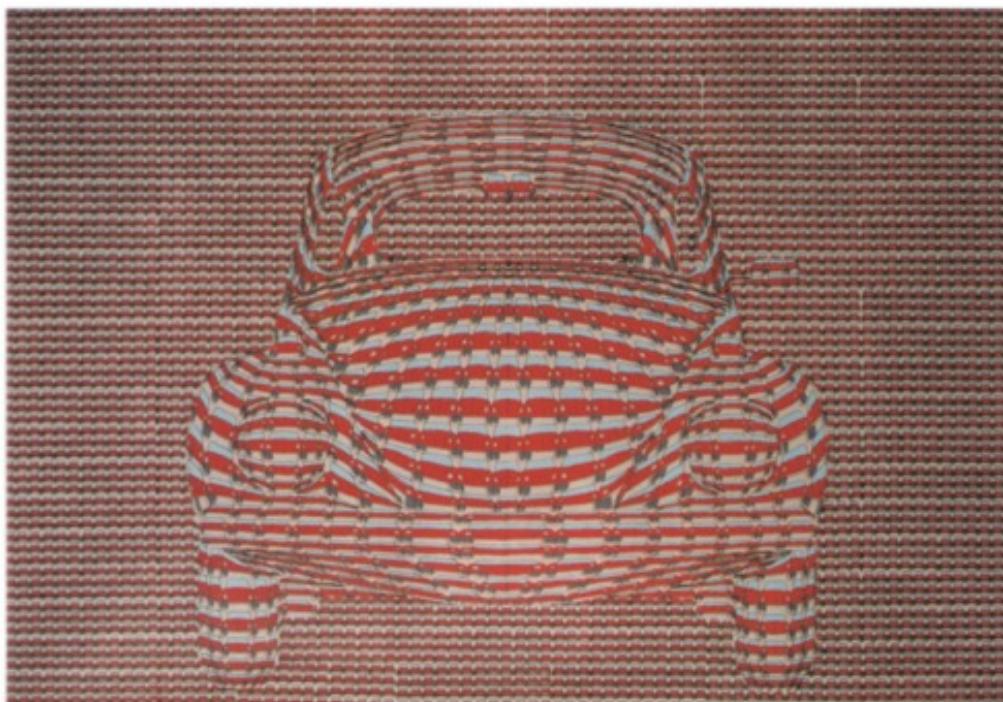


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Christine Mehring, "Mass Appeals," *Artforum*, April, 2007

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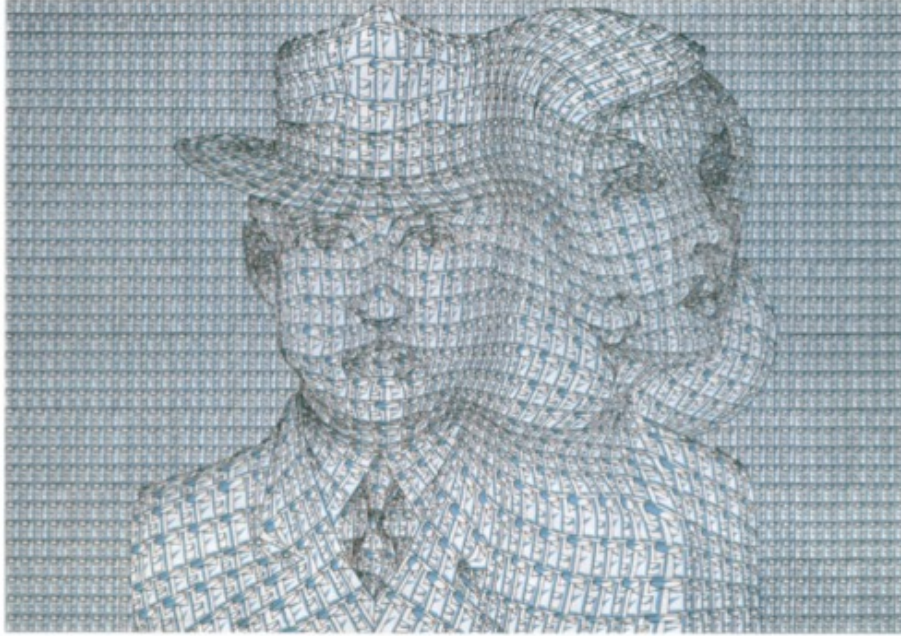


