

Hungarian University of Fine Arts

Doctoral Programme

The Countable and the Uncountable

Repetition in Fine Arts

DLA Short Theses

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In my thesis I focused on the phenomena of numbers in fine arts, as I observed that many art works (some of my own, too) are organised by certain structures, when some or many identical elements are composed together to form a kind of order, thus the original object or element gains new meaning. The created new order is even stronger, more important than the original single element which is somehow dissolved. My method was to choose examples from the history of contemporary, modern and ancient art, thought this choice was often high-handed (only the abundance of examples gives right to this high-handedness). Later on I formed groups of the collected examples following the number of elements they are contained of, and I observed the similarities and differences. Meanwhile I read the relevant literature, ever trying to find references even in general ascertainments of other disciplines, such as philosophy and psychology.

My statements are as follows:

The order constructed by repeated elements checks up with a general idea of order.

The observed images of order, constellations are similar, analogue to each other, thus they can be categorized by the number of the repetition.

The number of the repetition is in strong connection with the relation to time.

The proliferation of the elements means acceleration.

Artworks showing many identical elements appear more and more often as we get near to the present days.

The exact number the repetition is created by is most significant in case of numbers under 7.

My thesis is structured by the following chapters:

Introduction

I defined the problem I had dealt with and excluded those aspects (fractals, performances, videos, technical reproductions, etc.) that would have turned me away from the original, very simple questions. My purpose was to form a basic dictionary-like text which could include any work of art, if I had chosen it. These works of art came under the chapters depending on the number of the repetitions they show.

One

For being able to talk about repetition we have to talk about the oneness, the one which could be repeated, multiplied. From my point of view portraits are the main representations of oneness in fine arts. They fix the image of a person at a certain moment, at a chosen point in time. The portrait can be substituted by other objects, a single tree or a sphere for example.

Two

Repetition begins by the number two. That's why it is the most typical, most elemental extinction, it is the destruction of the one. To represent this extinction I could choose from a wide range of examples.

Another form of twoness is the pair, another universal archetype which can be well observed in our body.

Three

As the number three is not a symmetrical unity, it is more complex, more dynamic than the previous two numbers. This dynamics are part of many works of art that consist of three identical items.

Four

The number four is strongly connected to the axes of the coordinate system, to the four directions they appoint and that we need for orientation. Thus the whole world can be divided into four, as the two main crossing roads of the roman castrums or the inner courtyards of the medieval monasteries clearly show. Number four is a unity, too, as the number three, though we find examples to the articulation by four rarely in modern arts, probably due to it's static character.

Five

By number five we seem to cross a hidden barrier and step to the territory of the "some". According to my observations the structures of five often make a circle, as my cited examples show.

Six

Mathematics states about the number six that it is perfect. This means that the sum of the divisors of the number six is equal to it, i.e., $1+2+3=6$. This perfection, complex completeness manifest itself in the works of art I cited here in this chapter.

Seven

Experimental psychology has revealed that when it is about perceiving a group of restricted elements number seven is the terminal number (depending on the percipient person this number can change to number six or eight). We comprehend groups consisting less than seven elements as a transparent unity of separate pieces, while groups consisting more elements than seven seem to us an unspecified abundance, an indeterminable mass.

Many

Here begins abundance. Indeed, arts shed examples for the continuity of time expressed by repetition, for this very basic and yet incomprehensible human experience. At the same time we should not forget about the fundamental criteria of scientific experiments, that they have to be repeated with similar results to get control. Thus to gain certainty we need to repeat.

Much

When facing plenty, innumerable of something we visualize the infinity and perpetuity, so we get moved by this sublime feeling. The attraction towards the sublime has great traditions, especially since the romantic era. Phenomena en masse have another aspect that can be connected with the industrial revolution, the changed producing methods.

Conclusion

Though I am sure that one can collect examples to prove any statement, and it can be fruitful, too, I hope I could indicate a system present in human thinking (or a system present in the world itself, I could not judge) that reveals itself again and again in arts, too.

At last having seen the boundaries of my enterprise I drew a few sketches of other ways of building a system organized not by numbers but by colors, shapes, household utensils, etc.

My former publication on the subject (in fact a former and shorter version of my thesis):

A számos és a számtalan, Balkon, 2013. március