Joseph Nechvatal, "Thomas Bayrle, the Host in the Machine," *Hyperallergic*, April 09, 2014

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Thomas Bayrle, the Host in the Machine

by **Joseph Nechvatal** on April 4, 2014

Thomas Bayrle, 'All-in-One,' installation view (all images courtesy Institut d'art contemporain Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes unless otherwise noted)

VILLEURBANNE, France — A new look at a seventy-six-year-old German artist who for a half century has been visually warning us in his work about mass society and the mechanisms of communication and image production seems like a good idea in our post-Snowden era. Fortunately, Nathalie Ergino and Devrim Bayar have curated just such a show in the middle of France called <u>All-in-One</u>, the fascinating and coherent retrospective of more than two hundred works by Thomas Bayrle. It is at the <u>Institut d'art contemporain — Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes</u> (IAC) until May 11 following showings at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels, Museo MADRE in Naples, and the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead.

The exhibition continues IAC's vital exploration of critical and subversive artistic thinking, a trend they are continuing to identify in a variety of contemporary artistic approaches including the formal aspects of visual noise infiltration, image deviation, and representational deformation.

In Bayrle's *All-in-One* I saw a general eerie enthusiasm for data visualization principles that render distorted images within distorted images, for chains of image reproduction blurring into transformations continually laced with contradictory messages (and that necessarily counters the logic of crisp information), warped and rowdy shifts in scale that evokes the infinite, and unexpected woven interconnections between the micro and the macro. Thus Bayrle seems to fit into the deviant category best.
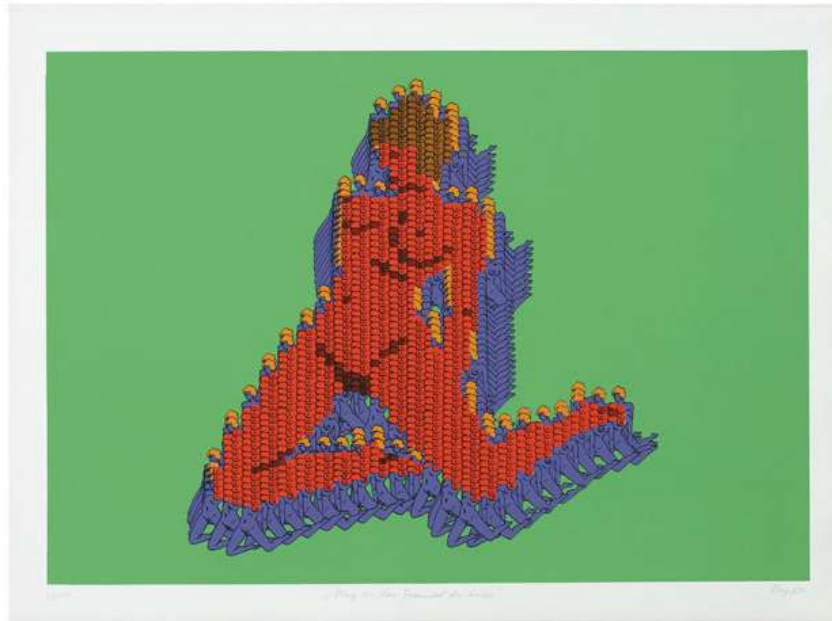
"Feuer im Weizen" (1970) (courtesy WIELS)

All-in-One covers, if not all of Bayrle work in one place, the key aspects of his work from the 1960s to the present: early drawings and prints, kinetic paintings he calls machines, collages, paintings, wallpapers, animations, anti-establishment graphic publications, sculptures, architectural models, books, and his most recent work with moving mechanical engines and sound.

Bayrle — a professor at Städelschule Art School in Frankfurt from 1975 to 2002 and something of an artist's artist — has perhaps paradoxically also been keenly interested in the vocabulary of marketing. And I think this combination of art pedagogy-meets-advertising is a key element in getting his art. In that regard, as well as his choice of technical media, Bayrle reminds me of a more complex and more technological John Baldessari, as Bayrle, since the 70s, has integrated computers into his appropriation-based practice. Between 1968 and 1972, Bayrle worked as a graphic designer for, amongst others, Ferrero Chocolates and Pierre Cardin; between 1961 and 1966 he ran (together with Bernhard Jäger) Gulliver Press, a small enterprise devoted to publishing artist's books, lithographs, posters, and portfolios.

