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Their Combination is Spectacular Thomas Bayrle talks about his work

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, souged, 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...