

The Line in the Lawn. 2000. Geographic Garden, Kolding, Denmark. Stoneware and steel. Group exhibition of environmental ceramics. 20 m/l x 15 to 100 cm/h. Photo by Helle Hove.

The Magic of Repetition

What effect does it have when craft artists repeat figures and forms?

The ceramist Helle Hove explores the kind of repetition that can be seen in patterns and ornaments and finds meaningfulness and debasement, the ordinary and the divine.

An Essay by Helle Hove

I WAS WARNED AGAINST IT – REPETITION – BY MY OLD FOLK high school teacher. “Let that figure stand alone”, he said. “It is unique, powerful in itself. If you repeat it, it will become a decoration.” And the word ‘decoration’ had an ominous sound, like something inferior.

It can not be denied: repetition is dangerous. Repetition is debasing. I did it all the same. Repeated figures in borders and rows, over the surface in patterns, around a centre like a flower, around the cylinder of the jar, in symmetrical formations like crosses and clover-leaves and in staggered sizes like the scales of a snake. And I ended up in one of the core disciplines of artist-craftsmanship.

Textile printing, weaving, pottery, jewellery-making – in fact the great majority of crafts – all traditionally make use of the repetition principle in visual expression; from the absolutely primitive thumbprint all the way around an earthenware pot to the complex ramifications of patterns and reflections in the Oriental carpet.

FROM THE COMPONENT TO THE TOTALITY

Repetition is debasing. It empties things of meaning. A figure that is multiplied automatically loses its unique identity, its values. It is six of one and half a dozen of the other – they are all the same. The placing seems unimportant too, for



Viaduct. 1999. Handmade high-fired earthenware produced at Petersen Tegl, Denmark; water ponds, water lamps, lights and glass. Located in a pedestrian street in Kolding, Denmark. As a result of a technical installation, the passing trains start a movement of the water and the light is subsequently dancing each time a train passes. Photo by Poul Pedersen.

even if you stand with a printed piece of cloth with a quite specific demarcation, in principle it appears to have been taken out of the infinite extension of an ideal pattern. For that is also true: in some strange way repetition also has an idealizing and unifying effect.

Like the famous picture of the white vase that can suddenly be seen as two black facial profiles, you can also do a perceptual flip-flop with repetition. Suddenly you experience something that is not tangible. The principle of the pattern, the geometry, the underlying order. Some people may even see the guiding hand of a divinity, of the kind you sense in the Islamic patterns. In this way the components are first emptied of their individual meaning and then charged up with a new one – that of the totality.

ANYTHING CAN BE REPEATED

The important things are now the in-between spaces, the organization, the rhythm – where every single thumbprint on the pot is seen as a beat and where the windings of the ornament are experienced as visual music. In principle you can repeat anything (from the most rigorous form to any old lump of snot) and produce patterns that seem to have shot up from an archetypal, primal substrate.

That is what I am working with at present: I use thousands of small identical ceramic ‘shells’ and lay them out according to a simple kaleidoscopic pattern principle. Turning the units a little in the imaginary kaleidoscope changes the whole pattern. It is a self-forgetting, thousand-year-old game. Super-simple. For me the project is about cutting in to the

bone in an excavation of dinosaur skeletons of the pattern world.

