to the death of three. Bayrle's use of this character is not anecdotal. Nor is it the first time he makes portraits of historical figures as dissimilar as those depicted in *Stalin* (a drawing from 1970), *Mr. Wörhr* (1972), *Mozart* (1979) and *Beethoven* (1979). Indeed, this series continues into the present, with portraits of *Willy Brandt* (2000) and *Condoleezza Rice* (2006). Carlos is an emblematic figure. Just like the members of the German terrorist group RAF, the Rote Armee Fraktion, Carlos, with the clear conscious of a defined identity in spite of the need to remain anonymous to survive and keep working, does things to avoid being recognized: constant changes in identity prevent him from being spotted. Terrorism, in those years, had a dialectical relationship with "the grid society", with a social and

political order which was perceived as oppressing individual freedom and difference. The grid – a highly technical social model where individuals are pieces and where the systemic movement is a machine against which it is hard to rebel– is comparable to a sort of limbo. According to the description of Saint Thomas Aquinas, limbo can be defined as a missing space. Unlike heaven or hell, in limbo there is neither punishment nor glory. It is a place defined by eternal deprivation. But, worst of all, the inhabitants of limbo, unlike those condemned to hell or rewarded with glory, are not aware of their deprivation. They do not suffer, because they do not see; their bodies are impassive. This state of absolute entropy is perfectly reflected in the aforementioned works. In them, there is no glory, but only the condemned, those rebels who have attempted to subvert this logic of no-place by appealing to violence.

Along with this pessimistic vision, however, is another vision, one that offers a strange sense of irony and fascination through the possibilities that eternal repetition affords the individual. The “machines,” as Thomas Bayrle calls this series of painting-objects from the mid-70s, are mechanical boxes, oil-painted toys with wind-up mechanisms by which the characters move, composing something like a scene from a fair. One of the clearest examples of such works is *Super Colgate* (1965), which consists of a small marionette theater with a figure – a bald, bespectacled scientist wearing a lab coat– in the foreground. The scientist laughs, as do the members of the audience who, seated in the stands with their back to him and facing the viewer, brush their teeth. The scene is crowned by lips. Once the curtain has risen, our hero, the doctor, appears. The work is, in essence, a small rehearsal of tragedy for a marionette theater. Tragedy always revolves around the fall of the hero and importance of ritual. But where has this man come from? From science itself. Decked in a white lab coat, he is bound to modern medicine, to the great advances that depend on the rigors of the laboratory, on the discoveries that have moved the world forward, that have confirmed man’s awareness of his superiority to nature. The figure in the white coat now has another aim: to spread the basic principles of oral hygiene. But science does not reign over this scene; what reigns here, rather, are the sensual red lips of a woman, behind which we catch a glimpse of perfectly straight, gleaming white teeth. She is the muse of *Colgate*, the company that launched the tube of toothpaste in 1873, setting off a revolution in the world of dentistry and marking the origin of the brushing ritual. From there comes this classic choreography. The monologue of the hero and his toothbrush, a broad chorus behind him with red lips and toothbrushes in hand, and the gods of oral hygiene, the Dentists, surrounding the scene. A button sets off the mechanism and, at the same moment, all the characters move their arms to brush their teeth.

Unlike the black and white photographic collages, the machines distill a sharp sense of irony. Limbo is not only a place of deprivation, but also the potential stage for a theater of the absurd. The residents of these bedroom communities may be lost creatures, yet they find themselves on a stage beyond perdition or salvation. These characters are not anonymous but null, which is very different (something like the figure of the zombie in science fiction); they represent the most effective obstacle to the notion of redemption. The characters that appear at this point in Thomas Bayrle’s work have the arrogant dignity of comic book characters. Their relationship to the objects of consumption is not

one of overwhelming desire, but rather follows the logic of a strange sense of justice of the kind expressed in contemporary slogans such as "Because I'm worth it." The world, at least the one Bayrle describes has made the characters this way. The only think left to do is identify the moment when this logic fails – the point from which difference may arise.

