

PART TO WHOLE

Thomas Bayrle, whose first US museum survey opens later this month, has been exploring the structures of contemporary life—from highways to religion—in his paintings and sculptures since the 1960s.

by Kirsty Bell

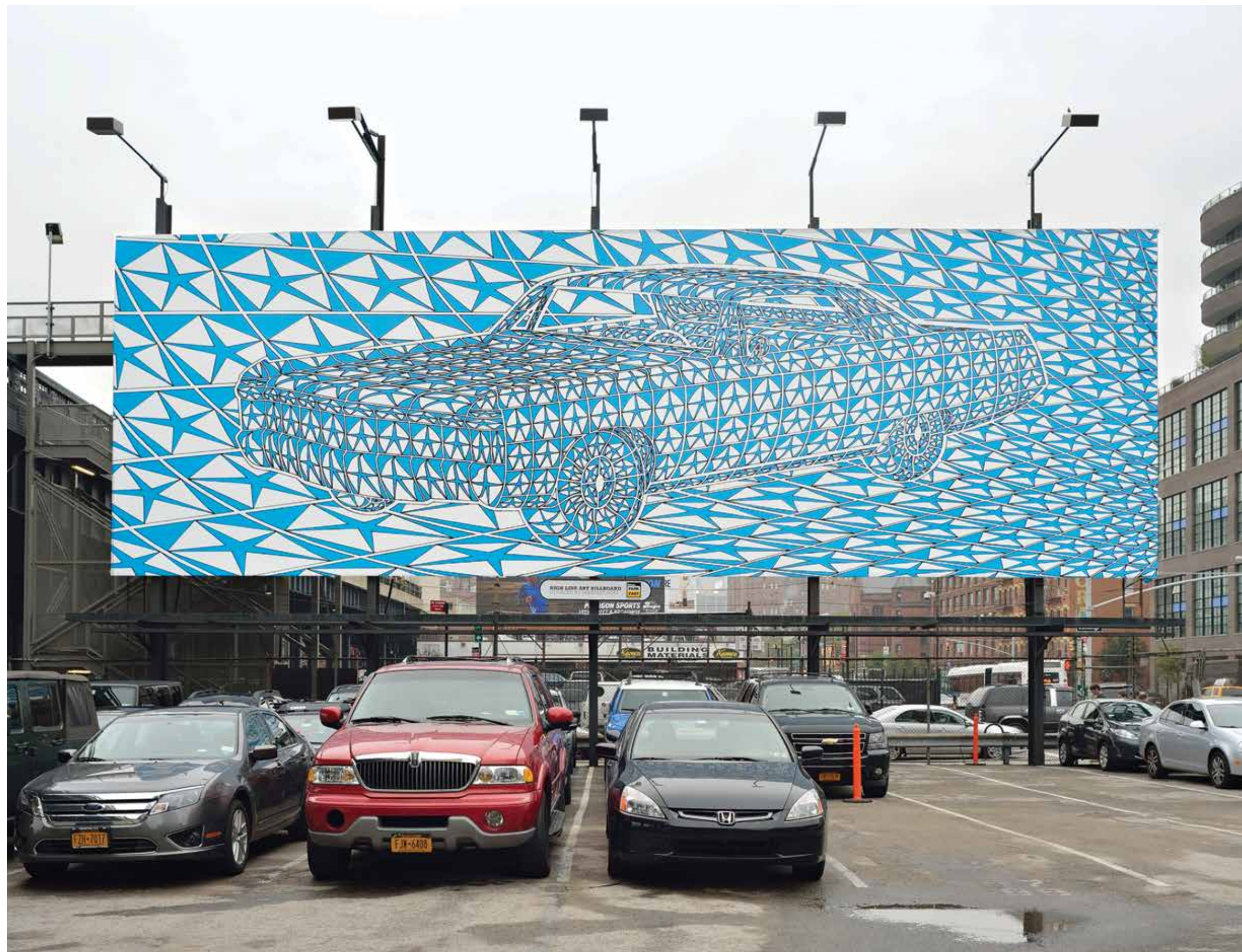
“THE WORLD OF commodities eats its way into human beings like hydrochloric acid. Oh, this capitalism is so horribly simple, so mercilessly simple. These are the circles, ovals, and squares in which it runs riot. With crackling, nibbling sympathy it creeps through the pores,” wrote German artist Thomas Bayrle in a 1980 dispatch from San Francisco published in a Frankfurt newspaper.¹ The “superforms” that he developed in the late 1960s wrestle with the merciless simplicity of capitalism head-on. The main image in these bright Pop silkscreen prints on cardboard or plastic consists of smaller images repeated in uniform measure and colored to create patterns. Pairs of shoes form a bowler-hatted man (*Butteresser*, 1968); a giant glass of beer is made from tiny beer glasses (*Ein Pils bittel*, 1972). *American Dream* (1970), a broad-chassised automobile depicted entirely with Chrysler symbols, was shown in 2012 as a billboard next to New York’s High Line.

