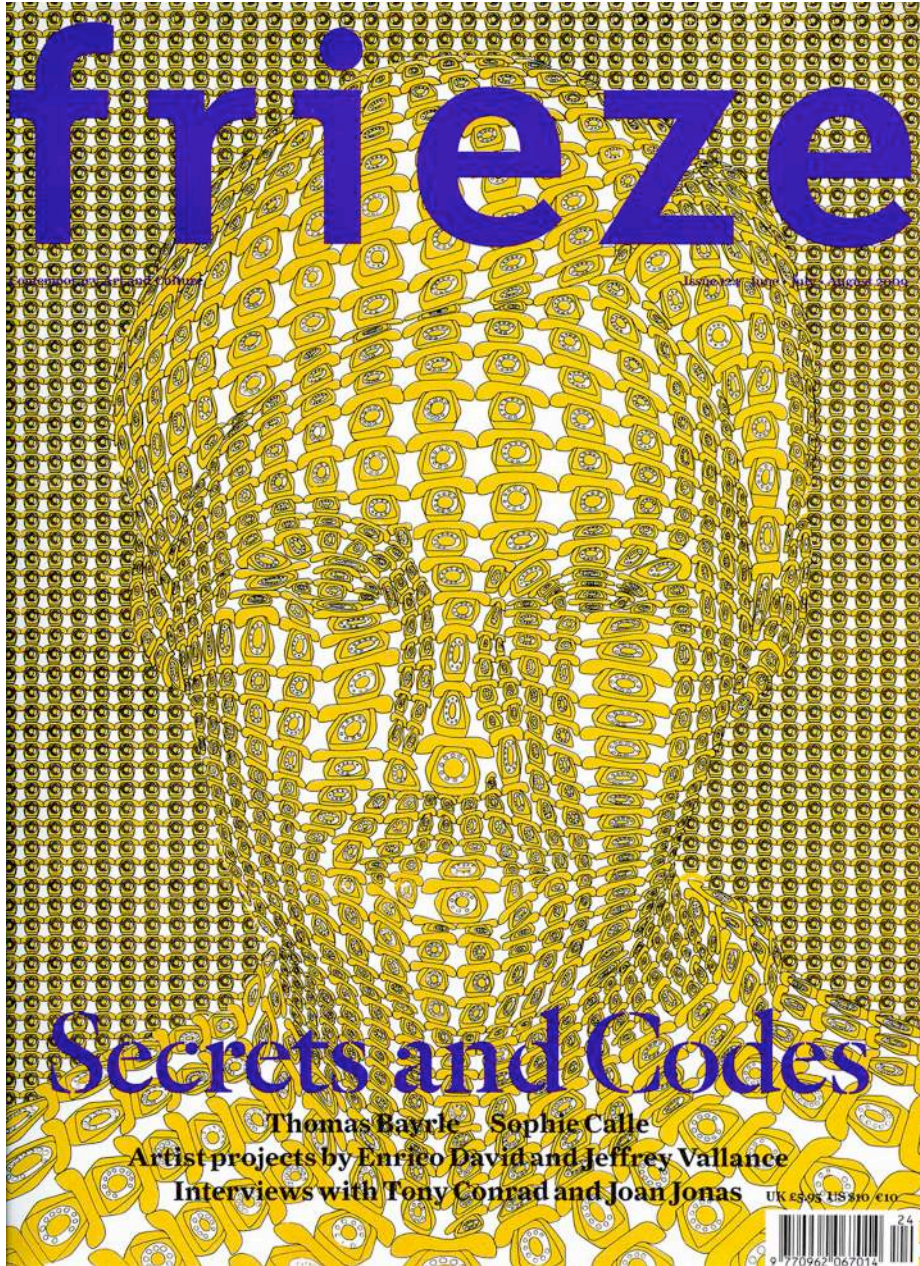


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dominic Eichler, "Social Fabric," *Frieze*, June, 2013