References to Mao and to the Communist system are frequent throughout Bayrle's work. Mao is an icon in and of himself; along with China, he represents the ability to reinterpret Marxist-Leninist doctrine and adapt it to a society that is too complex to be explained in few words. Synchronization and virtuosity are key to the staging of the Maoist scene. Society should appear as a single body and voice comprised of billions of individuals who make up the "dramaturgy" of the system and its *mise-en-scène*. Choreography is a way of synchronizing mind and body, making them a single will. All are part of a whole and the whole cannot be grasped from any single part. As occurs years later with digital technology, each individual is a carrier of fundamental information for the global image. Thomas Bayrle's way of working, his method, reverts this logic: in his work, all image is synodical, that is, the parts contain the whole. This effect is especially evident in his graphic work. The print on paper *VW Rot* (1969) depicts the well-known "beetle," Volkswagen's emblematic car. From countless red beetles, the image of the car emerges. *Glücksklee* (1969), another of his well-known graphic pieces, follows the same principle. This time, the object in the foreground is a can of condensed milk. Like the beetle, it is comprised of infinite units of the same object and surrounded by a plethora of tiny cans. There are numerous examples of this in his work although, as we will see, it is not the only way he relates the origin of an object to its representation. In these cases, the origin of the object is the object itself. The unit is not a part but a whole, just on a smaller scale. Like many aspects of Bayrle's work, this specific way of producing has ontological implications. It is much more than an optical trick based on the possibilities of a resource like repetition, and it has much broader implications as well. Insisting that there is no substantial difference between the parts and the whole means asserting the importance of all the levels that make up an organism. The properties of a biological, chemical, social, economic, mental, linguistic, etc. system cannot be determined or explained as the sum of their component parts, and the system as a whole behaves differently from the sum of its parts. Nothing is expendable. There is not an end and several means: they are one and the same. Reality is understood as an organic system comprised of elements, cells that in themselves contain the same information as the whole.

Bayrle's atomic reading of Mao's Chinese Communism is situated within this concept. Bayrle is fascinated by the way that individuals are treated by the Communist system, by the *mise-en-scène* and subordination of the individual to the group and of the group to an ideology. His works echo the effort of a huge mass of people destined to form a single image: Mao. The discipline and coordination of the group serves a higher cause than each of the individuals separately. The desire and the will of the individual can, with enough discipline, serve the Idea. *Papier Tiger* (1969) is a graphic piece that shows a group of soldiers in a row. The perspective –which is similar to a bird's eye view- allows us to see the tiger, undoubtedly a reference to militarism and the Vietnam War. A year

before, Bayrle made a similar image, *Kaffeegermanen* (1968). In that piece, there is a row of soldiers dressed in medieval clothing, in reference to the Germanic peoples. What we see here is not a symbol of war but a friendly, steaming cup of coffee. The contraposition of the proud past of the Germanic peoples and the pleasurable image of a porcelain cup is ironic, yet illustrative of the multiple levels of narratives that come into play in the formation of the identity of a specific community. Significantly, we are many things at the same time.

Bayrle started working at an important point, when a new identity was being formed in Germany and Europe. At that time, a new understanding of the strange coexistence of cultural ideologies, specific projects and an uncommon density in the flow of information exchange was taking hold. The new order divided the world into two large subsets, and each and every one of us negotiates our belonging to one or the other of them. The nature of our participation in a project both political and cultural is pressing. The metaphor of the "block" is no coincidence; it arises from the need to describe, via metaphor, how these two halves – capitalism and communism – are, in fact, identical. In this new status quo, discussion is essential to interpreting our way of being in the world and what the term *agency* (our capacity to interpret reality and to act accordingly) means to each of us.