Unlike Baldessari, Bayrle's characteristic approach to art is essentially a mash-up of minimalist conceptual art (serial composition) with Pop art (albeit a less aesthetic, more political version) — resulting in a representational adaptation of Op art that converts easily into digital post-conceptualism and post-media art.

"SARS Formation" (2005), fore, and "Capsel" (1983), back

Thus surely Bayrle is a hybrid artist *par excellence*, divinely confusing our art categories along with some contemporary social issues and themes: obsession, consumption, computation, ecology, image pollution, religion, sexuality, and pornography. Typical of his *oeuvre* is the look of something by Andy Warhol on crack; the crazy repetition of a single motif bending into strange almost three-dimensional representations. Something I imagine Warhol might have achieved with the computer, had he lived longer.

Not many know that towards the end of his life, Warhol did begin to create work using computers. In Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs, he describes Warhol's attendance at Sean Lennon's ninth birthday party at the Dakota Apartments, where Steve Jobs had brought in a Macintosh computer, the first computer that Warhol played with.

Less than a year later, in competition with Apple's Macintosh, Commodore launched the Amiga 1000 personal computer at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in Lincoln Center where Warhol, using ProPaint software, created a computer portrait of the Blondie singer Debbie Harry. Warhol then acquired several Amigas and began creating work with them, including a short film using the Amiga 1000 titled *YOU ARE THE ONE*. (Curiously, that sounds rather similar to Bayrle's show title *All-in-One*.)

The Warhol piece was never shown while he was alive, only being discovered in 2001 among Warhol's many computer disks. The Museum of New Art in Detroit premiered the film in 2006, but showed it only for one day. Even more like Bayrle's aesthetic of repletion *ad nauseam* was another Warhol work created on the Amiga for the cover of *The Creative Issue* of *Amiga World* magazine that showed Warhol with an Amiga showing an image of Warhol with an Amiga showing an image of Warhol with an Amiga, etc., theoretically ad infinitum.

In this ad infinitum vein, Bayrle, through the repetition of a single motif, generates images that mash-up Pop art and Op art so as to question the mechanisms of communication and image production. However, Bayrle's research extended into the social themes of traffic patterns and urban sprawl as well, giving Pop art a distorted computer-graphics-meets-political-ecology spin that Warhol tended to avoid. Through the threading and weaving techniques that serve as the basis for many of his work, he creates a form of unity in multiplicity that is typical of fractal logic.


"From A to B Helke I" (1991)

I don't know if it is significant in this context, but Bayrle's early distortions appear generated by computer-aided design, but were first executed painstakingly by hand. For example, he might have started out by working on latex, fix and collage various stretched states of it with a photocopier, and then transform the result into stamps, stencils, and modules to be recombined in turn. This kind of dizzying manual-technical manipulation was eventually replaced by the Atari computer, most notably in his Atari portrait series from 1990–91, a series accomplished with custom software developed by Stefan Muck.

