



Thomas Bayrle, *Feuer im Weizen*, 1970  
Courtesy: Cardi Black Box, Milan

## Repetition Is the Source of Life

Thomas Bayrle's world consists of a reality similar to what we see recorded on holographic film, in which each detail contains the whole. His Pop-derived subjects never cease to inveigle the eye with their minute particles. These are deformed to create three-dimensional effects, as though each one contained the DNA of the whole. The very young Oliver Laric, for whom Bayrle was probably a model of inspiration, enters into an enlightening conversation with the latter about the German artist's career and about the astounding complexity and modernity of his work, revealing a remarkable affinity of thought.

Oliver Laric: Did you also live in China for a while?

Thomas Bayrle: Not so long, no. I lived in Japan. I went many times. The first time was in '78. I also had a gallery there.

OL: That was in Tokyo?

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TB: Yes, I worked with this very conservative man. A very touching character.

OL: Who was that, if you don't mind me asking?

TB: He was called Masaomi Unagami and I worked with him for over fifteen years. He had

a large collection of mine, around sixty works. And I value him as a person. But the program did not convince me, simply because nothing was happening. So I would take him along with me, to the triennial in Yokohama and so forth, but he just did not look at anything. Anyway he was not flexible. Which you have to be, of course, as a modern gallerist in Japan.

OL: Did he build up a Japanese collection?

TB: Yes, he had Inoue YU-ICHI, who was a hugely important painter. He somehow did not grasp his work. That doesn't matter now.

OL: Gertrude Stein said: "There is no such thing as repetition". This becomes especially clear when reading Stein, listening to James Brown, or looking at your work. It may be boring talking about the impossibility of repetition. Perhaps we should talk about the productive potential of repetition?

TB: OK, so it always works like this: I have this metaphor with weaving that I learned. A fundamentally important metaphor. Because weaving is different from printing, where it is possible to produce different intensities. With weaving, you have to be clear: the thread goes over or it goes underneath. It is a different materiality and stringency. So I just went on from there without having too much of a plan. One thing led to another. Of course you have questions of reproduction and of course I also see repetition as the source of life and art. It is not possible without repetition—nature is not possible, nothing is. I worked through that with a certain mentality. And once through, there was another version, and after that, oddly enough, yet another. At first I had not thought it would carry through for so long. And quite the opposite, it kept growing.

OL: Looking at your works from the '70s, they seem like they could have been made in 2012. With some artists, writers or filmmakers, it seems the dialogue intensifies from decade to decade, that present technological developments actualize your earlier works. In that way, works are retrospectively affected and works made in the '60s or '70s are now being changed.

TB: That is right; I did not see this angle at the time. Nowadays you see it from another point of view. You automatically see it through the Internet.

OL: Holograms have a curious quality. If a hologram film is cut into two halves and only one half is exposed with laser, you can still see the whole image. It does not have the same focus, but still it is completely preserved. This discovery led neurophysicist Karl Pribram to study how information is saved in our memory. Up until the second half of the 20th century, knowledge was believed to be stored in specific groups of neurons. But in fact, people who have had parts of their brain removed after an accident do not lose any selective memory. All the information is preserved; it might just be slightly blurred.

TB: For instance, I had a lot to do with Wolf Singer who is a brain researcher and had a concept very similar to my own, which is that there is no brain center and instead, as with holography, the whole is contained in each splinter. Each cell makes up the whole and they are, from thought to thought, merely called upon and combined in different formations. There are billions of constellations. This magnificence need not be seen only in the brain. Even just a cell is something quite inconceivable and complex, so what I do happens, in a way, out of dignity. Though I do not approach the whole thing like a science writer, or like someone who

has to come to direct terms with this complexity, like a doctor or a scientist, I can still understand that the material we are made of and working with is unbelievably magnificent. Perhaps this is why we do not tire of it, and we like twist it just ever so slightly, to be able to see it from a completely different perspective.

OL: Regarding individual elements in your work, if you look at the microscopic realm, further worlds open up like Mandelbrot fractals.



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Oliver Laric, *Sun Tzu Janus*, 2012  
Courtesy: the artist; Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin; and Seventeen Gallery, London

TB: I am interested in this holographic approach or the link to an entirely hermetic reality

that is contained in every leaf—that each leaf contains the entire genetic information of the oak tree—not only in the leaf but also in each cell. It is this extreme assurance that nature is predetermined up to the level of the cell: this will become an oak. For me, all this presents a great challenge—of how to address the biological, societal, the challenge of anarchy. Mass production, for example, was flowing over in 1965 and since then all sorts of pull-ups have had to be carried out so this whole madness can actually get sold. So it can carry itself on and become actually anarchic. The organism to which this is attached is huge. To sit inside a plane, knowing what goes into the front and what comes out in the back, so to speak. Same with the car, this overwhelming feeling we are all part of, like a huge lump, pulls us down into melancholy, though the feeling is actually not that depressing. I've always tried to stay afloat of depression, though coming quite close to its surface. I believe it is important for an artist to have both: positive utopia and desperate reality.

