EVERYDAY LIFE AND ITS REPETITIONS
FINDING DESIGN INSPIRATION IN THE MUNDANE

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CONTENTS:

ABSTRACT: ...............................................................................................................................3
EVERYDAY LIFE AND EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES: .................................................................4
STORYTELLING IN PATTERNS ..........................................................................................5
SOCIAL SHARING: ................................................................................................................7
STRANGENESS AND FAMILIARITY: .....................................................................................7
REPETITION & PATTERNS: ..................................................................................................8
  POP ART: ..........................................................................................................................9
  BEHAVIOUR PATTERNS: ..................................................................................................9
  PATTERNS & OBSESSIONS: ............................................................................................10
INVESTIGATING THE EVERYDAY LIFE: ..............................................................................12
MY FINAL PROJECT & CAPTURING THE EVERYDAY: .....................................................14
**ABSTRACT:**

This essay concerns everyday life and its repetitions, in activities and objects. Although often associated with the mundane or boring I hope to explore how one can find inspiration from the events, things and people we tend to take for granted and also shed a little light on why a lot of these activities can be important to our aesthetic experience.

Firstly I provide my definition of what I consider to be the everyday, the experiences and activities that we repeat day to day. I recollect an older project that discussed similar themes and how that led me to think about how sharing one’s life on the Internet has become normal in today’s society.

I move on to examining repetition and how it can be found in almost everything, be it nature, behaviour or design. I look at works by Andy Warhol, Kusama and Eley Kishimoto and discuss their relationship to repetitions. I then continue my investigation of the everyday and how artist Sophie Calle’s work L’Hôtel inspired me to use photos from the popular online social sharing app Instagram.

The essay ends with a description of my own design project and how I incorporate photographs taken from Instagram into my pattern designs.
EVERYDAY LIFE AND EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES:

Getting up in the morning, eating breakfast, travelling to your workplace, standing in the queue at your lunch restaurant, having lunch, travelling home from work, having dinner, watching TV, brushing your teeth and going to bed. I would say that these actions describe a typical day in the life of a person living in western society. The everyday can be seen as a header for the day-to-day activities that we repeat over and over throughout our lives. Exploring further into the significance of these everyday life mediocrities, one distinguishes more nuances to them. In order to describe everyday life, according to Ben Highmore, one must also include value and quality or everydayness as he calls it.

Here the everydayness of everyday life might be experienced as a sanctuary, or it may bewilder or give pleasure, it may delight or depress. Or its special quality might be its lack of qualities. It might be precisely, the unnoticed, the inconspicuous, the unobtrusive.

In other words, what Highmore addresses is how one might experience the everyday life and especially the fact that one might not experience anything special at all. Everyday life most often goes on without much fuss. Other words such as the mundane, unremarkable, common have all been used when describing the everyday life. According to Highmore “the repetition-of-the-same characterizes an everyday temporality experienced as a debilitating boredom.” The monotonous repetitions override the normal everyday and give it a negative atmosphere. However, the everyday doesn’t have to be associated with ordinariness or boredom, although the latter is the word most often used when speaking of everyday life.

We all experience what one could call aesthetic pleasures in the midst of our everyday life. When making dinner I sometimes make an extra effort when serving the food by adding a little fancy garnish, not that it gives any extra flavour, just simply for my own enjoyment. Once I attempted colour coordinating my books to create blocks of colour to match the room interior and the result was unusually striking. When I manage to get perfectly finished edges on my printed textiles I feel the satisfaction and achievement in my chest. These aesthetic pleasures might only last for a few seconds but are enjoyable and create a momentary new dimension that gives some meaning in life.

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2 Highmore, 2002, p. 1
3 Highmore, 2002, p. 8
STORYTELLING IN PATTERNS:

At the end of my first year at Konstfack I took part in a course called Storytelling in Patterns. The course was led by teachers from the Storytelling department as well as the Textile department. As the course title reveals it was about creating pattern repeats that tell a story in some way or another. Our given theme for the project was ‘memories’, and in order to generate ideas for my patterns, I took part in writing and drawing exercises that were designed to push me towards exploring the storytelling side of my work.

