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The forms of repetition

The evolution of the concept of repetition and its interpretation
options in fine arts

Theses of the DLA dissertation

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The subject and aim of the research

The aim of my research is to collect the concepts related to repetition as used in art history, to change the negative connotations of this concept, and to point out the positive aspects. American art historian George Kubler (1992) suggested the use of trivial variation to avoid the negative judgement that adheres to using the term copying. At the extreme of this is the legal interpretation in civil life, where it may be considered as theft and plagiarism. Originality, being single and unrepeatable, has meant something different in every period, and in the 20th century, it became one of the fundamental issues in art. Seriality, a result of mechanical reproduction, materially changed the discourse in art about originality and copies (*Benjamin*, 1936). New concepts associated with repetition emerged, and existing concepts evolved, including the terms *original*, *copy* and *replica*. Similar terms from the second half of the previous century include *invention*, *convention*, *variation*, *mutation*, *transcription*, *paraphrase* and *appropriation*.¹ Obviously, new terms keep emerging, and through the analysis of these, I aim to explore the current status and role of artwork.

Repetition is seen as a natural phenomenon in many areas of our lives, for example there is georhythm, the cycle of day and night. In this role, it is typically unnoticed and hidden. For me, its exploration is the most exciting in fine arts and in my art, where I often feel it is present in some form, from the techniques used in the creation of artwork and the related movements, to the path taken in the studio between the shelf, the table and the kiln, with the object being created. It is mostly during the creation of objects in series production where there are accurately calculated, highly effective movements that are repeated cyclically and fill the space of the studio. When I look at an object that was created in series production, I can see the environment it was created in, the machinery, the person, the movements. Repetition is present in the movements of the hands in modeling, embroidery and painting. It can be analysed within the object as structure, form or motif. It is there in my thoughts when, for example, I have renewed interest in a previous concept or topic. It emerges as a memory that takes shape in an artwork. Its presence is fundamental when a new piece is created, as *Beke* (1980) also says, since every artwork being created incorporates the experience and learnings from the previous ones.

¹In collecting these concepts, I rely on various works, including those by art historians George Kubler and László Beke, philosopher Walter Benjamin, artist Mel Bochner and Viktor Kótun.

There is some repetition in every piece created. Due to the structural properties of matter, I interpret repeated hand movements like brushstrokes, chiseling, carving, modeling, knitting, sewing and embroidery, as typical of handcraft techniques. From my research I concluded that anything may be repeated, so the simplest solution is to define a framework and decide what types to explore in depth, based on my own creative work. My aim is to deepen my understanding of the relationship between repetition and creation, through the analysis and categorisation of artworks. As I was working on the chapters, the following ideas evolved as learnings from my research.

Theses

1. *Repetition plays an important role in art and can be interpreted from several aspects in the artwork and in the process of creation.*

The theories of George Kubler and Csikszentmihályi are somewhat similar to the following idea: the monotonous, meditative work process, with the state of absorption and concentration, relieves boredom and gives rise to creative, innovative ideas and solutions. Literary historian András Veres substantiates this mechanism with his theory of communication and learning, which says that in human language, in the course of unification, thinking may become more prominent as analogies develop. Ritual, repetitive work processes can be preparations for the more creative processes. Referring back to Veres's ideas, repeatability makes communication possible, and also socialisation, the inclusion of the individual in society, mostly through imitation and learning. According to László Beke (1980), every new work of art repeats something from previous works and previous periods. The artwork adds to the old structure, where certain elements are repeated and new elements are added.

Repetition is present in the line and in any geometric shape that contains a straight line; it is in fact present in all space and time. To examine repeated shapes, I explored the theories of the research of ornamentation, and as a starting point I used Katalin Keserü's *Ornamentika értelmezések (The interpretations of ornamentation)*. 19th century literature on ornamentation says that ornamental structures can be created through repetition, alternation, progression, confusion and the combination of these. To these, Gombrich adds rotation and reflection, which can be used to create grid structures that can be extended in every direction. He also writes about combination and permutation. Beyond the serial-formal questions of repetition, what I find the most interesting is how artists use the technique of repetition with a conceptual

approach. In the case of pieces building on handcraft tradition, such as sewing and embroidery, we see that repetitive movements are inherent in the technique, because of the specificities of how the material is worked. The creative method based on repetition can organise the whole creative process and time, which may become an everyday rite or ritual of the artist.

In the case of pieces created through industrial reproduction, replication is also part of the technique. This may lead to the transformation of the creative method of the artists, i.e., to the fact that they often think in series and when they work on an issue or a topic, they may create several variations of a piece. Using large industrial reproduction processes, artists can express the unique and the original, despite monotony, uniformity, duplication and unoriginality. Technological innovations in the production equipment may still be seen by artists as sources of inspiration, and they can use these to seek new forms of expression.

Repetition is also present in the works of an artist as re-emerging thematic orientation. This, however, may be a phenomenon that belongs to the psychological or socio-psychological space of the artwork—this is the aspect that reveals the imprints of tradition, culturally transferred behavioural patterns or transgenerational heritage in the artwork.

2. *Regardless of the creative method, in all the artwork I analyse there is a psychological space that conveys some sort of coping, a response to our world or an intention to deal with the past. At one end of the cases I examine there are the ritual, more passive creative methods, and at the other end there are the active, performance-like actions.*

During the analysis of the artworks, I assigned repeated aesthetical phenomena in one group, regardless of period, place and time. After establishing similarities, it was important for me to analyse the differences. After that, I needed to reexamine if similarities were indeed present and if yes, where they were rooted. The groups which evolved and in which I identify the cases of repetition are significantly different in terms of the creative methods, which are the following: manually created pieces, works of art created through technical reproduction, and performance-like or installation-like works. The shared forms in the group of manually created pieces are the designs, ornaments, chain or grid structures that point towards infinity. In the case of serial techniques, the form is often a series of graphic prints, or sculptures or objects cast in a series. The form of the third group is performance or action and its documentation. The third method, performance-like action is the counterpoint of the first work method, which is slow, manual and meditative creation. However, the psychological space of creation is important in both of them;

this is the response to our world that, in the latter case, is manifested in another extreme, a momentary aggressive gesture. Between the two extremes, there are the artworks connected to the discourse of memory, where the intentions to deal with the past and to commemorate are obvious. An axis seems to emerge with more passive, self-surrendering and accepting strategies or work methods at one end, and with more active expressions of rejection and denial at the other.

3. *In the case of pieces related to the discourse of memory, the use and appropriation of completed objects is a tool where artists use the objects' capacity to carry memories and their narratives.*

Objects as carriers of memory were first mentioned by Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1992), who said that over time everyday objects go beyond the horizon of the memory of things and from then on they not only refer to a purpose but also to a meaning. Types of objects in the realm of this cultural memory include symbols, icons, monuments, gravestones, churches, idols, etc. In the penultimate chapter, I analyse how artists use the capacity of objects to carry memories. First, artists use the historical and social relationships of objects to express criticism or to convey and trigger emotions in the recipients. In the case of the pieces analysed, the objects chosen by the artists imply, through the act of facing the memories, an active approach on the side of the recipient. Second, I examine the types of objects in the biographical context of the individual, and I analyse the artworks that build on these. I find the process exciting when everyday objects are transformed into personal mementos. Actually, any everyday object may become a memento, a biographical relic, it is the owner who selects the objects and assigns this role to them (*Otto and Pedersen, 2004*). The objects used get a new life and rejoin the cycle of the present—in this case in the context of art. Repetition becomes a means of remembrance.

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