Frieze



frieze

Secrets and Codes

Thomas Bayle Sophie Calle

Artist projects by Enrico David and Jeffrey Vallance

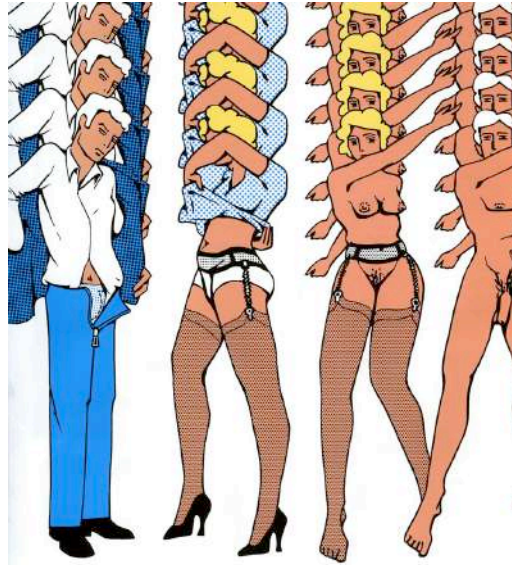
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Social Fabric

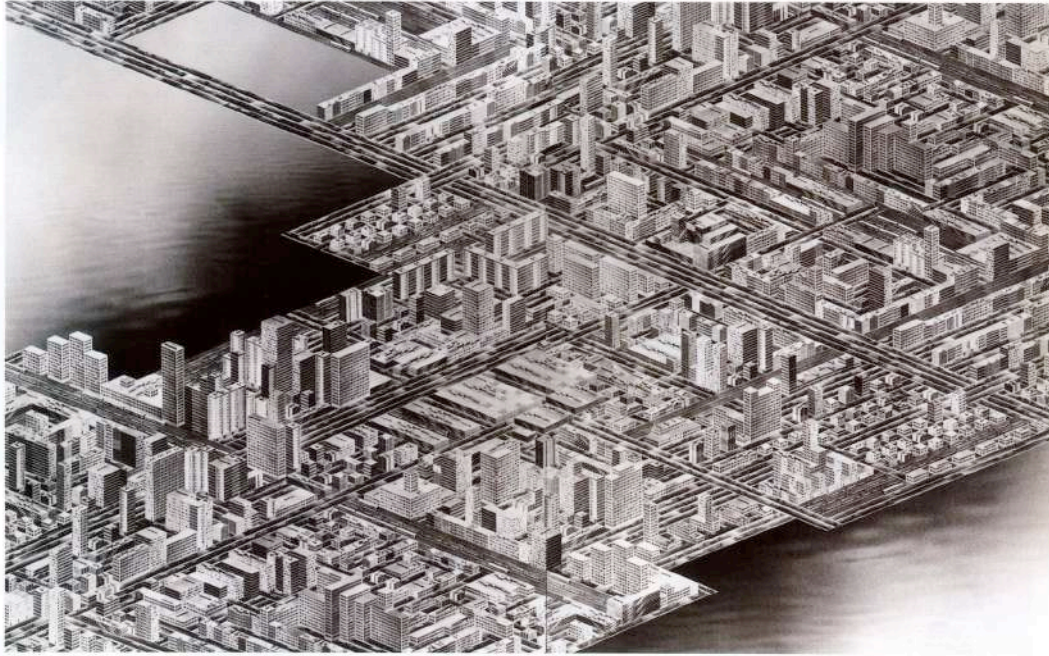
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Thomas Bayle's long and varied career as an artist reveals a sensibility shaped in equal parts by humour, absurdity and social criticism by *Dominic Eichler*

*Bayle's Blue
Opium for the
Tobacco
Bitch
Illustration on page
149*

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Air brakes screeching, a truck comes to a halt uncomfortably near to our taxi on a busy Barcelona street. Thomas Bayrle nods at one of its giant wheels and says: 'See that tyre? That's what's interesting to me.' Knowing of his craze for traffic and roads – understood as metaphors for the complex systems and superstructures that control and organize us – I realize he's not being ironic or flip. Take, for instance, the sculptural wall relief *§* (1980), which consists of a model, dollar-sign-shaped cardboard motorway interchange dotted with plastic toy cars and trucks as scrupulously positioned as the coloured squares on Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–3).