Mass Appeals

CHRISTINE MEHRING ON THE ART OF THOMAS BAYLE

This page: Thomas Bayle, *VW Rat (WW Red)*, 2005, silk screen on cardboard, 23 1/2 x 33 1/2". Opposite page: Thomas Bayle, *Handwritten Life in Stars*, 1970, silk screen on paper, 19 1/2 x 27 1/2".

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On the night of April 11, 1968, Thomas Bayrle and two friends, Bernhard Jäger and Uwe Schmidt, were busy in a basement print shop in Frankfurt, producing a poster of German student leader Rudi Dutschke. Earlier that afternoon, Dutschke, the prime mover behind the West German Extraparliamentary Opposition, known by the acronym APO, had been shot by a presumed right-wing extremist. The poster responded directly to the three bullets that were fired: THE REVOLUTION DOES NOT DIE FROM LEAD POISONING! At that moment, however, it was not clear that Dutschke would live. (He did, although complications from the shooting would kill him eleven years later.) By the next morning, his face was not only everywhere in the German mass media but emblazoned across the city on the trio's myriad placards. That night of uncertainty about the political icon's survival had already begun to crystallize into one of the most polarizing moments in '60s Germany, separating once and for all Left and Right, revolution and establishment. Yet not so for Bayrle. "The next day," he recalls, "I was cheerfully at it again with Mon Chéri." Which is to say, Bayrle resumed his day job at the same basement shop with Bayrle & Kellermann (The Makers of Display), the company he ran with graphic designer Hans Jörg

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From left: Thomas Bayrle, Bernhard Jäger, and Uwe Schmidt, *The Revolution Does Not Die from Lead Poisoning!*, 1968, poster made in response to the attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke, Thomas Bayrle in front of Enkalon poster, Frankfurt, 1968, Thomas Bayrle, Enkalon, 1968, silk screen on paper, 52 1/2 x 20 1/2", Models wearing coats designed by Lukowski + Ohanian with textile pattern by Thomas Bayrle, Galleria Apollinaire, Milan, 1968, Photo: Christian Frenkel



Kellermann from 1968 to 1972, producing advertisements for corporate clients ranging from chocolate maker Ferrero and carpet brand Enkalon to fashion designer Pierre Cardin and trade-union bank BIG. On the morning of April 12, Bayrle was producing a campaign and composing a sales slogan for a popular chocolate praline with a cherry and liqueur filling: "Mon Chéri, because one can't say it more nicely."

Was the revolution a one-night stand for Bayrle? A perhaps aptly equivocal answer is suggested by the basement operation of The Makers of Display, which encapsulates the slippery ways in which the Frankfurt-based artist's practice has long straddled the divides between agitprop and advertising, commodity criticism and commodity culture, art and design. At least since 1964, Bayrle has been infatuated with the notion of the mass, and in his signature work, ranging in media from books and silk screens to cardboard reliefs and films, a discrete unit is repeated numerous times to create what the artist calls a "super-form"—that is, a figurative image itself made up of hundreds of tiny figurative images. Obsessive repetition functions here as a kind of visual equalizer, most interestingly across party lines, since the artist draws his iconography from the worlds of capitalism and Communism alike. "For me, the external forms of mass products in the West and mass demonstrations in the East were optically 'the same,'" Bayrle recalls in conversation today. "And beginning in 1965, I mixed Communist and capitalist patterns together without qualms, simply under the aspect of accumulation. Mass movements like vacations, shopping, and driving over here were the same for me as marches, parades, and sporting events over there." Bayrle is a pathological squinter, equipped with a structural vision at once so near- and farsighted it can register only similitude.