Subject-wise, Bayrle's work (even the earlier work made with the use of unusual printing materials and techniques such as plastic supports and rubber stamps) is often a satirized critique of something from the establishment of political ideology via the dadasque absurdity of repetition. I saw that, for example, with "Stalin (red variation)" (1970). "Stalin (red variation)" is typical of the pictorial innovation that Bayrle calls super-forms, where forms are composed from pictogram-like cells, in this case of red moustaches.
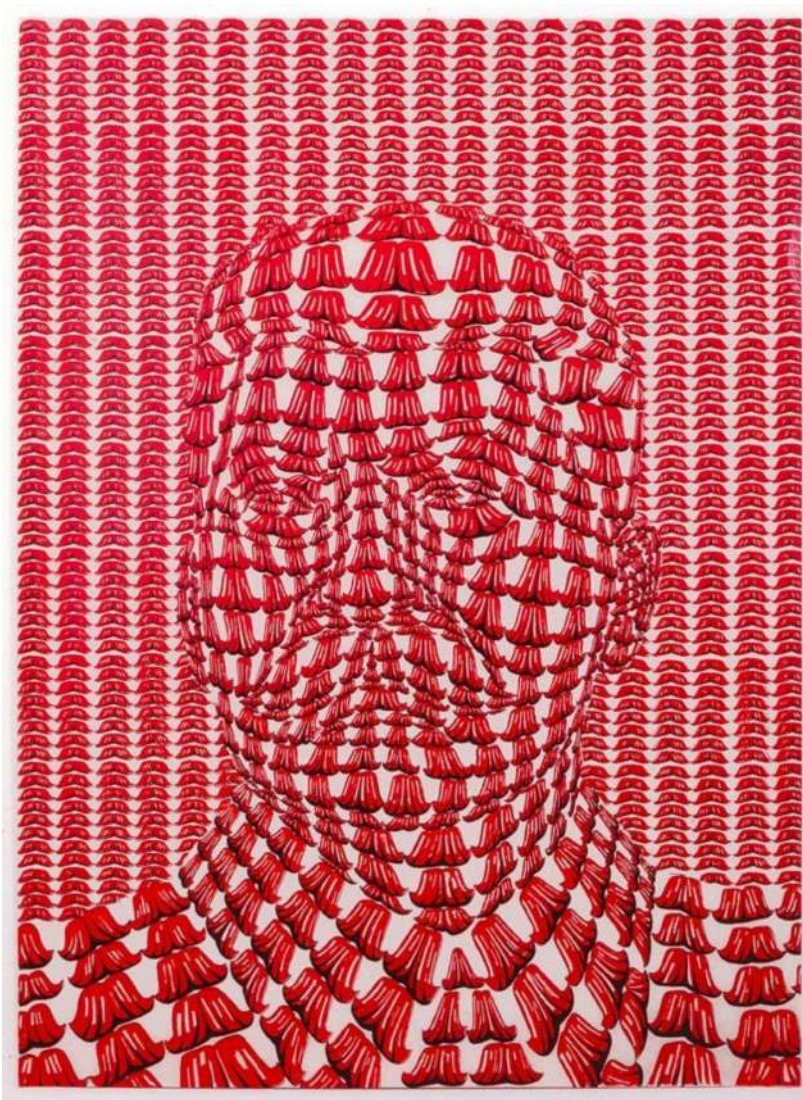
"Stalin (red variation)" (1970)

But Bayrle also plays with the notion of industrialized production of goods and services like sex. I saw that theme most clearly in the "Naked Lunch / Fire in the Wheat (wallpaper)" (1970/2013), a sex room that also held sex-lib prints and posters and a selection of his colorful rubber raincoats, "Kleiderstander" (1968–2008).

Bayrle also works with his idea of "industrialized religion" in work such as "Himmelfahrt" (1988) and "Madonna Mercedes" (1989). These views were based on his unnerving experience of ideology as a young man in post-Hitler Germany where he trained and worked as an industrial weaver. Indeed, that theme of weaving weaves its way throughout the entirety of his oeuvre. In scores of works, he depicts something by weaving together numerous tiny mirror images of that thing.

"Kleiderstander" (1968–2008)

