

## **Counting Houses      Steven Gartside**

Outside of the first few years at school, we tend not to be praised for the ability to count. Once the basics are established it follows a natural process of accrual; tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands - onwards it goes with an ever decreasing connection to everyday life. It is the early numbers that really matter, once they are mastered the milestones start to lessen. There are more complex processes than the sequential (in fact, it might be argued that everything is more complex). At the base though, is a desire to keep account. The bigger numbers of millions, billions and trillions tend to remain relatively abstract concepts, whilst the smaller numbers can often be the most fought over.

The philosopher and writer Roger-Pol Droit has written a number of books. They divide up into those regarded as being 'academic' and those that would fall more easily into the category of 'popular' (not that the two categories have to be mutually exclusive). There are many more of the academic than the popular, the academic work has tended to remain in their original language, that of French. The book *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life*, which tends to be prefaced with the phrase 'most notably', has been translated into more than 20 languages (the number changes with each new translation, though it does not lessen - even if something falls out of print, it has still been translated). The author invites us to reconsider the ways in which we carry out ordinary actions. The book that follows, *How Are Things?* pursues a similar vein, but this time through a consideration of objects. The purpose is to see things differently, not necessarily better, but certainly differently. Often, it is not a lack of looking at things which creates a problem, it is the way we look. It remains on the surface level, it does not question or analyse. Again, this is not always a bad thing, to obsess over every detail of every thing would lead to mental incapacity. But, we do need to be reminded of the need to break the pattern of casual acceptance.

One of the exercises in the *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life* is, appropriately enough, a counting exercise (the number in the title has a satisfactory evenness, same backwards as forwards, a sense of binary coding, yet at the same time providing the hint of fear generated by George Orwell's room of the same number in the novel *1984*). But this is to digress, it is not to treat things sequentially, or with focus. The exercise is to count to 1,000, Droit suggests that what we expect is a 'flat mechanical exercise'. It may be that this is precisely what we get, though the suggestion - depending on how much we are attuned to the purpose of the exercise - is that we develop a response which is outside of the numbers

themselves, that they have some other element beyond a simple summation. Counting makes the numbers possess weight, the task really feels as though it takes quite a long time. Despite the simplicity it needs concentration. This is what may happen. Yet, it is still important not to follow the logic too far and assume that having a greater sense of the reality of numbers is the same as having an understanding of what they might mean or the context in which they might appear. This is part of the dilemma, numbers are so familiar there is sometimes a separation as to what they might correspond to.

This drawing back to sensation and feeling might be considered in relation to the art world (not that such a 'world' exists as an actual 'thing'). Counting in this context is a frequent activity in terms of measuring participation. Most galleries count the number of daily visitors, they are added together to provide a running total, this continues to accumulate to the final figure for the end of exhibition, or end of year. Some galleries also count people at the preview or opening. The advantage of the opening is that of the greater mass, this might be the equivalent of a week or even several weeks general attendance. Climbing the stairs at a recent exhibition opening staff seemed excited to have counted to 1,000. It was not of course just the pleasure of having completed the task, nor was it a homage to Roger-Pol Droit's experiments in the everyday. The reaction seemed to indicate it was a qualitative response (though, in straightforward accounting terms, the familiar giving away of free drinks as an incentive to attend might be seen to suggest that the data could be flawed).

Double-Entry Book-keeping is a method of accountancy. Its principle is quite simple and this helps to explain why it has been in active use for such a lengthy period of time. The 'double' of double-entry refers to the process of balancing figures. In traditional ledgers there are two key columns, the credit and the debit - the two should work in such a way as to return things to a balance. In effect a return to zero. The system was developed by the monk Fra. Luca Bartolomeo Pacioli and is included in his work *Suma de Arithmetica, Geometria Proportioni et Proportionalita* (originally published in 1494). In the interests of providing an art reference in the midst of accountancy, Fra. Luca Bartolomeo Pacioli was a contemporary of Leonardo da Vinci (the artist helped to prepare drawings for Pacioli's later book on proportion). The system lies at the basis of capitalism, it is a method followed with a balancing out, but it also contains an implicit sense of 'justice'.

The double-entry system appears, and then is radically altered, in B.S. Johnson's novel *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*. The eponymous character decides that having been given the raw deal of the ordinary life lived (one without wealth or privilege), then there should be some

way of devising a method to create a balance, to alter or effect any perceived wrongs felt on an individual basis. It is the way that the system is applied - by being both absolutely logical and completely subjective at the same time - that gives the novel its impetus. As the narrative progresses, the perceptions of the wrongs done increases and the subsequent events required to right them also significantly increase in scale. The sense of justice, entitlement and pride which often go with the counting of things in the novel might also be translated outside. The cultural system, if we might call it that, is also perhaps indebted to Pacioli's 'Double-Entry' in a way not so directly acknowledged. There is a considerable amount of cultural counting which takes place, yet it does not always take place consistently. A little way after a new gallery has opened, it is not unusual for there to be an announcement that visitor numbers have been exceeded, this is a standard pattern. It can then be heralded as a success, a demonstration of both the need for a new gallery and proof of the benefit it brings. What does not happen is a questioning of the original number. Exceeding expectations only indicates an inaccuracy in the expectation and the estimation. If institutions associate themselves with particular sets of numbers as a cultural measure, they need to be attached to some kind of meaning - one recognisable from both inside and out. When counting occurs in relation to funding, the pressure is increased and the subsequent attention borders on mania. Asking questions as to how many people might benefit from an exhibition or activity is a very reasonable question, yet it also assumes measures which do not really exist.

Cultural counting is not wrong; in itself it is a harmless activity, a simple measure of how many people have chosen to enter a particular space or be involved in a specific activity. Numbers do give some sense of use, unfortunately what is often missing is any accurate sense of equivalence. It is questionable whether any realistic correspondence could be set between being in a space and what one might get out of it. Some of the most effective, long-lasting things are triggered considerably after an event has finished. Some of the truly terrible exhibitions and events we may have seen can have a value far greater than a glut of mediocre things. This would be no way to judge things of course. But, if equivalence of numbers and experience is not possible, we should at least limit the pretence that speculating to an imagined order is any kind of substitute.