On Numbers, a Series of Numerical Visual Poems
Richard Kostelanetz

Life is full of numbers. Unless we learn how to read them--how to perceive order and meaning behind numerical relationships--we are, in certain respects, functionally illiterate. The Pythagoreans assumed that only through number and form could man grasp the nature of the universe.

The arithmetic of whole numbers includes six operations: addition, multiplication, and involution (or squaring); as well as their opposites: subtraction, division, and devolution (or extracting the square root). All of these are procedures available to numerical art. Every piece of my numerical works has both a visual form and a numerical form.

Numbers, unlike verbal language, can be read both vertically and horizontally. They are also internationally understood. Some numerical structures are simple and instantly grasped, while others can be quite complex and opaque. My own art tends to favor symmetrical and sequential kinds of order over more obscure forms; the numerical sets in my number works usually articulate an arithmetic pattern.

Numerical art requires numeracy to be understood, much as poetry depends on literacy; this is an art for people who are "numerate." Numbers is primarily a series of works about properties peculiar to numbers. Rarely do the individual works attempt to refer to anything outside of numbers. It was my intention to use nothing but numbers in all their purity.

Figure 1
"Parallel Intervals," by Richard Kostelanetz, 1974.