OL: I also perceived this in your works, that they occupy a kind of intermediate space—neither entirely tragic nor euphoric.

TB: That is very true. This intermediate space narrows between potentialities towards a center, not towards an extreme. I never wanted to jump over the edge of the plate, but to be right in its center, like the Chinese.

OL: As well as German philosophy, I find. For example, the hyphen has a major function in German language, the being-in-the-world...

TB: Right, where something is happening in this moment, between 49.9 and 50.1 — it is a vast space. This percentage comprises a totality, just like the leaf. Decisions are happening in this one degree: is it cold now or is it still warm? I do not even see it with despair, it is a challenge created by the rise of technology and reality. For that reason I never tried to obtain an overview but stayed with the detail, knowing that the detail comprises the whole.

OL: Were you ever concerned with quantum physics?

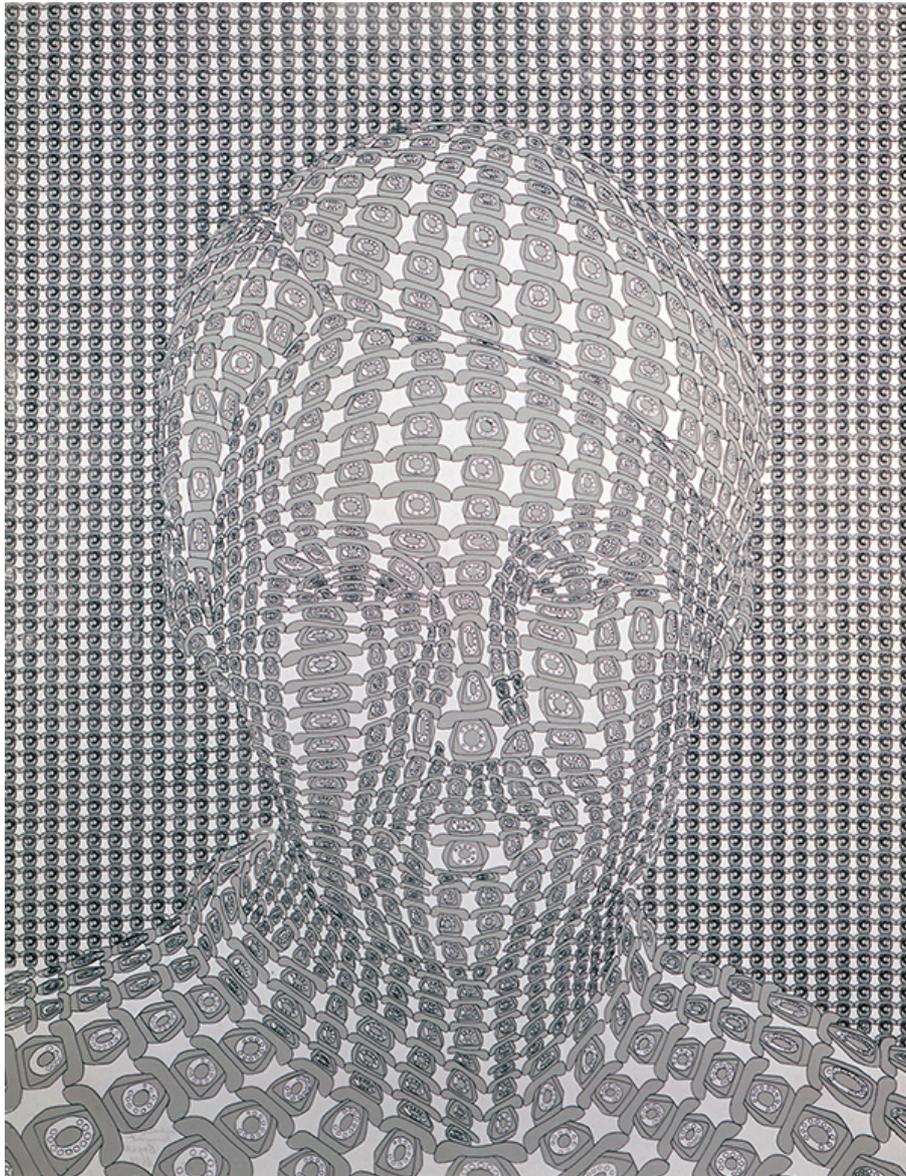
TB: I am really only peripherally interested; somewhere between Heisenberg and quantum physics.

OL: I was thinking of granularity. For example, drawing a distinction between digital and analog, you could say that the digital has a grid, a small, singular unit you come across at some point. The analog does not have an endpoint. It can be pulled apart and cut into smaller pieces. There always remains an even smaller piece. The hourglass, then, would be digital since it has the grain of sand as a unit. The themes you raise seem to be analog because you can go further inside or out. Vectors in graphic programs have an undefined size—they can be blown up to a kilometre or reduced to a millimetre.