Bayrle’s work rode the short-lived wave of West German Pop art in the 1960s and early 1970s, a loosely connected movement whose approach to the daily banalities of Germany’s postwar economic boom, or *Wirtschaftswunder*, possessed more irony and political critique than its high-gloss American counterpart. With their subversive undertones, these works, including the early Capitalist Realist canvases of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke as well as Konrad Klapheck’s surrealistic machine paintings, questioned not only the encroaching consumerism of that time but also the limitations of conventional German lifestyles. People preferred to move forward on a wave

Thomas Bayrle:
American Dream,
1970, installed
along the High
Line, New York,
Oct. 1–30, 2012.
Courtesy Friends
of the High Line
and Gavin Brown’s
enterprise, New
York. Photo Austin
Kennedy.

COMING SOON
“Thomas Bayrle,”
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Ein Pils bitte!, 1972, silkscreen on cardboard, 34 3/8 by 24 3/4 inches. Courtesy Air de Paris.

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of economic progress and to avoid examining the country's recent past. Given that the success of the boom depended on the suppression of this history, undercurrents of anxiety suffuse the German version of Pop. In his superforms picturing telephones or neatly ironed shirts, coat hangers, or polished shoes, Bayrle's emphasis was as much on the manufacture and distribution of the products of capitalism, and the operators of those products, as on the products themselves.

Bayrle first gained recognition with a series of quirky hand-made "machines" created a few years before the superforms. These paintings with motorized parts picture propaganda-driven systems and the power of the masses, as illustrated in a Maoist sporting event (*Mao und die Gymnasten*, 1964), a toothpaste commercial (*Super Colgate*, 1965), and a Nazi rally (*Nürnberger Orgie*, 1966). The critical approach to history, politics, and social economics evident in these humorous works can also be seen in the superforms, where the individual unit is always subsumed by the whole. The repetitive component is an emblem of repression and control, but also, potentially, of change: "Each moment of life is different—to fulfill a day with minutes—means thousands of little efforts to solve little problems—in a very similar—but never total [*sic*] equal way," Bayrle commented in 2009.² The small differences between gestures or actions that are almost but not exactly the same afford the possibility for incremental change from within, as opposed to change determined and applied from without. "I see repetition as the source of life and art," the artist said in a recent interview. "It is not possible without repetition—nature is not possible, nothing is."³ Both micro and macro levels of experience, affecting both the individual and the social masses, have continued to inflect Bayrle's thinking and output for nearly fifty years.

Bayrle's work has always concerned itself with the infrastructure that undergirds modernity and shapes our daily lives without our even realizing it. As his superforms developed, they moved away from being straightforward wallpaperlike silkscreens. By the 1970s, they had begun to bulge and bend, as Bayrle distorted the small units that made up the larger picture. This distortion, too, became a guiding principle, reflecting the awkward meetings of the organic with the mechanized, the coercion of one by the other, the warping and distention that inevitably occur when the infrastructure demands that we fit ourselves into its unyielding shape. Suggesting the granular level on which such distortions operate, the artist pictures the normally invisible patterning of daily existence.

Bayrle, however, preferred to observe and articulate the conditions at hand rather than to issue any unflinching hard-line criticism. He describes his work—and himself—as occupying a fifty-fifty position, half critical and half complicit, always teetering on the brink. In fact, between 1969 and 1972, Bayrle worked in advertising, producing superform images for clients,



Super Colgate, 1965, oil on wood with motor, 39 3/8 by 47 3/4 by 6 inches. Museum Ostwall, Dortmund. Courtesy Air de Paris.

including chocolate manufacturer Ferrero and clothing designer Pierre Cardin. But at the same time, he was creating graphics for radical activist groups, just when increasing political agitation in West Germany was about to erupt into the violence of militants like the Red Army Faction. Acknowledging both sides of the political argument, Bayrle adopted a tone that expresses awe and dread in equal measure: "I believe it is important for an artist to have both: positive utopia and desperate reality," he said recently,⁴ and his practice pivots on this intrinsic contradiction.

