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Painting ∞

Roman Opalka
Dominique Lévy Gallery
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Fade into White: Roman Opalka's Infinity by Sarah Mills

The magnitude of entropy overcomes one who moves along the two floors of Dominique Lévy's gallery, viewing Roman Opalka's five-decade quest to render the spectrum of time's (ir)relevance. Two early series prognosticate the honed laboriousness arriving in the French-born Polish artist's most renowned final series *OPALKA 1965 / 1 – ∞* (1965-2011). In this series, comprising 233 paintings in total, 11 shown by the gallery—each titled *Détails*—Opalka painted a number progression for forty-six years, beginning with the number one and ending with numbers in the five millions before his death. A single canvas has between 20,000 to 30,000 numbers painted on it in vanishing soft white lines over black paint gradually tinted

white.

Quietude has never seemed so palpable, so graciously advanced over time as by this oeuvre-sampling narrative that grapples with self existence, teetering back and forth between absence and presence, struggling eloquently with inevitable obliteration. The oft-made canonicalization of Opalka has him straddling minimalism's and conceptualism's internal logic driven practices, yet inclinations toward expression seep out, poetically, in photograph and audio recordings also viewed and heard in the gallery.



ROMAN OPALKA, 1965/1 -∞, *Détail 993460 -1017875*, Acrylic on canvas, 77 3/16 x 53 1/8 inches (196 x 135 cm); Photo Credit: André Morin / Courtesy Dominique Levy Gallery

The two early series *Etude sur le Mouvement* (1960) and *Chronomes* (1963), separated on one floor from *Détails*, serve as formal studies in building structure through lines and dots. The slashing scribbles of *Etude* are speckled by unwieldy dots furiously encountering the paper's edge. Two drawings, covered with abstract ink designs on either side are presented in a light-box manner so as to show Opalka's predilection for "all-overness"—a term the critic Harold Rosenberg once used to describe Jackson Pollock's mark-making process. But one senses control instead of Action-painter spontaneity here, a characteristic that continues to deliver in two more tediously dotted grid paintings of *Chronomes*. The delicately rendered lines and dots, which soon become an even-paced flow of number progressions in *Détails*, suggest a peculiar channeling of American painter Agnes Martin (whose work Opalka may have never known) instead of Hanne Darboven or On Kawara, contemporaries of Opalka's with whom he's often compared. Unlike Darboven and On Kawara, who, at times, reference the socio-political, Opalka relinquishes all but the existential.



ROMAN OPALKA, *Chronome No. 2*, 1963, Tempera on canvas, 24 x 24 inches (61 x 61 cm); Photo Credit: Vincent Lespinasse / Courtesy Dominique Levy Gallery

In 1965 Opalka encounters the self-organizing structure that will govern his final series *Détails*. Upon a 196 x 135 cm canvas he places a number “1” in the upper left hand corner—a white number on a black background—from which he proceeds to paint the basic numerical sequence: one to infinity. Because Opalka paints with a No. 0 (think: tiny) loaded brush until all pigment vanishes (at which point he reloads his brush), the numerical progressions appear in linear, wave-like patterns on each canvas, each line the length of a child’s fingernail. The title, bearing the infinity symbol, points to the artist’s reckoning with absurdity or the irony of attempting to defy mortality in working infinitely. By 1968, Opalka’s black backgrounds turn gray, and in 1972 he adds one percent of white paint to each proceeding canvas in the series, reducing the color value until around 2008. Late in his life—as his own physical colorations whiten—white numbers, somewhere in the millions now, appear as glistening snowflakes on white canvas. Opalka dubs these white-on-white canvases *blanc mérité*: “well-earned white.” Dominique Lévy shows her eleven *Détails* in chronological order. Each *Détail* begins and ends with a number—for example, 993460 – 1017875 and 5193063 – 5210330 (the first and last shown, respectively). While they aren’t dated, it would be safe to assume these paintings range in date between the 1970s and 2000s.

Anticipating the monochromatic future of *Détails*, Opalka reinserts himself back into the series, visibly and audibly in 1972. He records himself intoning in Polish the

numbers he counts as he paints. A throaty, even-toned voice, like a metronome's slow ticking, enhances László Beke's comparison of the artist to an old ascetic reciting prophetic texts as he transcribes them. Opalka also begins to photograph himself in a white background, taking a black and white passport-styled photo after each workday. In the seven photographs displayed, one gazes upon an aging man, fading into white alongside his work. Words such as "sublime" and "spiritual" contribute to the artist's quasi-deification in the gallery's texts and while not inapt, they un-anchor tensions of humanness Opalka poignantly portrays: the irrepressible desire to harness time only to renounce it, to create meaning in numbers only to find them meaningless, and to seek eternal presence while cognizant of death.

—Sarah Mills

(Image on top: **Roman Opalka**, *Etude sur le mouvement*, 1959 - 1960, Ink on paper, 86.3 x 63.5 x 2.5 cm; Courtesy of the Dominique Lévy Gallery/Photo Credit:Vincent Lespinasse)

Posted by **Sarah Mills** on 9/22 | tags: **abstract painting** **minimalism** **Infinity** **sound** **conceptual** **photography**

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