This central metaphor of weaving is subsequently totally appropriate for the location of this show (near Lyon) as the relationship between weaving and computing is a tight one here, originating in Lyon with weaver, merchant and inventor of the programmable loom Joseph Marie Jacquard. The Jacquard loom played an important role in the development of other programmable machines, such as computers, and a static display of a Jacquard loom is in the collection of the Musée des Tissus et des Arts décoratifs in Lyon. In the late 1950s, Bayrle worked for two years in a textile factory, often tending oppressively loud, rhythmical Jacquard looms. So the location of Lyon is particularly rich for *All-in-One* given Bayrle's central theme of weaving, which has historical connections to the mathematics of computing, and his early art experiments with the Atari.
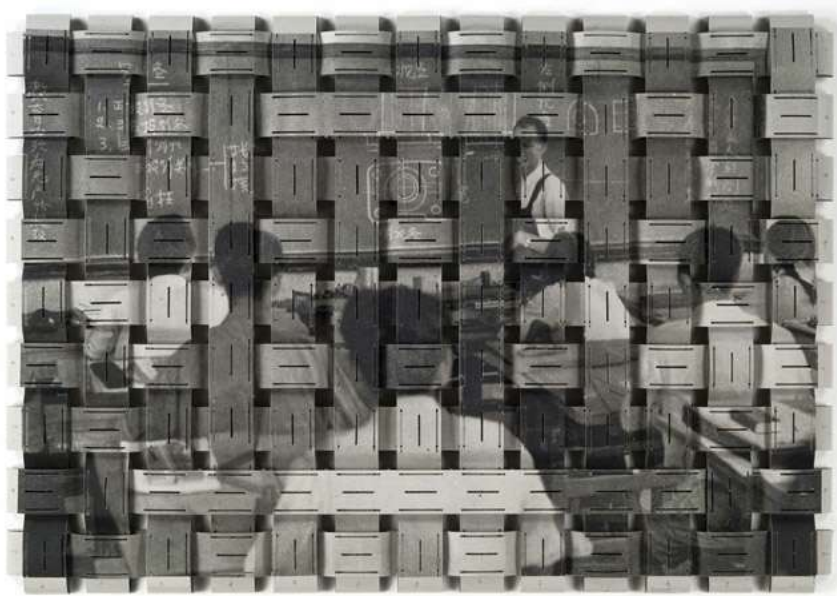
"Schule (Zeichen fur Container)" (2005) (courtesy WIELS)

This weaving theme is made the most evident in Bayrle's China-inspired bas-relief works made up of silkscreened cardboard on a woven wooden grid from the mid 2000s, such as "Sandwerfer (Zeichen für Epoche)" (2005) and/or "SARS Formation" (2005), a work based on the formation of the viral respiratory disease of zoonotic origin caused by the SARS coronavirus. An outbreak of SARS in southern China caused an eventual 8,273 cases and 775 deaths. This dire "SARS Formation" was agreeably complimented by a massive hand-made paper collage called "Capsel" (1983) that depicts two large touching figures, a naked and hairless man and woman, assembled with a plethora of warped images based on those Japanese hotels made up of tiny sleep chambers. It looked cool and slick from a distance, but as I scrutinized the details of its surface, wonderful tiny handmade errors emerged. I also marveled at the work-intensive hand-made quality of "Adam and Eve" (1991), made evident and enjoyable by hundreds of teeny tiny yellowing pieces of tape that knit the composition together.

But I asked myself, is the satirical and outlandish knitting, weaving and repetition of distorted images within distorted images still an effective critique of our techno-mediacratic society? How does big data and data mining affect the interpretation of his work? What does his art do for us today in our post-pop condition?

Such a big data reading involves a change of historical emphasis, perhaps. Certainly Bayrle shows, with considerable brilliance, how networks of artists and art images have changed from hand mechanical to fluid digital in a warped way, re-compositing the circuits of production and its mediatic status. And it is fun, but is it more than fun, though it is certainly that. For example, take Bayrle's deadpan hilarious (and faux romantic) pulsating 2CV-engined singing machine with Edith Piaf "Spatz von Paris" (2011), one of the highlights that I saw in the "Nouvelles impressions de Raymond Roussel" (New Impressions of Raymond Roussel) show held at the Palais de Tokyo last year. Though "Spatz von Paris" was not included in this show, there were two similar works, "Rosaire" (2012) and "Rosary" (2012) (both collaborations with Bernard Schreiner) that paired the endless thrusting of the engine pistons with the recitation of the catholic rosary that Bayrle and Schreiner recorded, once in Italian and once in German.

