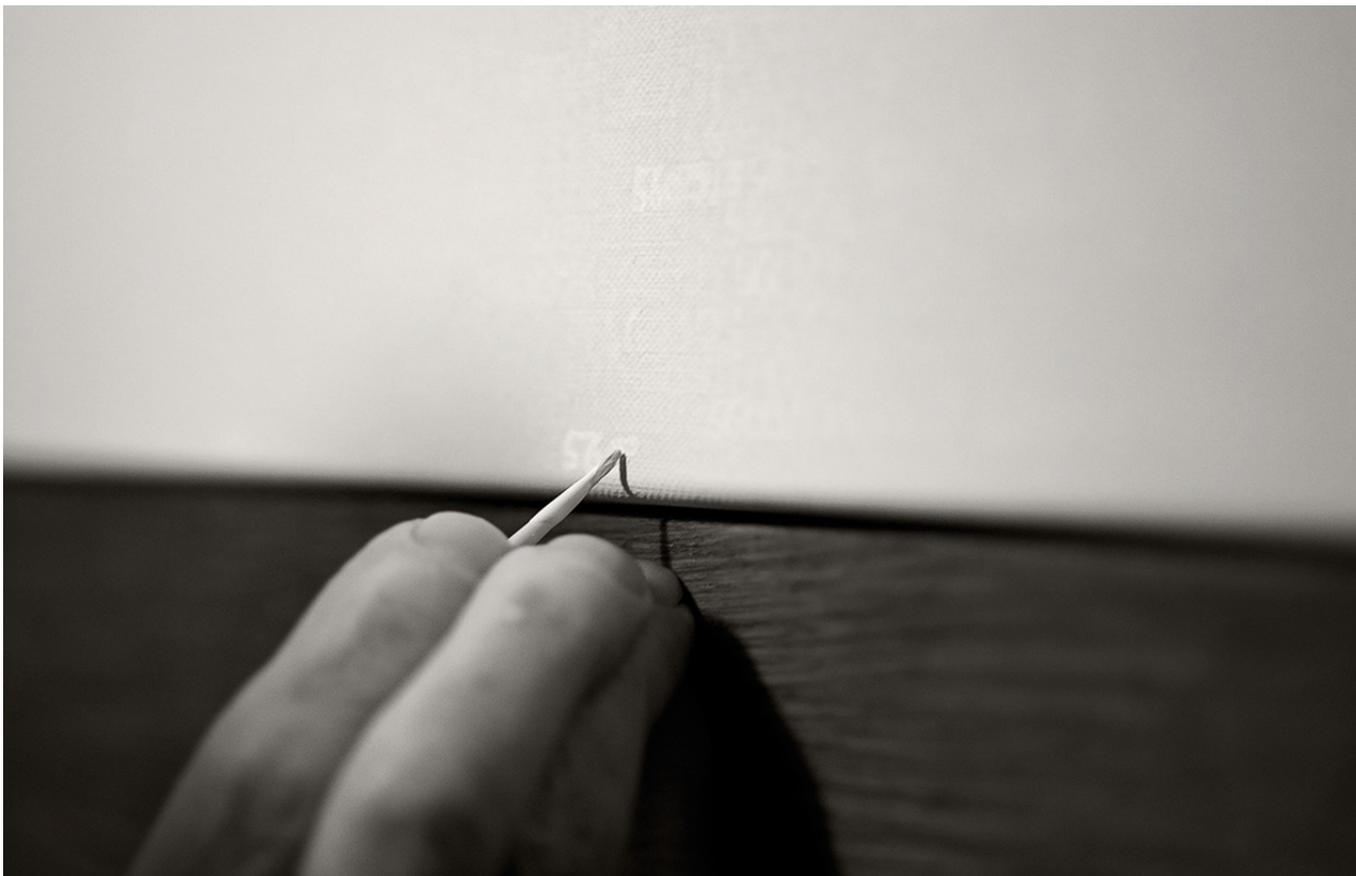


# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Roman Opalka's Numerical Destiny

by [Robert C. Morgan](#) on October 6, 2014



Roman Opalka working on the second to last *Détail* painting in his studio, Le Bois Mauclair, February 14, 2011 (photo by Vincent Lespinasse, courtesy Dominique Lévy Gallery)