In this context, Alain Badiou makes a fundamental distinction –one that Giorgio Agamben later makes reference to.¹ In political terms, we need to differentiate between being members of and being included in a project. Being members of a project, party, etc. has to do with the order of presentation. Inclusion in a project or party, on the other hand, takes place at the level of representation. For Badiou, a term (an individual) is *normal* (in the epistemological sense, clearly) when he or she is present and represented in a situation. That is, when he/she is both represented in the structure of the political system (State, party) and present in that structure. An anomaly appears when this second function does not occur, when an individual is represented without being present. This complex question of presence vs. representation is key to understanding the logic of the whole within the work of Thomas Bayrle. The search for balance between the different levels on which an individual can define him- or herself within a system also involves the question of, on the one hand, how to strike a balance within a given political, social or economic system and, on the other, how to create exceptions within this system to make it possible for other systems, other logics of social organization, to appear.

The image and the experience of the image inform these questions in Bayrle's work. Repetition is a resource that the artist uses as a way to force an event, an error. Error is considered a positive element here. Indeed, in many cultures, error is fundamental; it is the cosmogony in the narrative that explains the origin of the world. It is the confirmation that man, nature and the machine are, in fact, not one and the same. The inorganic nature of the machine has nothing to do with the spontaneity that we attribute to organic life. It is easy to consider these two systems incompatible: the singularity of the organic versus the inert universality of mechanical repetition. Jacques Derrida – along with Bayrle – is one of the first to posit that these two systems are, in fact, compatible.

Conceiving this compatibility is key to the emergence of a new logic, an uncommon form of conceptual substance. Truth be told, when contemplating our recent past and the future, this new logic is the closest thing to a monster that we can imagine.² The paradox of this apparently impossible coexistence could – perhaps – imply a new space for action, perception and aesthetic experience, as well as for the intellectual speculation that might engender new ways of conceiving the world.

The notion that several worlds coexist is fundamental to the discursive opening that contemporary philosophy formulates. The question lies in determining on what basis we can say that many worlds exist while investigating the role that different systems of symbols play in each of those worlds. The oft-repeated call for a pluralistic world is not at all related to the coexistence of systems that articulate reality in completely different ways. In a world capable of encompassing multiplicity and contrast, there is the possibility that together many similar worlds form a sort of unit. This difference is key when considering what Derrida postulates. The possibility of a new logic does not reside in the conception of a single world, as if it were, but of several worlds, and in being able to think of and interpret them. As we become used to the idea that apparently antagonistic logics cannot be reduced to a single logic and can, feasibly, coexist, we must not seek the unit in a certain thing, but in a new global organization that can take the shape of the types and functions of the images and of the systems of knowledge that these images create.

This is the task of Thomas Bayle's work: universes are made of worlds, and the worlds themselves can be constructed in many ways. Through a very personal and specific method of interpreting image, function, repetition and excess, his work constitutes a critical act, in both the most trivial and most complex sense of the word: it is a critique of life. At the point where vision and speculative organization converge, the possibility of things being different arises. But the critical dimension of the work also has a more specific, practical sense. It represents both an exhibitiv reflection on our cultural heritage and the context from which the work originates. From within the profane, the trivial and the domestic, an interest in the meaning of being can be discerned. The potential of the work lies in turning the backdrop of irrationality – which always borders the world as we know it – into something productive. Mistakes are pure potentiality; without them, without this opening up to the unknown, thought would not be possible.

¹ Giorgio Agamben: *Homo sacer*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 24

² Jacques Derrida: *Without Alibi (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics)*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 73-75.

Their Combination is Spectacular
Thomas Bayrle talks about his work
Lars Bang Larsen

This interview took place in Helke and Thomas Bayrle's home in Frankfurt am Main, September 29th, 2008. It has been transcribed as a monologue in order to document his voice and the couplings and flows with which he looks back at his work's historical contexts, and at motifs and methodologies that have been central to it.

When Bayrle talks, you are also introduced to his large 'family': Ligeti, Berg, Ravel, Webern; Piranesi, Archimboldo, Vasarely, Warhol; Mao, Buckminster Fuller, Michaux, Benjamin, and others from the fields of art, literature, music and politics. A community of influences that always mumble along.