What are the implications of that leveling vision? The Makers of Display was a place where, Bayrle says, "we killed ourselves working days and dove into the daily diet at night." Today, the artist concedes that he effectively led a "double existence," with neither half of his clientele—corporate or political—aware of the other. Rather than dismiss this enterprise as simply two-faced, however, we would do well to consider why Bayrle has described these days as

a "stimulating time" and his studio-cum-business as a kind of "reloading point and interesting turntable." Such terms suggest the comings and goings of those dozen or so friends who regularly gathered for ad hoc nocturnal activities, but more important for our consideration of Bayrle's art, they have a conceptual thrust that touches on the question of the politics of Pop, a matter that is increasingly relevant to our understanding of art today. To put it bluntly, do the likes of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Jeff Koons, and Takashi Murakami address popular and consumer culture critically or affirmatively—or do they want to have their cake and eat it, too? Given his superior bona fides as both a workaday shop owner trying to make ends meet (working within industry rather than offering any oppositional performance of it) and a committed political activist (taking his oppositional stance to the streets rather than simply hanging it on a wall), Bayrle presses Pop's seemingly inherent dichotomy more forcefully than the best of his peers. Consequently, his suggestion that there is no simple answer—and that taking sides (or, better, seeing the world through a single lens) has never been for him—is all the more resonant.

Bayrle's turntable practice reflected turntable times. Guided by the policies of economics minister (and, later, chancellor) Ludwig Erhard, West Germany during the '60s experienced what was popularly known as the "economic miracle," a time of consumerist bliss that, even if hardly unique among Western European democracies during the postwar years, was nevertheless more extreme for following on the heels of fierce battles on German soil and carpet bombings that left many with neither home nor husband. Paradoxically, this very history also contributed to an existential perspective in the populace and therefore to a kind of uneasy blend of gratitude and skepticism—the latter tempered by the Socialist reality cordoning off family members behind the iron curtain, which made capitalism not so easy to reject as an economic model. Nevertheless, West Germany had its share of '60s upheavals in the search for social and political change. Dutschke's APO, for example, was formed out of a loose collection of leftist student groups and intellectuals who shared the belief that true opposition

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From left: *Publics* design by Thomas Bayle for Peter Lindbergh, 1987, silk screen on cardboard, 20 1/2 x 13"; *Thomas Bayle, Ajax*, 1966, oil on wood paneling, 8 1/2 x 4 1/2"; *Thomas Bayle, Approach*, 1974, silk screen on paper, 23 1/2 x 23 1/2"; *Thomas Bayle, Helmutluff*, 1981, Giclée, 1987, silk screen on plastic, 28 1/2 x 20"