In 1965, the French-born, Polish painter Roman Opalka came to an important decision. While sitting at the Café Bristol in Warsaw waiting for his wife to arrive, the idea occurred that he should begin to paint numbers that would progress sequentially from one canvas to the next for the duration of his life. Upon arriving at his studio the following day, he began to map out the terms of his intention. Soon after, Opalka was painting small numbers in white pigment using a number “0” brush, creating rhythmical horizontal striations against a black background. Each canvas, or *Détail* as he called it, would begin in the upper left corner and gradually move to the lower right. Each application of white paint would continue until the brush became dry whereupon he would dab the brush and continue on as before. This process (or procedure) would occur slowly over time. His painterly method was to embed the trace of these white numbers against the black surface, to make them appear tangible. Opalka further decided that each canvas would be vertical, measuring 195 x 35 centimeters. The height would correspond to the artist's physical

height, whereas the width was derived from the girth of the door to his Warsaw studio where the project began.



Detail of the place when Opalka hit the number 1,000,000 in his series, The spot Roman Opalka hit 1,000,000 — “Opalka 1965/1 – ∞, Detail 993460–1017875” (photo Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

The numbers were painted in a thin progression of horizontal rows on a vertical format. From the day his project began in Poland until his death in the south of France in 2011, Opalka combined clear conceptual thinking with painterly materials. His search for infinity through painting became a form of phenomenology, which, in retrospect, might be seen as parallel to the philosophy of Hegel. Through his attention to a paradoxically complex, reductive manner of painting, Opalka focused on infinite possibilities latent within his project. He would count aloud each numeral while coordinating the tiny movements of his brush. In the process, he was inexorably bound to the medium in which he worked. Upon completion, each canvas — or *Detail* — constituted a part of the whole. For Opalka, his work always just beyond the present, like Heidegger’s phenomenology, where the horizon of thought kept appearing and disappearing. He understood his work as the culmination of a *lifetime of painting* when he famously proclaimed. “It’s important that my last *Detail* should not be finished by me, but my life.”

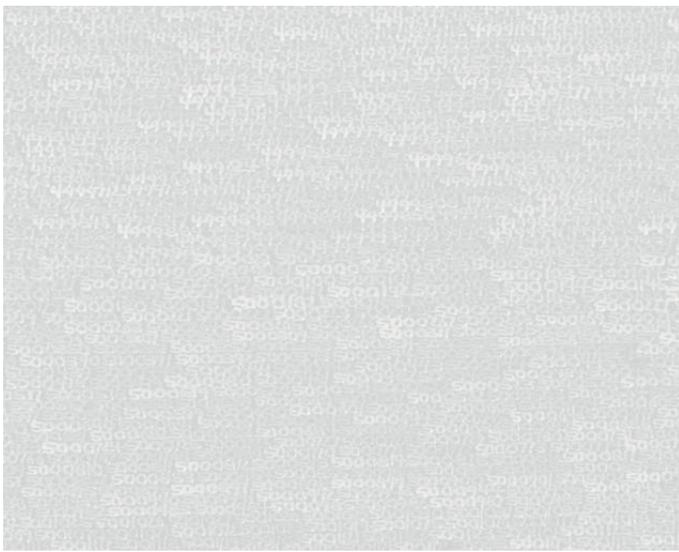
He pursued this culmination on a daily basis, eight hours a day, until the process of painting led him to “white/white” — that is, white numbers on a canvas with a background painted white, the same as the numbers. After three years (1968, possibly 1969), Opalka began to add 1% white pigment to the black background. Gradually, over time, as more paintings were painted, the black surface would become gray. As he continued to count and to paint five and then six digit numbers, he discreetly added 1% white to each canvas, thus making the surfaces appear

increasingly lighter. In the late 1970s he declared that the background of his canvases would eventually appear white, the same white used to paint the numerals that would finally dissolve into the surface, embody the surface. Ultimately, there would be no distinction between the white numerals and the white surface; they would culminate as a form of blankness, possibly transcendence, as the numerals grew invisible within the prospect of infinity, the [Samadhi](#) or highest level of meditation.



