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Everything and Nothing At All: Roman Opalka Painting Infinity

by Saul Ostrow

Roman Opalka: Painting ∞ at Dominique Lévy

September 4 to October 18, 2014

909 Madison Avenue at 73rd Street

New York City, 212 772 2004



Installation view, Roman Opalka: *Painting ∞* at Dominique Lévy, September 4 to October 18, 2014 © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS),

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Dominique Lévy supplies the back story to French-born Polish artist Roman Opalka with a show of works from 1959 to 1963 that precede his breakthrough to the series for which he is best known, $1 - \infty$, also presented here: the precisely painted horizontal rows of numbers in white on a gray ground. Upstairs from the display of Infinity canvases are seven works on paper titled *Etude sur le mouvement* and two works titled *Chronome*, 1963. The *Etudes* are typical of European gestural abstract painting of that period in that Opalka is engaged in filling the surface of the paper with improvised black ink scrawls, marks and squiggles. The resulting compositions are irregular masses floating on the empty page. By the end of this period Opalka's marks have become less and less expressionistic as he covers the entire canvas with small dots, resulting in black monochromes. He then abandons this approach, but not entirely, as he will continue to be concerned with filling the painting's surface with marks for the rest of his life. The principle difference is that his marks are less subjective and more logical once they are numbers, which define their own structure and order as well as being both abstract and representational.

The infinity series was the result of Opalka deciding in 1965 to count to infinity and in turn, paint each number in sequence. By the time of his death in 2011 he had filled 233 canvases. They are all the same size and all inscribed with numbers drawn with near machine-like consistency. The count begins in the upper right corner and ends lower left. Each painting contains 20-30,000 consecutive numbers. Each numeral that makes up these numbers is slightly lighter than the previous one. The fade is a result of the diminishing amount of paint on the brush as he moves from one numeral to the next. The density of white signals the beginning of the next number.

At a distance the numbers' differing densities form optical patterns as a result of which the works initially resemble blotchy monochromes. Opalka considered each painting to be a detail, a fragment of a continuum punctuated by small indifferent incidents. The earliest paintings were of white numerals on a black ground, but over the course of the years Opalka began to add one percent of white to the background color. By 2008 he was painting white numbers onto white grounds. According to gallery notes, Opalka recorded himself saying each number as he worked.



Roman Opalka, Etude sur le mouvement, 1959-1960, Ink on paper, 34 7/8 x 25 inches. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Accompanying the paintings, though much less interesting than them, are Opalka's self-portraits in which at the end of each work session he would take a passport style photograph of himself. Subsequently, we have a history of his aging appearance.

Like Samuel Beckett, Opalka found incredibly economic solutions to making works that are seemingly about everything and nothing at all. Opalka's paintings are at once formal, process oriented, personal, conceptual, optical, autographic, ethical, aesthetic, concerned with phenomena of repetition, variation, etc., and yet are not about anything more than filling the canvas, duration and persistence (obsession or compulsion) notwithstanding. The works are hermetic in that they tell us nothing about process, time, numbers, mathematics, art, or for that matter about their maker — excepting his resolute commitment to the singular nature of his project.

If parallels are to be drawn with other artists of the 1960s, the two that most immediately come to mind are Ad Reinhardt and On Kawara, both of whom were also committed to rigorous programs of repetition and variation — although each artist arrived at this everything-in-nothing position by very different routes and to differing ends. All three strip painting of subjectivity as much as they can, nearly reducing it to pure information. Reinhardt's so-called "black" paintings are all squares divided into nine smaller squares and are uniformly painted in differing shades of black. Kawara's paintings, also begun in the '60s, conform to one of eight standard sizes, ranging from 8 by 10 inches to 61 by 89 inches and all horizontal in orientation. The dates are hand-painted and are always centered on the canvas and painted white, though the background colors vary. The front page of a newspaper, which corresponds to the day and place the painting was made, accompanies each painting.

Despite their aesthetic differences, however, beyond the repetitive format, each of them has taken as their subject a different aspect of time. For Kawara, time is punctuated by events; for Opalka it is a continuum; and with Reinhardt time is duration marking the transition from one state to another. Each artist seeks to use painting to generate that key existentialist concerns with "being" in time — that is of being present and encountering the real. Opalka uses interval as his means to index our relationship to Newtonian time as something measurable within which events take place and are experienced.



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