My particular memory was taken from an everyday situation that happened a few times when I was growing up. I remember I was sat at the kitchen table facing the last few pieces of my dinner that I refused to finish, mainly to express my stubbornness. I eventually became bored of sitting there and I came up with the idea of hiding the food behind the radio that was facing the wall at the side of the table. Out of sight out of mind was my brilliant solution to the problem, at least until the evening when my mother came to wipe the table and discovered my hideaway. I think I finally learned that it was faster to finish my dinner than getting my own way.

Sifting through my childhood memories made me think of what the radio actually looked like? What was the food I ate? Did I use a knife and fork? What else was around me in the kitchen? I was inspired to start drawing again not least because the memories theme gave me many ideas to choose from.

Sketches for Food Explosion pattern
My childhood kitchen was orange and brown with a round kitchen table, radio from the early seventies, low hanging kitchen light and textured white walls. I started drawing the everyday objects that I remember seeing around me when sitting at the kitchen table. My aim for this print was not only to tell a story but also to illustrate the fundamentals that make the memory what it is. Even though it was my stubbornness and refusal of finishing the food that was the core of the memory, it still comes back to me as a positive one and most of all a funny memory that makes me smile.

Food Explosion, 2012

Remembering these fragments from my childhood has become very meaningful to me. These trivial bits and pieces may not strike anyone else as very significant but for me, they describe my everyday life from that time. I realized this was a very good starting point for my final project.

Sometimes just a small detail can evoke feelings or the mood of a time gone by. Most of us have relics from our childhood or mementos such as pieces of art or most commonly photographs. There can be music or songs that bring back memories. This made me think of how people capture and record daily experiences and surroundings and how this has changed over the last decade with the influence and accessibility of the Internet and the development of cheaper, user-friendly technologies.
SOCIAL SHARING:

Sharing one’s life on the Internet has become a normal occurrence; we all do it with varying levels of intensity. On social networking sites such as Facebook one gets bombarded with status updates of friends’ current locations, what they are listening to and daily photos of meals or activities. Does it make the mundane everyday activities more exciting if we write and tell other people about them?

As I said before, photographs are most often taken to capture special moments in life, so that later in life we can remember them and enjoy the memories. Nowadays everyone carries a phone with them, which makes it simple to take hundreds of photos and at the same time experiment with lighting, apps and effects without any proper training or technical knowledge.

It seems as if people are increasingly trying to capture the moments of pleasure in everyday life. I think by taking photos of everyday life, situations or objects can be enhanced and even romanticised adding an extra quality to what is so often overlooked. Another positive side is that it inadvertently adds elements of creativity to people’s lives. It makes people pause, if only for a few seconds, to observe and enjoy a particular moment in life.

On the other hand, do we perhaps now view our worlds through rose coloured glasses or is that just the face we wish to express to our peers and followers in social media? While it is easy to be cynical about the implications of this I don’t think this is always necessarily a bad thing. Social media being purely superficial, I think, is a far too dismissive and easy statement to make. It seems far more complex than that, and that is where things get really interesting. What people choose to define themselves as and how they represent who they are is a fascinating subject and undoubtedly the choices being made are aesthetic in nature.

STRANGENESS AND FAMILIARITY:

Most often, we only notice things in our everyday life when something has gone from being familiar to being strange or unexpected. Let me bring back the previous everyday life scenario of waking up, eating breakfast, travelling to work etc. but by adding on an unexpected event to it such as when travelling to work you get on the wrong train and end up at a new place across town. Your everyday life pattern is disrupted by this occurrence and the “out of the ordinary” enters the picture.

When we are in a new environment or a new place the surroundings are strange to us. “Strangeness is temporally prior to familiarity, but it cannot be a continual state.” 4 What Happala points out is that over time, unusual situations or strange places become familiar because of the fact that one is continuously introduced to them. This shows that strangeness and familiarity can be exploited as tools when making sense of a situation.