Installation view of *Roman Opalka: Painting ∞* at Dominique Lévy Gallery (photo courtesy the gallery)

More definitively, in 1968, Opalka also began taking black and white, photographs of himself — frontal headshots in his studio upon the completion of a day's work. After a *Detail* was completed — often taking several weeks to finish — the artist would select a single portrait from the contact sheets that would accompany each painting. In 1972, he began using a recording device so that his voice would be heard pronouncing the numbers in Polish, as he was deeply involved in the process of painting. The recordings would add an aural dimension to accompany the visual one (photography) and thereby offer a complete documentation of his on-going work.



Roman Opalka passes 5,000,000 in “OPALKA 1965/1 -∞, Détail 4988006 -5006015,” acrylic on canvas, 77 3/16 x 53 1/8 inches (196 x 135 cm) (photo by AndréMorin, courtesy Dominique Lévy Gallery)

During lengthy conversations with Opalka, first during an exhibition at the former John Weber Gallery in New York (1989), and one year later in Bordeaux, France (1990), I recall the artist's insistence as to the difference between the Russian Malevich's Suprematist paintings using “white *on* white” (1918–19) and Opalka's notion of “white/white.” Opalka's idea, though not without mysticism, was visibly more pragmatic, and, in some sense, carried with it a more precise point of departure than that of his earlier forebear, Malevich. Opalka was clearly reaching for *invisibility* in his paintings by employing a more systemic idea, concurrent with Conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt, On Kawara, and Hanne Darboven in the late 1960s.

Still, there was another point worth stating ... Although Malevich lived in Russia, and was considered Russian, for all intents and purposes, his genealogical extraction was half, possibly three-quarters Polish. Opalka, being of Polish origin, was not oblivious to the connection, and therefore, insisted all the more that his concept of infinity expressed as “white/white” was an achievement that would go beyond the poetics of “white *on* white” that Malevich found in his Suprematism. Whereas Malevich advocated the repetitive dictum, “Form = Feeling,” Opalka took a more rational line of inquiry. As rational as the latter's line may appear in terms of process, the impulse to routinely engage it as a painter, virtually in tandem with his destiny, was another matter altogether.



An installation view of some of Opalka's from 1959 and 1960, years before his lifelong project began. (photo courtesy Dominique Lévy Gallery)

As asserted in David Shapiro's essay in the catalogue for Opalka's exhibition at the John Weber Gallery in 1978:

"Painting is not thinking, it is the exterioration of thinking, as much a process of analysis as a generative synthesis ... Opalka's work is both theological and mathematical exteriorized and exteriorizing thought in layers."

This layering of thought is where the two poles of the spectrum seem to coalesce. Former critic, gallerist, and museum director Jeffery Deitch goes so far as to insinuate in the same catalogue:

"The work of painting has become meditation. The intellectual and emotional sides of the work are absorbed through the medium of the spiritual."

Both writers imply that Opalka's work was not entirely based on rational thinking.

A frequent misunderstanding about Opalka is that his engagement with painting was merely a convenience by which to execute the idea, and that the idea would be enacted over decades of time. In fact, painting was never ancillary; it was a central idea. For Opalka, there was no idea apart from the act of painting. This was his infinity. In this sense he could be evaluated as a dialectical painter as Hegel was understood as a dialectical philosopher. Opalka's synthesis

became an idea/painting, the result of a numerical destiny, the entire span of 233 *Details* at the end of his life, or, from a conceptual point of view: one vast singular epic given to a rarified existence.



Some of Opalka's self-portraits, left, "OPALKA 1965/1 -∞, Détail -Photo 2787231," 9 7/16 x 12 inches (24 x 30.5 cm), and, right, "OPALKA 1965/1 -∞, Détail -Photo 5455634," 9 7/16 x 12 inches (24 x 30.5 cm) (both photos by Vincent Lespinasse, courtesy Dominique Lévy Gallery)

By 1989 — the artist, then in his late fifties — had calculated that his paintings would move through a show gradation of gray to grayish backgrounds before arriving at white. According to Opalka, this would occur sometime in his seventies. Consistent with his calculation, the artist passed away in 2011, sometime after his exhibition at the Yvon Lambert Gallery in New York. He was 79. His life-long project remained intact, as he wished it: within whiteness, on the verge of infinity.

[Roman Opalka: Painting ∞](#) continues at *Dominique Lévy Gallery* (909 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until October 18.

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