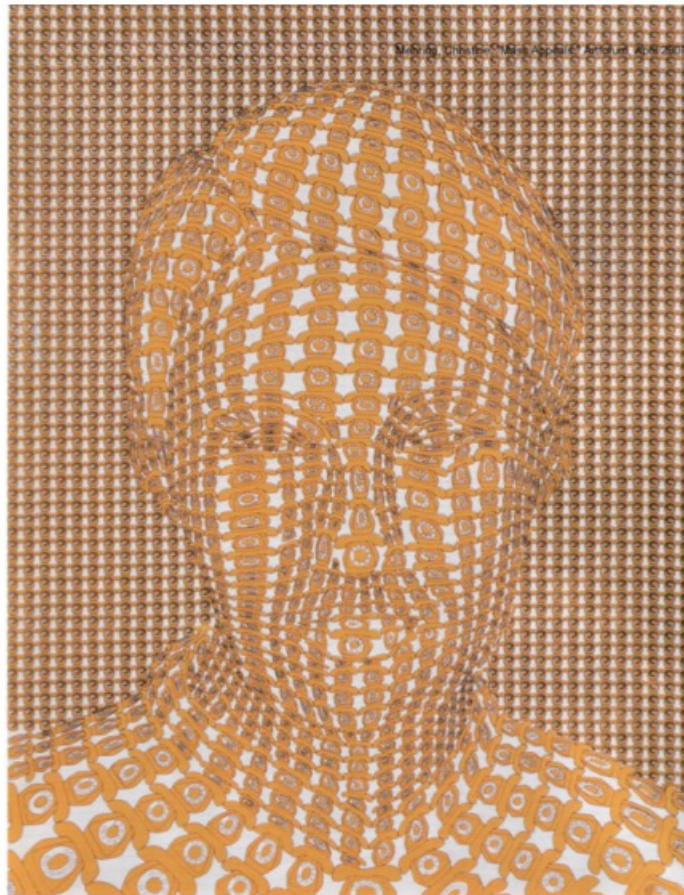
was no longer possible from within parliament, following the Social Democratic Party's move to the center and its Great Coalition with the conservative Christian Democratic Union in 1966. The activists' demonstrations and writings revolved around the government's (and the general population's) refusal to work through the country's National Socialist past, as well as around the stale bureaucracies and curricula of the universities, the brutality of the US-led war in Vietnam, the Emergency Laws intended to allow temporary suspensions of the constitution, and the sensationalist press that invariably rallied to right-wing causes (in the last regard, the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* was considered by many to have incited the young worker who shot Dutschke). However, whatever unified front existed on the Left was short-lived, and the APO soon dissolved—not least because of disagreement about the militant path chosen by the so-called Baader-Meinhof Gang. The Red Army Faction (RAF), as this organization called itself, had grown impatient with the limited success of the APO and believed that armed class struggle modeled in part on Mao Zedong's civil war in China was the only means for political change. As someone with Communist sympathies trained in design, Bayle was interested in the cultures of consumption and protest, but he insisted that each had its virtues and vices. The fluidity of his practice was therefore, he says, "unavoidable, and necessary both economically and artistically."

Indeed, Bayle recalls his visit to the Mon Chéri factory with a mix of emotions infused with a sense of the absurd: "All those Mon Chéris that came flying out of those machines! Who eats all of that? I felt astonishment, excitement, and horror all at once." If he joined the historical ranks of artists who were also product producers, it was surely to live and explore this absurdity—a passion for which pervades the art Bayle made in response to Ehard's economic miracle. In his first art proper, dating from the mid-'60s, he built "kinetic portraits"