Resistance to dogma lies at every level of his work. Mao is juxtaposed to Gillette razors; Stalin's moustache is as good, or as obscene, a pictorial element as that of a couple's athletic lovemaking; while the meshwork of the Autobahn, in its busy indifference, weaves humans and machines together. Bayrle puts the spectator viscerally in the middle of ideas and materials: the steady chugging of the mechanical weave on the factory floor turns into the emancipatory pulse of jazz and rock'n roll...

Typical of Bayrle's cross-pollinating use of various media – prints, films, books, etc. – is the way they lose their innocence as carriers of meaning. He approaches media from the outside, and typically proceeds through labour-intense routines that he sets up for himself, constructing artistic machines with their own laws and regularities that co-determine the production of images against the smooth functioning of the medium.

As Lenin once remarked, everything is connected to everything else. This is a materialism that also characterises Bayrle's work and enables him to take long views through history. In other words, he makes connections without streamlining things (it is not the "connectionism" of management thinking). Conjunctions are rather made on the basis of the autonomy of every person, and on the level of every single pixel or cell and their capacity for transformation and osmosis with other units, and with assemblages that are bigger than themselves.

Lars Bang Larsen

All right, just a few things to give a direction...

Forty years ago, when I started talking about weaving in relation to art, people were

completely unwilling to follow this idea beyond discussions of technique and skill. At that point it was almost blasphemy to connect meditative feelings with the mechanic world of the machines, to have the desire to try and link the rhythm of your self and your body with automated machine rhythms. However, this was how I felt after I had been an apprentice at a weaving factory, and at that time I didn't realize how valuable this experience would turn out to be, years later, as a metaphor in my work.

Like many other children I was impressed by the "rhythm 'n' blues" of big heavy engines, like bouncing tractors or the deep drone of idling 16 -cylinder engines in big, fat trucks! The frantic beat of metal cramps connecting the leather belts that transmit energy from steam machines to dynamos also drove me crazy. I found such basic rhythms in almost all production machinery: conveyor belts, farm and factory machines, automatic looms or printing presses – in their continuous looping movements they all gasped, snuffled, wheezed, soughed, on and on and on...

While standing in the weaving factory, day after day, hour after hour, I sank deep into this undergrowth of warp and weft myself. I kind of melted away. Yeah – especially when I felt tired, I was immersed in this endless reinforcement of millions of crossovers and crossunders that makes any average fabric consistent. In such weak moments my feelings were likely to be shifted into very strange areas and other scales. Big drops burst into smaller ones and disappeared in sparkling bubble clouds... My conscious mind subsided and after a while my sensory perception and memory connected the factory hell with the repetitive chants of monks. Suddenly the rosary of my childhood was back... I was in the middle of a small country church and heard the whimpering and tender voices of a small cluster of women dressed in black, repeating, chanting, looping the same sentences of Ave Maria, on and on and on...

In 1957-59 I was into jazz, bebop, Charlie Parker, rhythm 'n' blues... it was right around the time when Little Richard yelled rock 'n' roll for the first time. So via rhythm I was able to merge a lot of contradictory things. The sound of those weaving looms was sometimes even more important to me than what they produced. Listening to those automats added another level - maybe a deeper understanding – of what they really did.

When I was at the factory I intended to be a patternmaker, not a printer. But that was soon about to change... In spite of that I never forgot the reality of the canvas's construction, of what carries the paint. Many people who paint on canvas never think about what is underneath. While standing at the loom, I tried with my gaze to dive into the structure of the canvas itself. Even if, later on as a printer, I would work 1 mm "on the first floor above" the woven structure, I always tried to be in organic correspondence with the structures beneath... And in this way the printed form seemed to turn out differently. This structural view was an entrance into a fantasy or hallucination that reached further, and in which the finished product – the fabric – came to represent wholeness, an ensemble; a society or a collective. The single thread stood for a sort of individuality, with the implication that the 'social' fabric is made up of individuals who are woven together, but cannot move. They are bound up with each other. You see it in a perverse way in Chaplin's *Modern Times*, and before this in Edward Muybridge's film-like series of

moving human and animal bodies. Besides being a fantastic photographic adventure, Muybridge's photos helped Henry Ford to maximize the workers' ability and velocity, and make their movements along his conveyor belts more efficient.