Bayrle was in Barcelona for a retrospective of his work at the city's Museu d'Art Contemporani (MACBA) titled 'I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore'. The artist and I had just met for the first time and it was immediately apparent what a generous thinker and beguiling talker he is. But with this statement he seemed also to be making clear to me that the thoughts on art, politics and people that he offers and happily debates, are grounded in personal observation, in telling details lifted from the real. Later, I started thinking about all the billions, perhaps trillions, of tonnes of rubber rolling around on asphalt in clouds of exhaust fumes. And about the fact that the most visible signs of the economic integration and expansion of the European Union are not blue flags with yellow stars, but the endless processions of trucks that run along its roads, connecting the continent to the arteries of global trade. Suddenly, I remembered another aside that Bayrle had made, borrowing a metaphor from a Brothers Grimm fairy tale: 'Capitalism is like sweet porridge flowing over everything.' It is sticky and potentially suffocating when a basic comfort food becomes plentiful and boundless and applied to all surfaces, situations and people indiscriminately. As I write this, the BBC World News reports that, despite the current downturn, the global economy is still projected to double in size in the next two decades.

There is an obsessive and darkly visionary quality about much of Bayrle's work but, crucially, there is also plenty of wry humour and pleasure in the absurd and the idiotic. Contrary to the visually pluralistic tendencies of other artists with mixed allegiances to Pop and Conceptual art as well as media critique, his work seems to have remained doggedly consistent for decades. Ever-present are his engagement with advertising and comparisons between mass iconography and systems in the East and West including religion, technology and sex. In his books, collages, paintings, graphics, drawings, computer animations, sculptures, films and videos, he has accomplished what



Top:
Stadt am Meer
(City by the Sea)
1977
Photographic collage
156×246 cm

Above:
Glicksklee
(Lucky Clover)
1969
Silkscreen on paper
84×61 cm

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many aspire to achieve but few actually do: to articulate a unique and transfixing visual language.

One of his hallmark innovations is the production of images, which he calls 'super-forms', composed of pictogram-like cells. For instance, the head of a woman – as in the screen print *Anarchie in Konstruktion (blau)* (Anarchy in Construction (blue), 1971) – might be composed of hundreds of open windows. In scores of other works, the depicted thing is composed of numerous tiny mirror images of itself. This unnerving device was put to dramatic use in the mammoth print *Flugzeug* (Aeroplane, 1984), whose fuselage consists of tiles laboriously printed with warped reproductions of the 'master' image. In a number of works, Bayrle also pieced together swarming masses of people out of a few basic images. As Jörg Heiser has written in the pages of this magazine: 'Bayrle's pieces switch from macro to micro perspectives – between a fascination with and a horror at the modern – with the speed of a strobe light, leaving viewers puzzled whether to think of themselves as giants or germs.'³

Bayrle began experimenting with rudimentary computer graphics and animations in the 1970s. Later work built on this early practice, while taking advantage of technological developments. For instance, the mind-bending video *B)ALT* (B)old, 1997) consists of disturbing, digitally animated footage of an infant's face embedded in that of the artist and vice versa. In continually harking back to his 'super-form' concept, Bayrle aims to look inside it and through it: to find the ideas within the idea. Explaining his approach, Bayrle has noted: '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.'³

