Today, we should be thinking about the artist Thomas Bayrle (b. 1937, Berlin).

The year is 1936. The film, *Modern Times*. It begins in a factory, on an assembly line, with Charlie Chaplin trying to tighten bolts. It isn't going well.

In 1958, Thomas Bayrle worked as an apprentice in a textile factory in Göppingen, near Stuttgart. The noise and repetition of factory life was slowly driving him crazy—until he started to sing to himself. He matched his own murmur to the rhythm of the loom, sinking into the machine. Bayrle stopped fighting the machines but synched his body to them, like one clutch disk that approaches another, enabling the gears to shift. In that moment, he remembers hearing the rosary from his childhood: the tender voices of nuns, dressed in black, reciting the *Ave Maria* in long strings of repetitive chants, breathing in, breathing out.

This early experience was both traumatic and ecstatic, but it made one thing very clear: meditation and machines belong together. Both are made of pure repetition.

After studying at the Arts and Crafts school in Offenbach, Bayrle started making books with his friend Bernhard Jäger, and they founded Gulliver Press in 1962. Using hot-metal typesetting, they made small editions of concrete poetry: a single letter goes next to other letters to form a word, words make a sentence, a book, and end up as an entire library. And then back to the single letter, made of lead.

Bayrle soon began building his own kinetic sculptures—Joseph Beuys referred to him as “the guy with the machines.”

He has made prints, collages, silk-screens, and developed what he calls *superforms*, images made of many smaller images of themselves. In the 1980s, he began printing images on fragile latex, and asked friends to help him distort them on photocopy machines—each person held a corner and pulled in different directions as he photocopied thousands of stretched images. These modules came together as collages, animations, and films.

His cardboard models of roads are warped into infinite interlocking strips. It’s as if millions of bodies in millions of cars were using millions of tanks of gas to travel across millions of miles on millions of roads built with millions of tons of concrete.

It's what Bayrle calls the quality of quantity, or the process of making pure quantity into a quality. *Quality is merely the distribution aspect of quantity,* as Vladimir Nabakov once put it.

The context matters here: 1960s Germany lived through its so-called economic miracle, when, a few short years after a devastating war, everyone was buying shiny new toasters and washing machines. This contradiction involved a mixture of gratitude and skepticism. Capitalism was a savior and a monster—fascinating and repulsive.

During that period, Bayrle read Mao Zedong's *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (1957). He saw the Chinese "permanent revolution" as a commitment to continuous motor activity—a form of weaving—and liked Mao's dialectics between unity and struggle.

But communism still looked pretty much like capitalism. Both talk about giving power to the powerless, but end up absorbing and transforming them into statistics. They both turn cars into traffic.

Traffic. For Bayrle, the world is made of traffic: everything is always moving and always stuck in place at the same time. We work, buy, use, pray, fuck, drive, make, cook, break, choose, decide—it's all *traffic*, moving at the rate of a trillion yes's and a trillion no's per second. *My work is always 50-50*, he says.

Traffic doesn't care. It is indifferent. It doesn't discriminate, it only accumulates. It isn't extraordinary or terrifying, it's just mediocre. Grey. Like a sticky jelly or a thick porridge, it spreads itself over a collective of repeated individual units and organizes them, fixing them into a temporary configuration. Most people hate traffic, but there is a certain intelligence to its stupidity—it bends, swerves, and moves in a rhythm that no single one of its units can control. Call it the power of crowds (Elias Canetti) or the mass ornament (Siegfried Kracauer), but it reveals the tendency for mechanized repetition to take on generative and aesthetic properties. Grey Pop.

People say we've shifted from an age of production to one of consumption. At this point, it's become an age of accumulation, of *all of the above*. We don't choose between objects or ideas as much as we accumulate them, holding on to all options. We don't agree or disagree, we filibuster and save for later.

Thomas Bayrle asks what is micro about the macro and what is macro about the micro. His work tries to locate where the individual stops and the ornament begins: cells and bodies, people and icons, threads and woven fabric, cars and traffic, prayers and religion, image and pattern, sex and porn. The world is constantly busy moving one into the other, with all of the distortions this might involve or require.

The question becomes what to do about it. From his time as a weaver, Bayrle knows that straightforward rebellion or didactic critique don't go far. Best to swim with the current. So instead, he sinks into the machine, stays elastic, and tries to match its rhythm: he distorts the distortions, normalizes the normalizations, compresses the compressions, standardizes the standardizations, mediocritizes the mediocrities, and repeats the repetitions. *I want to take consistency to the point where it becomes inconsistent*.

Society is organized in refrains, with recurring patterns we learn to recognize and rely on. Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi describes art and poetry as an attempt to move language so that it deploys a new refrain. This is what Bayrle does—he perverts mass culture’s refrains.

His perversions are laced with politics and jest—a bit like caricature. Whereas most caricaturists exaggerate what’s abnormal, Bayrle builds on what’s normal—to such an extent that it becomes disfigured and grotesque.

Christine Mehring calls it a *comedic clash of scale, tautology, and transformation*.

Sherrie Levine once described her habit of taking a photograph of a photograph in terms of playing the same note on two different pianos at the same time— it sounds the same, but it also sounds different. There is a vibration inside the repetition, somewhere.

That vibration can be explosive. It can agitate. It can be extreme. It can lubricate. It can burn. It can force an error. It can cause trouble. It can make bodies go soft and go sideways. It can revitalize touch. It can move anxiety into laughter. It can make things change. It can stop making sense. It can move it move it. It can Rock'n'Roll.

A-wop-bop-a-loo-mop-a-wop-bam-boom.

The sixth season at The Artist's Institute, with Thomas Bayrle, runs from February 10th to July 14th, 2013.