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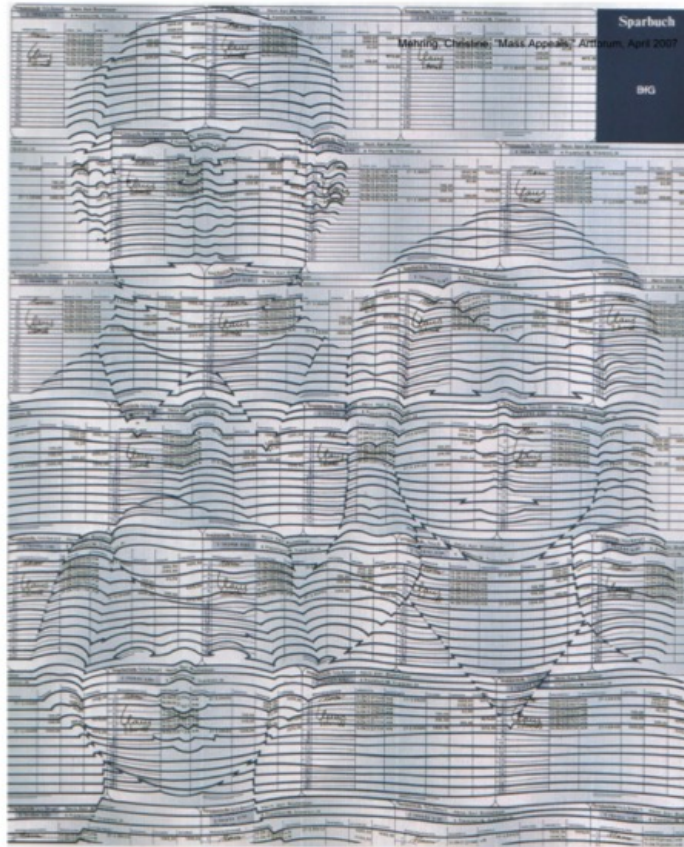
that captured what he considered to be, in light of the impoverished wartime years, the irrationality of excessive growth. Made from ray figures painted on individual pieces of wood, these constructions moved with squeaking sounds and comic senselessness: Housewives armed with brooms and cleaning products lift their skirts in *Ajax*, 1966; a man turns his beaming face to shave in another work. (In one of the first texts on Bayle, the artist-writer Bazooka—who, as it happens, was the model in the advertising image on which the latter piece is based—termed these machines "soup-catapults," a witty label that has stuck ever since.) From 1967 on, Bayle made screenprints whose imagery constituted a lexicon of products that, after the war, replaced West Germany's piles of rubble: condensed milk and seasoning sauce, VW Beetles and Ajax cleansers, streamlined toilets and skylight windows. Like Polke, Bayle displayed a knack for pinpointing the historical charge of the New, implying that the national obsession with cleaning signified the desire to erase an uncomfortable past and that artificial or pseudo-luxurious foods were meant to compensate for years of undernourishment during the war. But here again, Bayle revealed his absurdist bent, as his super-forms often comprised such products gathering into larger versions of themselves (as in VW Beetles making a bigger Beetle) or altogether different entities (shoes forming a duck)—generating a comedic clash of scale, of tautology and transformation. In this droll commentary, Bayle went so far as to construct people out of products, as in prints like *Telefonbau-Normalzeit*

(Telephone AT&T), 1970, where a seemingly boundless grid of telephones creates the portrait of a woman, and *Hemdenleben* (Life in Shirts, following Bayle's telling translation), 1970, where shirts are similarly used to depict a freakish couple that have gotten together, bonding quite literally in their fervor for a dapper look. This was, in Bayle's words, the "German reality": "It was pure happiness around us. Mass production seemed to be overflowing like cream



Maschinen, 1966, "Maschinen" (Machines), 1966, silk screen on cardboard, 20 1/2 x 13"

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Opposite page: Thomas Bayle, Sparhuck (Barkhuck), 1972, silk screen on paper, 25 1/4 x 20". This page, from left: Thomas Bayle, Mao, Wiesbaden, 1969, silk screen on wood and mechanical curtain, 26 3/4 x 42 1/2"; Installation card for Thomas Bayle and Bernhard Jäger's "Litographieren" (Litographieren, Darmstadt, Germany, 1962), Photo: Ely Jön; Exhibition poster for sparhuck shown in Denia, Spain, 1963, Photo: Ely Jön; Thomas Bayle and Bernhard Jäger, Frankfurter Triptychon (Frankfurt Triptych) (detail), 1965, lithograph, three panels, 24 x 10 1/2" (total).



struck the artist as analogous to capitalist advertising. "Although these scenes stood in the greatest possible ideological opposition to the ornaments of the West," he says, "optically they had more to do with our mass culture than anyone wanted to admit—above all, their naive, grotesque dimension." It's a point that Bayle drove home when he literally collapsed the two sides in a theater curtain for Brock's play *Unterst überst* (Lowermost Uppermost), performed at the 1969 Experimenta exhibition in Frankfurt. Intended as a visual equivalent of the play's reevaluation of politics and pop culture, the roughly thirty-by-forty-foot curtain had two fronts: one featuring Mao made of little Maos in red, yellow, and black, and the other featuring Marilyn Monroe made of little Marylins in pink, yellow, and black. Both were silk-screened on wooden slats that could be lifted to reveal the stage, turned horizontally to see through to the stage, and flipped vertically to reveal either image. Communism and capitalism met as both opposites and twins in their imagery; the staged goings-on were revealed and obscured through the lens of each.