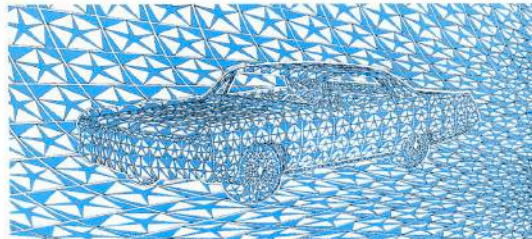
To art audiences beyond Germany, Bayrle's work until very recently hasn't been so familiar, although the extensive retrospective at MACBA and his planned contribution to this year's Venice Biennale may change that. (He will be exhibiting several works referring to cars, including *Chrysler wallpaper* from 1970.) In Germany, however, he is highly respected. In part, this is due to the almost-three decades Bayrle spent teaching at the progressive *Städelschule* in Frankfurt from 1975 until 2002 (born in Berlin, he has lived in Frankfurt since 1953, and it is still his hometown today). Bayrle's career as an artist has had many ups and downs and, between 1968 and 1972, he worked as a graphic designer for, amongst others, Ferrero Chocolates and Pierre Cardin. Between 1961 and 1966, he also ran (together with Bernhard Jäger) Gulliver Press, a small enterprise devoted to publishing artist's books, lithographs, posters and portfolios.

Currently, however, there is a sense of a sea change in the standing of his work. Something of an artist's artist, Bayrle, now in his 70s, humbly attributes this renewed interest to the exchange of ideas over the years with what he refers to as his 'younger colleagues' at the *Städelschule*, including such diverse practitioners as Tobias Rehberger, Thomas Zipp, Sergej Jensen and Stefan Müller. The latter two performed recently at MACBA, on the occasion of Bayrle's retrospective – arguably the most inclusive, surprising and conceptually satisfying gathering of his work to date. Amongst the 268 works on display was a large selection of his hilarious 1960s' satirical 'paint machines' or kinetic paintings including *Super Colgate/Zähneputzer* (Super Colgate/Tooth Cleaner, 1965), a cheeky painted box featuring over a hundred little heads with toothbrushes that mechanically swing in their open mouths. Following painstaking research, the exhibition was able to track down a number of works that the artist hadn't seen for years, let alone together in one place. There were stories of things bought cheap or traded and never seen again and another of paintings that had been lost when a collector died and the family just tossed them out.

Although not generally appreciated in its day, the radical vision of Bayrle's early work is now being recognized. Some consider him, together with fellow Frankfurt artist and friend Peter Roehr, as one of the pioneering figures of West-German Pop art of the 1960s and '70s. Since the focus in West-German art history during this period is usually almost exclusively on the Düsseldorf and Cologne art scenes, such a reading involves a change of historical emphasis. A different creature to both the British and American variants, West-German Pop art has more to do with the deep cultural and political internal contradictions of an occupied nation with a key place in the Cold War, outwardly enjoying the new wealth of the 'economic miracle' whilst, at the same time, in the throes of dealing with, or refusing to deal with, the legacy of fascism, as well as the profound and violent generational rift that accompanied this process. Amongst other things, for Bayrle that meant an interest in mass movements and collectives,



I remembered an aside that Thomas Bayrle made, borrowing a metaphor from the Brothers Grimm: 'Capitalism is like sweet porridge flowing over everything'.



Top:	Above:
\$	Chrysler
1980	1970
Cardboard, pen,	Silk screen on paper
model cars	42x79 cm
84x64x8 cm	



In the late 1950s, Thomas Bayrle worked in a textile factory, often tending oppressively loud, rhythmical Jacquard looms. The experience haunts him to this day.



Above:
SARS Formation
2005
Cardboard
Installation view, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona
2009

Left:
Mantel (rot/gelb) (Coat (red/yellow))
1967
Silkscreen on plastic
Installation view

be they chemically driven termites, or Maoists, or 'all forms that questioned and newly rebuilt the idea of the individual. After what happened during the Second World War, we just couldn't believe in the old thing anymore. This *Über-Ich* simply imploded.³ It is worth noting that Bayrle became fascinated with Chairman Mao some time before Andy Warhol, Sigmar Polke or Gerhard Richter. Chinese propaganda magazines that predate the Cultural Revolution were also an important reference point. For Bayrle, Mao's China and West Germany 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.'⁴

In the late 1950s, Bayrle worked for two years in a textile factory, often tending oppressively loud, rhythmical Jacquard looms. It was an experience that would shape his worldview and still haunts him to this day. Nearly all of the writing on Bayrle's work includes a retelling of this traumatic and hallucinatory story, every version of which differs slightly in detail but always has the same intensity. In the MACBA exhibition catalogue, he tells the story like this: 'While I was standing in the weaving factory, day after day, hour after hour, I sank deep into this undergrowth of warp and weft. I kind of melted away - 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 nuns. 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.'⁵ In another version he added the thought that, when it had happened a few times, he knew it really was time to get out of there.