The ideas of strangeness and familiarity can also be applied to functional objects that we use to help us with everyday tasks; the computer, the fridge or the cooker. If the object, for example, stops working or starts operating in an unfamiliar way, only then do we look at it differently and start paying attention to its details. Happala says “When familiarity has been broken by something new, then we start to look at things”\(^5\) In other words, according to the above, a break in routine can make you stop and appreciate that momentary experience. Looking back, perhaps this is the main reason I remembered the incident with the hidden food behind the radio. A daily routine, repeated every single day of my life as a child was broken by some thing out of the ordinary, in this case my unwillingness to cooperate. This is possibly the reason I recall the events so well all these years later.

**REPETITION & PATTERNS:**

Not only are patterns and repetitions the central part of my work, they have become the core of my artistic research. There is so much to interpret from these two words themselves and in connection to other subjects, aside from the design world. Repetitions can be found in almost everything, be it decorative patterns, nature or in people’s behaviour.

*Repetition* refers to one object or shape repeated; *pattern* is a combination of elements or shapes repeated in a recurring and regular arrangement; *rhythm* is a combination of elements repeated, but with variations.\(^6\)

A figure on its own does not create a pattern. Few figures placed next to each other create a repetition. Repetition without variation, and spaced over an area, becomes a pattern. When creating a pattern the repeating objects don’t have to be the same but simply follow a regular, ordered arrangement in their recurrence.

Patterns have an importance and meaning for many cultures around the world and are often used to convey spiritual and symbolic meanings in religion. Although these areas interest me I will not delve deeper into the history of patterns. The decorative aspect of patterns is my focus and I think there is just as much weight and meaning within it as in the previously mentioned subject area.

By repeating a pattern, a lot of power is created aesthetically. It is quite evident that by repeating something one can create many different effects. By taking a shape or an object and repeating it, we are made to look at it in a new way. Once something is repeated it can produce other impressions and images besides the original one.

For me in my work it mainly begins with aesthetics. I start with an object or scene that interests me. That one drawing or photo needs to look great to start with, however I have come to expect and sometimes rely on the visual dynamics that repetition brings. When almost ANY object is repeated it feels like it gains importance and definitely aesthetic value to me. A lot of this I get through experimentation during the printing process.


**POP ART:**

Many examples of artists using repetition in or as part of their artwork can be found. The pop art movement that emerged during the end of the 1950s is a great example, not only when discussing repetitions but also when it comes to everyday life objects. Artists in America and in the United Kingdom were starting to incorporate objects and items that were available to the masses in their artwork. Pre-packaged food, brand names and everyday objects are a few examples that started appearing in artworks by Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol, amongst many other artists. The pop art artists were taking everyday objects and placing them in a different context. Andy Warhol once said that he wanted to work with the gap between art & life which I assume was not only meant to be a reflection on his working methods but also his choice of motifs. I appreciate this take on art and design as I think in many cases these worlds are seen too strictly as black and white. Pop Art and Warhol blur the lines and in my opinion give a more human, balanced perspective.

Repetition is a pretty central part in Andy Warhol’s work. If you take “Campbell’s Soup” print as an example; would it give the same impact if it wasn’t repeated over 30 times? Apparently Warhol ate this soup everyday of his life for 20 years, so this was in fact a daily ritual for him, now made as art. In a way the daily ritual of eating the soup can be seen as being represented in the repetition of the art. Even though each print is slightly different they all appear to look the same and when placed together they give a striking impression.

The idea of a daily ritual appeals to me; I think this is evident in the early print I did with the radio and hiding my food behind it. Now it must be stressed that this wasn’t a traumatic part of my childhood. It was actually quite a humorous but not exactly extraordinary event that for some reason sticks in my memory. I liked the idea of using it and celebrating it and the child that I was, looking for a quick way to escape eating food that I didn’t want. I like the fact that inspiration can be found in things that are not necessarily huge, powerful moments in one’s life or perhaps discovering that these small moments and memories in fact can have a powerful and lasting impact later in life.

**BEHAVIOUR PATTERNS:**

Looking from a psychological point of view repetitions and patterns are firmly within us on many levels. Behaviour patterns or repetition of routines can be something we carry with us our whole life, something we might have repeated for decades or something that has been passed on from previous generations.