Particularly significant to our understanding of Bayle's assimilation of parallel systems here is his use of the term *ornament*, which stems in part from his background in industrial weaving and letterpress typesetting. In fact, as a teenager in 1936, Bayle—who never attended art school—envisioned for himself a career as a textile engineer or a pattern programmer, having begun a two-year apprenticeship at the Gumann factory in Göppingen, south of Stuttgart. There he was responsible for reattaching torn threads that stopped any of the more than one hundred looms. "After eight hours at the factory amid a hellish noise," he recalls, "I could meditate myself into these machines as they ran; my gaze constantly scanned the fabric, which flickered so intensely that there seemed moments when I could see each intersection individually." Such actual immersion in pattern and design was before long refined, as Bayle took on graphic- and textile-design studies at the *Werkkunstschule* in Offenbach, near Frankfurt—which in 1960 led to his cofounding Gulliver-Press, a small publishing house that produced artist's books, lithographs,

posters, and portfolios. Bayle here often collaborated with writers who were part of the annual Frankfurt book fair's vibrant literary scene—including Brock, H. C. Artmann, Ernst Jandl, and Franz Mon—many of whom were involved with concrete poetry, whose playful appreciation of letters and words for their visual, audible, and material properties might also be understood as a precursor to Bayle's mature considerations of unit and mass. Although Bayle and Jäger's Gulliver-Press illustrations seem gestural—in keeping with their lithographic medium—the clusters of imagery and text here clearly set the stage for the repetitive patterns and super-forms of Bayle's later silk screens. For instance, in Bayle and Jäger's *Frankfurter Triptychon* (Frankfurt Triptych), 1965, litanies of data copied from Frankfurt's statistical yearbook—records indicating that the city had, say, seventy-one cinemas with 32,978 seats, 1,955,757 meals served in restaurants, and 9,866 students—form axes for the composition of heads and bodies.

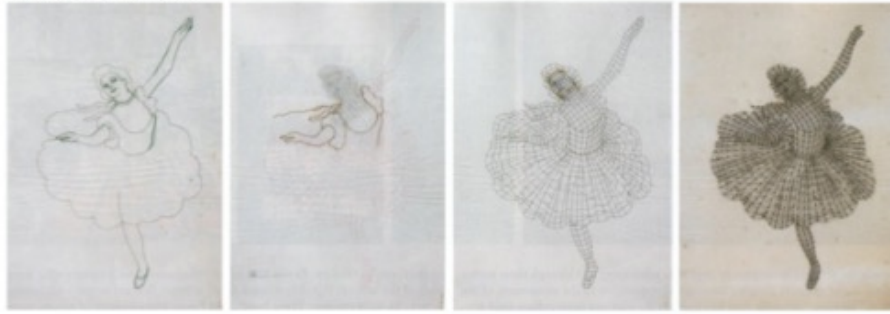
Bayle's references to ornament and decoration also underscore the importance he has accorded to architect-turned-cultural-theorist Siegfried Kraacauer's 1927 essay "The Ornament of the Mass." Famously inspired by the British dance troupe known as the Tiller Girls, Kraacauer argued that mass ornament constitutes a distraction for individuals from their real political circumstances and an aesthetic reflection of the totalizing rationality of an economic system—even while, in a more positive vein, figuring the priority of reason over both nature and myth. Bearing this inherent dialectic in mind, one finds it hard to imagine that the cover of the 1963 German reprint of Kraacauer's essay did not resonate somehow with Bayle, who first read the text as a young book illustrator: It features not the

Kraacauer's discussion of ornament's social implications struck a chord with Bayle, for whom the theorist's willingness to recognize both positives and negatives in the decorative "offered the possibility for proving my unproven hypotheses—for example, that critique was completely exaggerated."