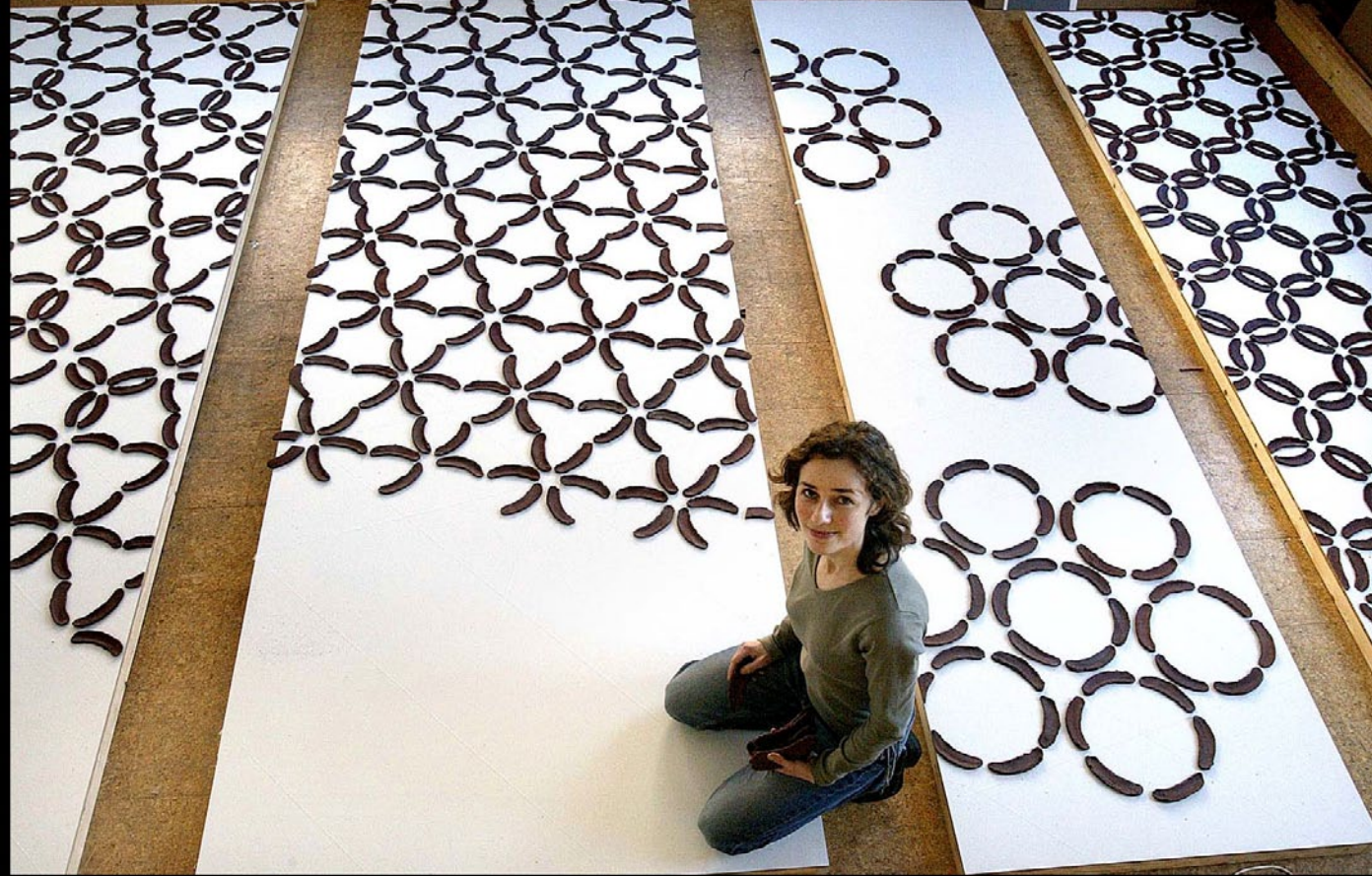
THE PULSE OF LIFE

Repetition increases your sensitivity to the small variations. It is the underlying beat that you can play against, just as you do in music. Deviation requires regularity to have something to deviate from. The system has to be there to be broken. Variation can only arise when there is a repetition to vary.

It is striking to see how the repetition principle in the pattern, the row and the ornament reflects life’s own design of animals and plants. All of existence is based on a pulse of repetitions; the beating of the heart, the rhythm of the day, the recurrent need of the body for food and for sleep. Everyday life is repetition. Ritual, prayer, meditation are based on repetition. Our own (Danish) national church does it, as Bishop Jan Lindhardt expresses it: “The time of repetition is sacred time.” Everyday life and the sacred. Think about it. Are these the meanings that co-exist when repetition is used visually?

REPETITION AS IDEAL

In our modern society we have a strained relationship with repetitions. We pay lip service to the opposite: the innovation, the transformation, the experiential kick. But repetition is a condition of life to which we as human beings are forced to relate. The psychologist Henrik Høgh-Olesen from Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark emphasizes that every development is based on repetition: if you can get beyond the immediate boredom threshold and continue into a state of immersion in the process, doors



*Above: Helle Hove in the studio preparing the exhibition **There's Joy in Repetition**. 2004. Photo by Kim Rasmussen
Below: **There's Joy in Repetition (Detail)**. Solo exhibition of architectural ceramics at The Danish Museum of Art & Design. This project explores the music and magic of repetition. The same simple form (pieces of unglazed stoneware, some 13 cm/l and others 5 cm/l) is repeated in various patterns over big surfaces to fill the room with a meditative feeling. Photo by Sven Berggreen.*

will be opened up to brand new layers of experience. Through repetition (for example, everyday life with a husband or wife) you reach deeper levels than any number of new infatuations can ever give.

Back in the 19th century, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard pointed out something similar (if we can put it briefly). He used the concept of 'repetition' about the ideal state that can be achieved by choosing concrete everyday life and being fully present in the whole sequence of moments in life. Does pictorial repetition offer the same opportunity for transcendence and a breakthrough to new layers of experience? At all events we have here the recipe for the best way to experience a pattern: the meditative, self-oblivious way where one abandons one's fear of monotony and follows the music of the pattern where one feels the magic of repetition.

Helle Hove (b.1970) is a Danish ceramist. She works with large scale site specific projects and is especially interested in light/shadow and the use of patterns and ornamental structures. www.hellehove.dk She is currently working at the research department at The Danish Design School.



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