Bayrle's works are mind-bogglingly intricate and time-consuming to make: his drawings, collages, silkscreen prints, and, occasionally, 16mm films were all, until very recently, produced manually by analog means. Drawing is the basis of most of his work, determining the shapes of the units. Though hand-rendered, the repeated outlines look as if a machine made them. The monographic publication *Strippenzieher*, which accompanied Bayrle's early silkscreen prints and more recent engine sculptures in Documenta 13 (2012), shows his process. He printed drawings or photographic images on strips of latex, which he then pulled, twisted, and held over a photocopier with the help of his wife, Helke, and several students and friends, producing the small distorted images that compose the large single form. The countless pictures of airplanes that make up the monumentally scaled passenger plane of *Flugzeug* (1984) are an



Himmelfahrt, 1988, photo collage, 88¾ inches square.

example of this process. Looked at now, from the distance of several decades, the contorted forms in *Madonna Mercedes* (1988), a Madonna and child composed of images of a shiny black Mercedes, and *Fuck Canon* (1990–92), a copulating couple rendered wholly in little Canon cameras, seem to anticipate digital effects readily available on any number of smartphone apps.

I RECENTLY visited Bayrle in Frankfurt, where he has lived since childhood. A key figure at the city's well-reputed art school, the Städelschule, he taught there from 1975 until he retired in 2002. I sat with him and Helke in the kitchen of his small, bright, modern apartment, drinking milky coffee from white cups and saucers. Bayrle is a fascinating conversationalist, talking himself deeper and deeper into his own thought processes, which seem to unfurl through the medium of speech itself.

I asked him about a series of canvases from 2015 based on *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew* (1602) by Caravaggio. He told me how he and Helke came across the painting on a recent trip to Rome, when they took a moment's respite in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. In its gloomy interior is a small chapel where visitors can insert coins into a collection box to illuminate the Caravaggio painting. The lights stay on for a stretch of time, long enough for each onlooker in the crowd to take a smartphone shot—images ready to be immediately disseminated to thousands of other cell phones in distant parts of the world. As with much of Bayrle's work, it is only through the incident that the system may be perceived and articulated. This encounter was enough to prompt

a series depicting Caravaggio's image of Saint Matthew, each about the same dimensions as the original painting, made up of hundreds of miniature icons of an iPhone. Bayrle transforms a masterpiece of religious iconography into a sign of our current quasi-religious adoption of instantaneous digital-image transfer, suggesting the monolithic function that this technology has come to possess, not only influencing but also fundamentally structuring behavior. In this work, religion, art history, means of reproduction, and means of instant dissemination are all conflated in a single plane. The fact that the original painting also deals with communication and the dissemination of thought—Saint Matthew, the author of the first Gospel, is guided in his writing by the angel, delivering divine inspiration—adds to the compression of Bayrle's piece. Furthermore, these latest works have embraced computer rendering and exist as high-end digital prints. They are not distanced critiques of technological progress; rather, they adopt it and speak from the inside. The full complexity of their apparent simplicity lies in a face-off between the painted surface and the digitally printed one, between image as a conveyor of religious narrative and image as social critique. What at first may appear to be a one-line gimmick is in fact a nuanced commentary on the ways that the new technology is now embedded in daily life.

All of Bayrle's brothers and uncles are engineers, he tells me, but his father was a painter and a friend of André Derain in the 1920s and '30s, before the Second World War derailed his career. An exhibition of works by Bayrle and his father was held at the Museum Wiesbaden earlier this year. (The fact that Bayrle himself is more "senior" than "junior" at this point was underscored in the show's jovial title, "Seniorenfeier"—meaning a celebration for old folks.) Bayrle fills showed primarily drawings, vividly confirming their role as the structural underpinning of all his output.

Bayrle's interest in fundamental structures can be traced not only to a genetic predisposition but to his early experience as an apprentice in a textile factory in Stuttgart in 1957. The enormous industrialized Jacquard looms had an indelible effect on his imagination and subsequent comprehension of reality: "While I was standing in the weaving factory, day after day, hour after hour, I sank deep into this undergrowth of warp and weft myself. I kind of melted away."⁵ In this semi-hallucinatory state, he began to picture the city, the highways, the mechanized systems that determine our movements and our very means of existence. The format of weaving, simple in structure but complex in effect, its gridlike construction creating great durability, came to underscore his way of thinking and crop up in his artworks. Similarly, the relentless clatter of the machines, like the clamor of an internalized urbanity, colored his understanding of the systems of industrialized society.

