

# 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 unpicking 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 the 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 Art 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 (*Yamaguchi*, 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 Red Army Faction, 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 that 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-60s, 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.

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

In this context, Alain Badiou makes a fundamental distinction – one that Giorgio Agamben later makes reference to.<sup>1</sup> 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

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

new logic is the closest thing to a monster that we can imagine.<sup>2</sup> 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 Bayrle'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.