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Form, a Series

By Marjorie Welsh 11/18/09



Certain situations make us aware of arithmetic eloquence. Two exhibitions, paying homage to series, do just that.

Dan Flavin's sculptural installation is a surprise even for those viewers who know his work well, for to enter the galleries at David Zwirner is to be blown back by near blinding color-drenched light. Induced to see the source of the color reflected off the walls of farther-off rooms, the viewer is hooked; and by the time she encounters the mere industrial fluorescent lamps that are the source of illumination, it is too late to protest. For once, the seven outside spaces comprising the Zwirner gallery help rather than hype the art on display, by providing a situated unfolding of fluorescent lamps in series, leaving one to discover why an art of arithmetic matters.

For all its spectacular qualities, the installation steers the viewer to pace himself, to reflect on the concept of number, as the broad spacing of the lamps compels one to swivel to see how combinations of one, two and three elements permute and progress within each room—whether these fluorescent tubes are fixed along the walls at their centers or their corners. There is nothing dry about Mr. Flavin's Minimalism. *Untitled (for John Heartfield) (1990)*, for instance, looks for all the world like modernist branding irons. Mounted vertically on the walls are red fluorescents punctuated with short, perpendicular elements, the entirety bathed in blue light—not red, owing to the reflected light from an adjacent barrierlike installation. Although the fluorescent barriers in the next room draw attention to the space they block off, they are not nearly as compelling as Mr. Flavin's manipulation of the ambient color, turning architecture into painting by way of linear sculpture. From room to room, the Minimalism on display here is about economy of means but certainly not about poverty of means, as color makes arithmetic structure, well ... vivid.

The remotest thing from the all-beige décor now often called minimal and meant to give no offense, Minimalism arose in the 1960s to shake sculpture loose from all the accretions of figure, anecdote and ornament. As theorized by Robert Morris, Donald Judd and Carl Andre, sculpture had lagged behind painting in this regard. In clarifying what was intrinsic to sculpture, they argued, sculpture could prove its own necessity. At its most rigorous, Minimalism shunned color to keep distant from painting, and refused even to consort with traditional sculptural materials and technologies, instead articulating sculptural volumes with aluminum grating, plywood, bricks and other materials swiped from basic household construction.

From this mandate of necessity comes Flavin's definitive *The Nominal Three (to William of Ockham) (1963)*, re-created for this show and essential viewing no matter what. Spaced out are vertically oriented daylight fluorescent lamps. Retrieved from their common utilitarian function of lighting rooms from overhead, these lamps become something else—way stations for the pilgrim to contemplate number. One, two, three—concepts neither mathematicians, philosophers nor theologians ever tire of contemplating. And for good reason.

"Dan Flavin: Series and Progressions" is on view at David Zwirner Gallery, 525 West 19th Street, through Dec. 19]

COUNT THEM: five small paintings occupying the large gallery at Peter Blum in Soho but spaced in such a way as to accord with a Fibonacci series—the number series describing a spiral. This is the decision of the Swiss-Austrian artist Helmut Federle, whose works are on view.

An installation so anomalous as this draws our attention to its cause, and points the way to interpreting the paintings for certain symbolic content. Even before we approach the works, we are prepared to read the visual appearance of their compositions through a law of form. Indeed, each of Mr. Federle's small abstractions repeats the composition of a rotated plane of thinly applied sludge-colored paint, producing by degrees an angular spiral more and more dark and turgid as the layering builds up the surface. At the center is an illusion of a luminous oculus. The spiral construct is, of course, meant to conjoin the mathematical and the mystical, and, as Kandinsky might say, convey to us an inner resonance.

Inspiring in the abstract, nonetheless this set of paintings seems constrained, perfectionist. This work is better understood as an aspect of Mr. Federle's celebrated practice, dedicated as it is to working the primal matter of paint in different ways to reveal the potential form inherent in structure and series and yet also in chaos. This current show, called "Scratching Away at the Surface," should be understood in light of an ongoing, open-ended embrace of the extremes, including disorder—at which Mr. Federle is brilliant.

"Scratching Away at the Surface," now on view at Peter Blum Gallery, 99 Wooster Street, runs through Jan. 2, 2010.

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