Tiller Girls but a print by Josef Albers, in which two like but opposing cubic elements embrace in perceptually ambiguous ways. The discussion of ornament's social implications did strike a chord with Bayle, who as a trained weaver thought of "the individual as the thread, the mass as the fabric," and considered "threads' connections in tablecloths and what have you, in terms of their

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This page: Thomas Bayrle, preparatory drawings for *Degas*, 1973, opposite page: from left, Thomas Bayrle, *Degas*, 1973, silk screen on paper, 13 1/2 x 10 1/2"; spread from Thomas Bayrle's *Forever the Winner (Fox in the Mouth, MARZ Verlag, 1970)*.



corporeality, as things into which ideas are woven." Kracauer's willingness to recognize both positives and negatives in the decorative, Bayrle says, "offered the possibility for proving my unproven hypotheses—for example, that critique was completely exaggerated." Nevertheless, Bayrle confirms that his simultaneous fascination with China in fact originated from "the search for ways of changing society." Bayrle's interest in Kracauer's dialectical thinking surely resonated with his interest in Mao's midcareer texts, particularly the 1957 speech "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," where Mao paraphrases Marx's classic argument that "between the opposites in a contradiction there is at once unity and struggle, and it is this that impels things to move and change." Such dialectics had led Mao to conclude that a progressive China had to "let one hundred flowers blossom, let one hundred schools of thought contend." Bayrle, for his part, decided that he should create an art of contradiction, not one of mere critique—something that would suggest not only a means for change but also a measure of society's freedom, because he believed that "the more contrasts a society can take, the freer it is." Pressed about the brutalities of the Cultural Revolution, Bayrle today concedes "We all weren't in a rush to believe the quietly surfacing rumors about the vandalism of the Red Guards."

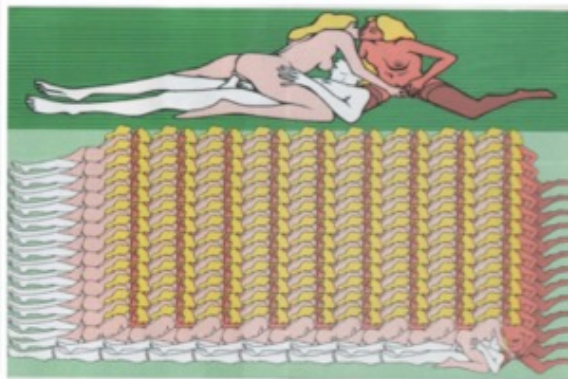
Bayrle made the most profound artistic statements about the most defining aspects of the postwar period—the cold war and the computer. In addition to addressing the visual similarities of East and West and proposing a radically dialectical model for social change, Bayrle's art shrewdly pinpoints paradoxes and uncertainties that defined societies on both sides of the cold war. His countless, near-identical units are incorporated into and constitute super-forms, and as such denote totalitarian and representative forms of

The tension Bayrle set up between representation and absorption of individual elements gained a cunning historical specificity. By blurring the front lines of the cold war, Bayrle artificially generated and offered for reflection the pervasive and uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty that actually united East and West during this period.

government. Indeed, by 1969, the artist had introduced three-dimensional distortions that seemed to underline this difficulty in determining whether a super-form truly represented its units or merely absorbed and instrumentalized them to its own ends: To make *VW Rot (VW Red)*, 1969, Bayrle fastened tracing paper on top of a found Beetle image and drew "an organic network of distorted squares" to match the vehicle's contours; he then removed that image and filled the resultant irregular grid of distorted and undistorted squares with distorted and undistorted small Beetles, with the distortions at once suggesting a sense of individuality (each unit now is different, after all) and of conformity. Picking up on such tensions in previous works, Frankfurt-based critic Peter Iden generously suggested that the artist compels us to recognize the contradictory nature of our place in society: "The inevitable transformation of one content into another," Iden wrote, "does not leave the viewer off the hook. To stand in front of these boxes means to be sublated in them. Nothing to be done about it: There is really no way out." Contradictions, Bayrle suggested to his contemporaries, were integral to their way of living, whether in the East or West; in keeping with Mao's educational vision, Bayrle's contradictions force viewers to think hard about them, so gaining alternative perspectives. More important, however, the tension Bayrle set up between representation and absorption of individual elements gained a cunning historical specificity. By blurring the front lines of the

cold war, Bayrle artificially generated and offered for reflection the pervasive and uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty that actually united East and West during this period. Here it seems worth mentioning that, when asked about the similarity between his super-forms and the composite heads the sixteenth-century painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo made of foods,

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tools, or the like, Bayrle respectfully offers that each artist has made "authentic documents" of his time. Indeed, one allegorizes the Hapsburgs' imperial rule, and the other takes on the cold war.