TB: The pixel is magnificent, but impoverished compared to the analog. If you blow it up you can see that the dot is not round, it is missing something, whereas the shaping of the pixel where it meets us is much narrower. The eye immediately notices and reports this to the brain. Materially, the eye is bored after seconds and wants the next image. Which is of course the reason for the pivotal presence of painting, because it does not stop but has a material richness that cannot satiate the brain. Technical images and image contents have to deliver a constant narrative in order to surpass their material emaciation. This is how I understood the rise of images. I am not against the digital. I also made a couple of digital films.

OL: Recently I had an idea for a sculpture and it occurred to me that the idea already belongs to you—actually ideas do not belong—perhaps it is rather a work for you. 3D printers make possible to produce a sculpture in which a basic element is repeated to construct the whole sculpture. An object made of objects. This is actually a Thomas Bayrle work. You already made the watering can out of watering cans. Have you done this more often, a sculpture made of sculptures?

TB: Yes, there are a few examples: the cup made of cups, the Maggi bottle made of Maggi bottles, the can made of cans... they were important at the time, you had the graphic drawing and suddenly there was this monster made from 4300 cans. Because this was the exact quantity necessary to construct the can. They are somehow grotesque, but I never took them very seriously as sculptures.



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Thomas Bayrle, *Telefonbau-Normalzeit (dunkelgraue Version)*, 1970  
Courtesy: Cardi Black Box, Milan

OL: Concerning the watering can, I think there is a generosity, in that I could construct it in my living room if I wanted to. Have you ever run into someone who imitated your work?

TB: Yes, well, in Japan, Unagami had a good saying: the more you are copied in Japan, the better you are.

OL: I think this could apply internationally... I am not surprised by your proximity to Japanese thinking and I can imagine, as you say, that you got stronger feedback in Japan and China. Especially in terms of de-individualization—away from the individual and the artist genius. For instance, I am going to Japan next year to visit a temple that is destroyed and reconstructed every twenty years. It has existed for 1300 years. The craftsmanship is passed on from one generation to another. It is not so much about the value of the wood, but more about the form, ritual and use of the space. UNESCO was considering adding the temple to the list of World Heritage Sites but then realized it was only twenty years old. For the Shinto priests of course this does not make sense, in their view the temple is 1300 years old. I sympathize more with this approach. Even when someone in Japan imitates your work, although it did not come from your studio, it is still Thomas Bayrle.

TB: It is true, and such things are very important, where everything is present and time delays do not occur anymore. In nuclear physics, present is everywhere. There is no “from here to there—10 seconds”; it is everywhere. In research and consciousness we are continuously coming closer to the point where every reality is present everywhere.

OL: There is a statue I particularly like, at Basel city hall, which originally used to be a Virgin Mary with Christ Child. During the Reformation, Jesus was removed and replaced with a set of scales to create a personification of Justice.

TB: Not bad at all.

OL: And perhaps one day she will become Buddhist, in 100 years. Nobody knows what the future has in store for her.

TB: Well, it is too late for her to become Mao... I still think the whole of Christianity is connected to the car; that it was in a way developed by Christianity. After all, that is how it is.

OL: The car was developed by Christianity?

TB: It was developed in Christian Europe. It is closely connected to this inner disengagement (Gelöstsein) and what happened 800 years ago. I realized this through Worringer. He was an art historian who wrote a small doctoral thesis in 1913, “Abstraction and Empathy”. He proved that Expressionism occurred as a way to compensate for Greek pleasure and Egyptian abstraction. I carried on with this thought. They made columns in the south of France, windows in the west, and floors in the north. Joined together, they mark the beginning of the prefab parts industry. Assemblage was in a way developed by the automotive boom where 4300 parts come together. But it is archaic. Thinking is in everything. It is not a division but an area of study that has its specific ways and raises specific questions.

OL: Do you know Robert Pfaller? In his system of ‘interpassivity’, someone or something takes over one’s activity. He also mentions the Tibetan prayer mill, which you turn and it then prays for you. Or the video recorder, which records a movie and watches it simultaneously. You do not have to do it yourself.

TB: For me it is important that it does not relieve me because that would be as if someone

worked on my behalf. I would not want that. It should be more like something sliding into a new materiality, as if diffusing into the machine. Like blotting paper becoming saturated. Because you cannot be relieved of the work itself. Like you said about Tibet, the people there are working incredibly hard, up until having to throw themselves to the ground hundreds and thousands of times, in order to wear off their guilt. But here in the West we are running the risk of relieving ourselves from our work. I have not thought it through. But I know that it would not relieve me from making my way. There are other topics, like the Way of the Cross, which is so dangerous because it typically ends up becoming folkloric. There is also a danger in the telling of a story that in its essence is highest abstraction.

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Thomas Bayrle, *Canon Meets Utamaro*, 1988  
Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York