Repetition in our everyday lives is interesting because while it has mundane and perhaps negative connotations repeated activity gives many people a sense of safety and stability. Many people will never break free from these things as it could disturb and throw their sense of well being out of kilter.

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7 McCarthy, David, *Popkonsten*, Ortman, Maria (translator), Malmö: Fogtdal, 2001, p. 22
PATTERNS & OBSESSIONS:

Yayoi Kusama’s relationship with patterns and repetitions could be looked at from different angles. Yayoi Kusama describes her pattern obsession as a direct outcome from her disease, having suffered nervous disorders and hallucinations since her childhood. “They were about an obsession: infinite repetition.” Many times she experienced patterns and objects appearing before her eyes in hallucinations.

Many of Kusama’s early work consisted of large-scale canvases with dots and net patterns, very simple and mechanical repetitions. The patterns were a way for her to create a physical repetition of her psychological being. The process of making them was long and time consuming and she poured all of her energy into them. There is no beginning, end or centre to the patterns. They were supposed to send out a hypnotic feeling to the viewer. “Psychoanalytic theory holds that serial repetition is the return of psychic material in symbolic form.”

Since then, the dots and the nets have become her signature patterns. She has painted endless variations on canvases, created everyday scenes and applied them onto objects and displayed them in public places. There were no limits as to where these patterns could be displayed.

Kusama’s installation Driving Image (1959-64) consisted of an environment with furniture, household objects and mannequins all covered in her Infinity Net patterns in

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8 Kusama, Yayoi Kusama, London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 2000, p.18
9 Kusama, 2000, p.34
complementary colours. Kusama’s art often consists of phallic symbols and plays with sexuality. However, what struck me about this piece is how the pattern covered objects lose their original identity and become a unity together. One pays attention to the surface of the object and not so much to their functionality. Kusama doesn’t seem to express an overt interest in the everyday life itself; rather I think she used an environment to show how far her pattern obsessions could reach. One can certainly read into the symbolism of each object and why Kusama had placed them all together, but here I believe it is more about the all encompassing, overwhelming sensation from the repeat pattern rather than the individual shaped objects.

Seeing images of Kusama’s Driving Image sparked ideas for how I could present my final pattern collection. I like the idea of creating an environment for my patterns. I saw how my inspiration could come from the everyday, whether it be mere objects, routines, memories, events. The patterns that come from this could then be reflected and directly imposed upon these same objects and environments from where the inspiration came. This I hope could heighten the impact and forcefulness of the material/objects, beyond the superficial.

Although they come from a fashion-orientated world, designer duo Eley Kishimoto\textsuperscript{10} have also been a huge inspiration to me. I see similarities in their and Kusama’s work, mainly in recent years when Kusama’s prints have been used on fashion garments and accessories. Just like Kusama they have sometimes created small environments where pattern covered objects and clothes have been displayed together.

Eley Kishimoto are not scared of combining different colours and patterns together in a complete and extreme way. Despite this, their diverse patterns still manage to convey a harmony and balance when placed together. It is also interesting to see this approach in an obviously commercial setting and in utterly wearable fashion. Their work has pushed me to be wilder and more free in my overall application of patterns, taking risks with size and colour in particular. I’m looking for the same sense of balance in my work not just visually but also in the way Eley Kishimoto approach art and its commercial applications.

\textbf{Eley Kishimoto,} shop display for Supermarket Sarah in Selfridges, 2011

\textsuperscript{10}www.eleykishimoto.com
INVESTIGATING THE EVERYDAY LIFE:

Quite early on in my research about everyday life I came across a book by the artist Sophie Calle. Not only is Sophie Calle’s art often based around rituals and repetitions, she also seems to have an overall fascination for the everyday life.