All of these may seem like discreet events, but I do believe that they connect historically. As a child I watched old women singing over their rosaries, and later I linked this to the sound and repetitive movements of conveyor belts: Here monotonously repeated sentences, there the steady flow of goods... Did these have anything to do with each other? In medieval times families had up to twelve children, and one or two were sent off to a monastery where their work consisted of meditating and praying, while the other family members had to work on the fields. While having its reason in what is absent and universal, the practice of praying was also very localized and specific: 30 prayers for a good harvest, 20 for rain, 10 for curing a friend who was ill, etc. I compare this negotiation of wishes and desires through meditation with the process of developing photographic negatives in the obscurity of the darkroom.

During the Renaissance this changed. The power of meditation decreased and was displaced by the realistic view of believing in mankind's abilities. And they wanted to see it! They wanted results! I compare this with making prints from photographic negatives – not only one, but by the thousands. This process of materialization continued with increasing speed, right up to the conveyor belts of the 19th and 20th centuries on which the stuff of our dreams passes by. So to make a long story short, I see a direct connection between Gothic meditation and our conveyor belts... beginning with the betrayal of the true value of meditation that turns into a Faustian pact with rationality and productivity, and re-appearing in our present environmental catastrophe.

My parents were ethnographers, and themes like Buddhism, Islam, Communism, Africa, Asia, were present in our family... From very early on, I felt attracted to Asian cultures. Their approach to reality via collectivism – through the dough of collectivism you might say – unlike the Western way of egoism, of over-accentuating individuality. This was my approach to China... I was in the East pretty often. In 1978 I spent two months in the Tokyo summer heat. To the average tourist of the time this was absolutely vulgar; one was supposed to go to Nara, Mount Fuji or Kyoto to understand Japanese culture. The fine, minute, endless, flat quality of this culture fascinated me. The ongoing modulation of the big city; the sameness, which revealed many more tiny variations. The difference between big or small cities was just comprised of more or less of the same: Same big companies, same logos – 10 times, 20 times, 50 times Fuji – Toyota – Sony – and the white Shinkansen trains connecting feverish cities in the sun... Boredom and excitement in one!

I remember entering these big, very loud Pachinko halls, where thousands of business people sat and played, row after row, gazing at flows of little metal balls. I would call this the "compensation waterfall"... But more than a dream of enrichment they came to play a game to get refreshed, like taking a shower!

For years I was close to communism... and still am. I feel an undiminished proximity to Marx, even if some of his texts have been distorted. It is always necessary to think about the relations of production: society is like the soil (this almost sounds fascist!) on which a tree grows; you have a responsibility to nurse it, otherwise it doesn't yield a crop, doesn't give anything back. Today socialism and communism are in a corner of whatever... A supermarket of -isms where nothing is very sharp.

In the 1960s I helped the Maoists in Frankfurt with graphic design and advertising, but I sensed an automatism in their political attitude. So I was repelled at the same time as I was attracted to them. It was the same with the Red Army Fraction – on the one hand their actions seemed totally right, but when they started killing people I couldn't approve of it. They turned into a bad thrashing machine that you had to follow. Then it was better to go psychedelic, try some drugs and make the machine soft and pliable! I am a rather fearful guy. Working towards big changes was never my thing. I like sideways and slow go, and I like to divide big problems into small ones... I don't have an expressionist mentality, which seems to be the German stereotype. Churchill once said: you either have the Germans at your feet – or you have them at your throat... Ha ha...no better way to describe us!

