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John Chilver

'Art and Number'

Abstract:

The paper examines art's relation to number, and to mathematics in general, both art historically and conceptually. It notes that contemporary art has largely forgotten the fertility of art's suture to mathematics, perhaps under the influence of those broad currents romanticism and twentieth-century philosophy that denigrated mathematical thinking. The paper traces out two major epochs that characterize the relation between art and number: the first being what the paper terms the epoch of ratio, (where number is sutured to image by means of a semiotics of geometrical proportions); and the second being the epoch of the list, (where visible constructs attempt to articulate number as contingency and as infinity). Conceptual art since 1963, continuing with post-conceptual art today, is shown to be fundamentally motivated by the problem of visualizing (or visually implying) the infinite - a problem not unlike that contained in embryonic form in Kant's 'Analytic of the Sublime' in the 'Critique of Judgement'. The paper then turns to set theory as deployed in Alain Badiou's philosophy. It is argued that set theory offers the most plausible reading of conceptual art's relation to mathematics; yet whatever was vital in the conceptual art of the 1960s lacks traction today; this lack can be usefully approached via Badiou's formal proof of the excess contained but not indicated within any set. Finally, some recent artworks (including works by Bernd and Hilla Becher, Florian Slotawa and others) are considered as fruitful attempts to perform the excess the set.