L’Hôtel (1981) is a series of photographs Calle took when going undercover as a chambermaid. This gave her the opportunity to sift through people’s belonging, investigate and photograph them. Coming from the outside, the snapshots almost end up looking like crime evidence photos. I think Susanne Küchler, senior lecturer in Anthropology at Goldsmith’s University in London described her work in an apt way:

The small worlds of personal relationships, composed of the familiar, the strange and the forgotten, are carefully documented in the photographs and lists of which her artworks are composed. The details of the everyday she records, though always specific in terms of place and time, have also universal quality, thereby negating the notion of an environment containing persons.11

There is something about Calle’s photographs that draws me towards them and makes me want to examine them. It could be compared to the same feeling I get when walking down the street in the evening and glancing in to lit up apartments. To secretly see how people live, what kinds of things they surround themselves with, the lighting, and the colours is fascinating. Walking by on a dark evening a persons window is almost a framed snapshot into their lives and environment. Although I know this could come across as being nosy but I can’t help it.

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What also struck me as interesting about Calle was to see how her photographs reminded me of many of the photographs I see on Instagram. Instagram is an online photo sharing service that you can access through your mobile phone. It allows you to take photos, apply filters and captions and share it to your online friends and followers.

There are vast amounts of photos on Instagram that portray various household items/object arranged neatly next to each other, almost like a modern still life or criminal evidence photos. It is captivating to see how people record every minute and sometimes banal detail of their day. Even though they most often are random objects found close to the person taking the photo at the time, I like to think that the photos say something about the time and world we are living in. At least for me, this creates images of who these people might be and what kind of lives they might be living.

Examples of Instagram photographs
MY FINAL PROJECT & CAPTURING THE EVERYDAY:

The vast amount of public photos that I can find on the Internet and online sharing sites such as Instagram have been the base for my pattern designs. Right from the start of this project I had in mind that I wanted to incorporate everyday objects and activities into my work and reflect the environments and events we perhaps take for granted.

I had ideas of staging my own photos and recreating simple day-to-day scenes, however, I found myself looking at other people’s photos instead. Here was a chance to catch a glimpse of other worlds without any fake scenes or manipulation from me. Having other people take photographs of their own routines meant I could perhaps get a more individual and personalised impression of someone’s day. The way they choose to romanticise their everyday events as images is also extremely fascinating.

Examples of Instagram photographs

Once I got over the perception of feeling too inquisitive (after all, these people have chosen to share their photos openly) I started searching and compiling photos into different themes. With hashtags one can search users’ photos under common themes, for example #morning often reveals photos of breakfasts or journeys to work.

The geometric shapes that I have used come from some of my original sketches where I have experimented with square photos. I liked the way they worked as a structure and a frame for the incorporated objects, so they became the base for my pattern designs. The photographs that I chose I edited, traced and drew on using Illustrator.
#workinglunch, work in progress

For my pattern collection I wanted to create a variation of designs that could work in interiors and on clothing. I didn’t want to limit the possibilities for the patterns by pre-determining what the fabrics could be used for ultimately.

I chose to make some of the patterns with larger and more illustrative components and some with smaller and more repetitive objects. In for example #workinglunch I wanted the grid to be the dominant feature and let the photographs be more abstract, something you discover when looking closer at the pattern. My aim for #instalove was to make the illustrations the main focus in order to make the pattern bolder and crazier. All along the way, I had to bear in mind that the patterns would end up being screen-printed and adjust the designs for this purpose.

#instalove, work in progress
I see my pattern designs as a celebration of all things ordinary and the everyday. In my patterns I tried capturing the essentials out of my theory but at the same time applying my design aesthetics and taste. It is important that the theme doesn’t outweigh or overwhelm the work.

From a design perspective this subject has given me the opportunity to look closer at what inspires my work and to dig deeper into understanding where my fascination for repetitiveness and the everyday comes from. I think we have more to gain by recognising and appreciating the diversity in our aesthetic life. By taking a break from the day-to-day activity and appreciating the moment, we enhance our experience and can reflect on the various ways we interact with our environments.

I believe this is a subject that I will continue to explore throughout the future, I like the space where these ideas exist, to borrow from Warhol: “in the gap between art and life”.
REFERENCES:


WEBSITES:

1) [www.eleykishimoto.com](http://www.eleykishimoto.com)
2) [www.sophia.org](http://www.sophia.org)