"Rosary" (2012)

Bayrle's art has sometimes been lumped together with the German Capitalist realism of Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Wolf Vostell, and indeed there is something of the processed image and sly whimsy of Polke and Vostell here. But I saw no points of contact with either the dry photo neutrality or the abstract gooeyness of Richter, because I think it is possible to think of Bayrle's work as post-conceptual images and objects without thinking about the post-media condition of painting, even as he references paintings and painters quiet often. Indeed he starts *All-in-One* off with a room of new wallpaper called "Hartung/Majerus" (2014) that samples two dead painter friends of his, Hans Hartung, the German-French painter known for his gestural work, and Michel Majerus, an artist whose work combined painting with digital media.

"Canon Meets Sharaku" (1989), Silkscreen, Computerwork : Stefan Mueck
(Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York)

But to invoke the Bayrle question in terms of post-painterly fun is also to invoke the legacy of fascism along with orders of image materiality and representational dominance as related to the image as data set. I saw this first with two seminal works based in Japanese culture, works that provide echoes of art images rendered with a distorted photo of a Canon camera, "Canon Meets Sharaku" (1988) and "Canon Meets Utamaro" (1988) — based on a woodblock print by Kitagawa Utamaro.

Thus his art can invoke questions of capture technology and image processing as well as levels of negation of fascism and the role of the Frankfurt School of critical theory (which Bayrle confirmed for me). Thus perhaps it is still critical in how it cuts through the velvet rope of exclusion traditionally attached to capture imagery and opens the image up to potential signs of collapse of the cybernetic dichotomy between information and noise, because his art tends to collapse an image into an image-orgy of promiscuous swarms and furious assemblages.

An early indication of this aesthetic direction was evident in the lithograph "Im Schwimmbad" (1960) that constructed a beach scene out of hundreds of micro-elements, that when looked at carefully, reveal themselves as tiny swimmers. It is a very early example of how all of his work makes your head swim, as his typical images are a sort of agitated whirlpool, made up of hundreds of similar but warped and undulating images. There is a general wheeling movement of an image spinning around itself in a dense weaving grid motion that compresses and expands. The work is therefore a metaphor for an undoing and redoing of the social fabric, the making and unmaking of totalities out of individual bits who are woven together. So a feeling of stress is there that, when you look long enough, loosens and pushes back into a swarming and tangled political poetics. This is rendered more literal (if less evocative) in his Atari animation clips such as "Sunbeam" (1993-94) or the DVD "Autobahnkreuz" (2007-08), a work that had a dark room of its own in the third gallery.

"Madonna Mercedes" (1989)

With these and other works, such as in the masterpiece "Madonna Mercedes," Bayrle overwhelms the sender-receiver model of communication, buoying our love/hate sensibility for the knot of imagery that has become our inner lives. Works like "Madonna

Mercedes" help us pass through the ploy of the velvet rope by gelatinizing the imagery's structure and deranging its order of scale. We pass through these images by way of exegesis into the multitudinous realm of hypercommunication, where images attract other images, shimmer, and shimmy. Hence they lose their velvet grip on us in the way that Raoul Vaneigem called the maddening of media.

This is a concept that is close to the model of resistance against global systems of power as described by political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their international best-seller *Empire* (2000) and expanded upon in their *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004). And I put Bayrle's essentially multitudinous (or flocking) art in this political context, thus lifting it out of mere fun and entertainment. For me it is a form of ornamental critical pleasure that has three aspects: it is immanent, it is simultaneously transcendent, and it is networked. That is what gives it the all-in-oneness that the title of the show suggests (along with William Blake's materialistic mystical suggestion that we learn to "see a World in a Grain of Sand.") In this way it is the Warhol path not taken.

Rather than taking a neutral Warholian attitude towards art and the mass-produced, Bayrle's is a critical practice of Pop art that closes the gap between the mass and the multitude by creating image-swarms where immanence meets excess. His work presents funny, mocking excesses that penetrate the fetish of the spectacle. Thus it shows a seething underbelly of the capitalist trinket commodity culture, adrift through commodity protocols and its network linkages. Accordingly, Bayrle makes Pop art into a multitudinously tentacular version of hydra-headed union. It still is fun, but it is serious fun where the individual unit fuses into a complementary mass — a union. But there is something of the stoned systems administrator to it too. There is something of a sitting back and marveling at the simultaneously individualized and intertwingled aspects of a huge system, now set twinkling by the contradictions.