When we met, he again conjured up the factory floor and the thousands of threads. It seemed to me that the constant retelling of the story was akin to the constant revisiting of motifs and the incessant repetition and serialism in his visual work. As he talked, it was easy to understand how, in such a state, the world around us might start, if not to unravel, then to open up and reveal its weave, and that once this had occurred there was no going back. Warning

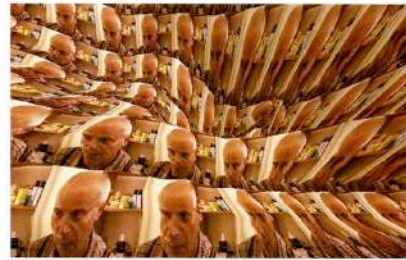
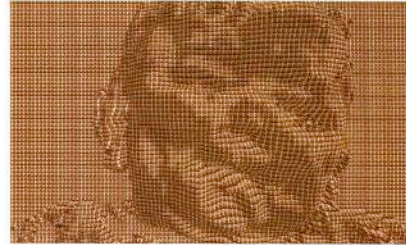
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to his grand metaphor of the weave, another time Bayrle explained: 'The finished product – the fabric – represented the totality, a whole: a society or a collective. A single thread represented something like individuality. That is where I got the idea that the "social" fabric is made up of individuals who are woven together but cannot move.'⁶ The weave, which has historical connections to the mathematics of modern computing, is also used as a visual expression of the urban fabric in photo-collages from the 1970s, such as *Stadt am Meer* (City by the Sea, 1977): a city composed entirely of a few modernist buildings, roads and railways, which seems to have been self-replicating on the surface of a grey ocean, like that on the fictional planet in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film *Solaris*. These and other works use a simple but ingenious jigsaw technique to create an eerie perspective.

Religion and sexuality also recur throughout Bayrle's practice as domineering systems. His heterosexual couples are highly standardized models: the naked and hairless man and woman inhabiting a Japanese hotel in the expansive photo-collage *Capsule* (Capsule, 1984–5) seem doomed to reproduce themselves *ad infinitum*. In his recent series of woven cardboard sculptures, such as *SARS Formation* (2005), a monstrous, large-scale hanging network of loops, Bayrle returns to and intertwines the themes and iconographies that have always engaged him. The steady drone of mental traffic is ever-present: in the video *Autobahnkreuz* (Motorway Junction, 2006), a Gothic crucifix hangs over and merges with a motorway, as if to say: everything is mere belief. If the complexity of the world makes us wonder how it keeps running, Bayrle's work begs the sinister question: how could it not?

Dominic Eichler is a contributing editor of frieze.

- 1 Jörg Heiser, 'Thomas Bayrle', *frieze*, issue 69, September 2002
- 2 Thomas Bayrle quoted by Chus Martinez, in her extensive essay length 'press release' MACBA, February 2009
- 3 Thomas Bayrle in conversation with Konstantin Adamopoulos, 1997, translated by the author. See: www.mip.at/de/dokumente/1125-content.html
- 4 Thomas Bayrle quoted by Chus Martinez, op. cit.
- 5 Thomas Bayrle in conversation with Lars Bang Larsen, 'Thomas Bayrle: I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore', ex. cat., MACBA, Barcelona 2009, p.37
- 6 Thomas Bayrle quoted by Chus Martinez, op. cit.



Above:
BIALT
(BOLD)
1997
DVD still

Below:
'Looping'
2008
Exhibition view,
Museum Ludwig,
Cologne



Looping courtesy, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; photograph, Maurice Cox • BIALT courtesy, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; Galerie Francine Fox Zurich, Art de Paris, Paris; and Galerie Bismarck, Luxembourg, New York