I'm a local guy, and during the cold war, Frankfurt was important as a hub to the bland Berlin. It was a newspaper, literary and jazz city – but it hardly generated any visual art. I felt like a lonesome art cowboy in town, because compared to Cologne or Düsseldorf there was nothing. There was the concrete poetry crowd, though, people like Franz Mon, Bazon Brock, Charlotte Poseneske, and Peter Roehr – and Bernhard Jaeger, with whom I shared the Gulliver Press for 4 years. Already by then the book fair was the centre of Frankfurt culture; the book fair and the Americans. There was a large US influence in Frankfurt, more so than anywhere else in Germany. Almost 20,000 soldiers were stationed here. The general atmosphere they brought with them was very positive for me. For example, some bored GIs on the Airbase in Wiesbaden – George Maciunas, Dick Higgins and Al Hansen – started the first Fluxus festival in the local museum. Suddenly something happened in the middle of the desert! And Fluxus lead to Happenings at the University of Frankfurt, with Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Emmett Williams etc. They performed a lot of John Cage's work – vividly and fresh, like I never, ever saw again.

Mapping has been one of my main concerns; to fill large containers with small elements. Over the years I experimented a lot, with semi-automatic tools. Beginning in 1969 I started composing works from distorted images. For several years this had to be done by hand drawings. But in 1980, after having tried diverse collage methods, I started to distort printed latex rubbers. This method allowed me to produce larger amounts of distortions in order to produce prints and films. I was trying to achieve a homogeneous stretching, which to me represented a second skin. The stretching was a collective process. The production of every little form would involve three or four people, each holding or pulling in their direction on the photocopying machine. For the films we had to make thousands of photocopies, thousands of distortions. Each rubber template had a different capacity for stretching the most impossible, extreme stretches. This was before

the computer, of course, but I wouldn't have used a computer for this purpose even if I'd had access to one. To me the computerized form seemed boring; the computer made things *smooth*. And I would not have missed the psychological effect of such collective mapping for the world. Sometimes 50 rubbers would be destroyed before finishing a sequence of a film... "Shit – It's broken again!" Each square centimeter in the stretched image is an effect – the way each cell in the human body is individual, and has its needs; the body is active at cell level because it consists of these millions of small efforts and relations of force that are constantly reproducing the body.

When Warhol painted Mao as a Pop art motif it was genius. But I approached socialism and Pop art naively, as artists do, and thought that they had something in common. Often artists seem not to think things through in a very profound way, but they are emotionalizing things. Today I ask myself, why did I take the approaches that I did? Somebody like Michael Asher always knew what he was doing! For me, art making is a mix of doing and post-reflection. In terms of Movement or School it is not clear to me where I fit; and when you do fit somewhere it's boring, and you proceed to make the next mistake. I am not at all coherent in this river of influences. One thread fell and I picked up another, which took me in a different direction; I wanted to contact the society in one way or another and went into teaching, or – together with Wolfgang Schmitt – organized a children's playground in 1974. At certain times I almost forgot about art. Thirty or 40 years ago people called me inconsistent; all this jumping around and going back and forth was not welcomed back then – it showed a lack of conviction or character. But I don't think I'm incoherent: I want to take consistency to the point where it becomes inconsistent. It's la Strada delle Mistakes, Strada delle Adventure! I'm a total doubter and this never leaves me...doubts all the way down to the last detail. But doubt is also the yeast that makes the dough rise. Many artists sat in this kitchen – Dieter Roth, Lawrence Wiener... And bunches of students engaged in constant questioning, a lingering with questions, constructing a soft edifice of thought.

Like doubt, ugliness is a dynamic process. The resistance that is built into ugliness forces you to deconstruct and reconstruct, as steady as breathing. This takes a lot of life, a lot of energy. You let things fall, from one hierarchy into another, and bring it back together again. The world is not a fixed-image world: It is always necessary to blast the world of things away, or to reduce it to grains of sand or clouds of molecules in order to re-build it in your imagination. When I had one of my few LSD trips I had this hallucination of a cupboard melting like wax, and I remember this electric feeling of seeing something dematerialize... Of course you don't have to be stoned, it is a simple question of making something move; every living organism has this dynamism.

One's lonely craziness is important. You shouldn't let collective euphoria carry you away, the way a lot of activity in 1968 got carried away by its own movement. You must allow space for personal adventures to unfold; your biology, social networks, and ideas to come together in their many layers. Their combination is spectacular...