It is significant in this context that Bayrle's distortions appear generated by computer-aided design but were drawn in painstaking freehand, for technological advancement featured prominently both as a weapon during the cold war and as a means of postwar reconstruction. The young Bayrle, in fact, had grown aware of digital units and programming through his work with Gummann's Jacquard looms—a semicomputerized process that originated with early-nineteenth-century automation by means of punched pattern cards invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard. Yet Bayrle's manual simulation of a computerized process—as recorded in the documentation of the making of *Degas*, 1971—is hardly a gesture of resistance to technological development. Comparing his distorted silk screens with contemporary computer graphics, which were produced primarily by scientists for isolated German exhibitions at the time, one recognizes that digital capabilities had simply not yet caught up with Bayrle's vision of three-dimensional rendering, so that he was forced to draft them manually until Atari—to his great relief—produced a machine sophisticated enough to do it for him. Bayrle's anticipation of the digital revolution in this regard is only one reason why he counts among the most inventive European printmakers of the postwar era. Since 1988, Bayrle has integrated his use of the computer with work in more conventional media such as film, where he has rendered distorted images within distorted images, and, more important, printmaking, where he has experimented with chains of image reproduction and transformation. Following his earlier use of unusual printing materials and techniques such as plastic supports and rubber stamps, Bayrle in such works evokes the infinite: For *Fetzen Haut (Scrap Skin)*, 1988, for instance, he started out by painting a brushstroke on latex, fixed and collaged various stretched states of it with a photocopier, and then transformed the result into stamps, stencils, and modules to be recombined in turn. Introducing the computer into the process then came naturally, as Bayrle proceeded with even

more image manipulation, using an Atari program written for him by Stefan Mück. Armed with a hefty dose of optimism amid a brewing climate of post-modernism, Bayrle apparently had little patience for pervasive concerns with inauthenticity. Yet no matter how enthusiastic Bayrle's embrace of digital possibilities, it also is tempered by some skepticism, since his art is continually laced with contradictory messages that necessarily counter any logic of information.

While Bayrle's Pop has not always anticipated the times, it has kept apace. The artist always returns to matters of culture, and over the years his obsession with the politics of Left and Right has given way to other matters that are equally two-sided. Beginning in 1970, Bayrle rode the wave of sexual liberation—contributing to Günter Amendt's sexual-education manual *Sexfront* (1970), for instance—and he has continued working with images of copulating groups to consider the erotic gray zone between the public, anonymous sexuality of porn and the private, individualized sexuality of intimacy. Such interest in the body took a biological turn in his 1997 film *h/alt*, where pixelated images of the sixty-year-old Bayrle morph into ones of his grandson, so that the unit-mass motif accrues associations with human reproduction and genetics. But most poignant and prophetic, perhaps, is his consideration of human perception's evolution in light of urban sprawl and traffic growth—something he has addressed since 1975 in drawings where cities appear within cities, as well as in slightly later sculptural reliefs comprising intricately interwoven cardboard highways. During a recent residency in China, which Bayrle has frequented since 1990, the artist began to project photographs of everyday Chinese life during the '60s onto such street clusters. As we all know, the drastic growth of metropolises in the East has by now far surpassed their more gradual expansion in the West, suggesting a new, anxious era of influence between the two hemispheres. To what extent, in turn, the West will take on the face of the East remains an open question, of course, but it appears as if Bayrle was onto something when it all looked the same to him back in '68. □

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