Large-scale pencil drawings from the mid-1970s portray the city as a kind of claustrophobic construction, with a warp and weft of razor-straight highways and modernist tower blocks. The role of the autobahn, even more than the car itself, began to seep into Bayrle's thinking as a kind of structure determining life patterns, fusing with the noise of the factory floor. In Germany, the autobahn system, which steadily expanded throughout the postwar years, went hand in hand with the economic miracle and fostered the ubiquity



Caravaggio Meets iPhone, 2015, acrylic digital print on canvas, approx. 9 by 2 feet. Courtesy Gavin Brown's enterprise.

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Blessed Mary Mother of God, Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, 2010, wood with ball bearing, 22 inches in diameter. Courtesy Air de Paris.

of the made-in-Germany car as a key status symbol. The autobahn came to be increasingly a part of his visual vocabulary, represented with lengths of cardboard in many works—the first being *§* (1980), a relief of parallel lines of highways intersected by a curving overpass to form a dollar sign.

ALTHOUGH THE autobahn was a crucial aspect of Germany's postwar consciousness, it was when Bayrle spent a year in San Francisco with his family that the full significance of the highway sank in: the diverse buildings it links “form this regularly structured, endless, active chain which stretches dead straight across mountains and valleys like a gigantic artery in honor of cars,” he wrote in a letter published in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* in November 1980.⁶ He began to marvel at the tire and its ability to carry cars along as if they were floating: “only here did I grasp the splendid invention of moving enormous weights silently on air; that’s what’s going on here.”⁷

By the mid-1980s, two systems—highways and religion—came to intersect in a number of works, knotted together in a variety of ways. Among them are *Madonna Mercedes* and the photo-collage *Himmelfahrt* (1988), in which

the form of a crucified Christ, made up of tiny photos of a section of highway, is suspended over an aerial view of a highway. Tires carved out of wood with the opening words of the rosary engraved on its surface—“SANTA MARIA, MADRE DI DIO, PREGA PER NOI PECCATORI . . .”—spin on integrated motors like Tibetan prayer wheels, in the project “Automeditation” (1987–). The sculptures of engines shown at Documenta 13 are cross-sectioned and displayed like gleaming fetish objects while their pistons continue to pump and gears still turn. A recording of the rosary being recited augments their rhythmic sounds. Recent sculptural models built from cardboard combine crucifixions and highways in enormous quasi-architectural structures, one of which declares itself to be an “Automatic Toll Church,” a kind of drive-through confessional (*Gerano Pavesi, Church*, 2015). Many of these works will be in Bayrle’s largest exhibition in the US to date (opening at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami), which will explore his treatment of infrastructures and their relation to the human form.

“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,” Bayrle has said, “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 twist it just ever so slightly, to be able to see it from a completely different perspective.”⁸ Just as highways tame wilderness, crossing mountains and valleys alike, connecting and making everything accessible, so Christianity—or any religion—can be used to tame individuals and social groups. But as images turn into bodies, roads into flesh, highways into arteries, and engines into religious fetishes, the potential for transformation is reclaimed. Bayrle’s works, though dealing with the omnipresent abuses of capitalism, are fundamentally optimistic. Even in his dispatches from San Francisco, after describing in incredulous tones the hyper-manifestations of capitalism’s power, he goes on to say that the situation is good for art: “It must change! Grow up, grow faster, more liquid. There are no criteria anymore.”⁹ ○

1. Thomas Bayrle, “Letters from San Francisco to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*,” in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev et al., *All-in-One*, Brussels, Wiels, and Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2013, p. 143.
2. “Transcendental Flu: Conversation between Lars Bang Larsen and Thomas Bayrle,” in Bayrle and Larsen, *Strippenzieher*, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012, p. 45.
3. “Repetition is the Source of Life: Thomas Bayrle and Oliver Laric,” *Mousse Magazine*, no. 36, December 2012, moussemagazine.it.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Bayrle quoted in Marta Kuzma, “*Die Butter ist Nicht Alle*: The Anarchic Impulse in Thomas Bayrle’s Notion of Weaving,” *All-in-One*, p. 79.
6. “Letters from San Francisco,” p. 144.
7. *Ibid.*
8. “Repetition is the Source of Life,” moussemagazine.it.
9. “Letters from San Francisco,” p. 150.

Opposite, view of Bayrle’s installation at Documenta 13, Kassel, 2012, showing (clockwise from back left) *Carmageddon*, *Airplane*, and three engine sculptures. Courtesy Gavin Brown’s enterprise. Photo Anders Sunø Berg.

