

Roman Opalka

WORK AS DETAIL

(the problem is that we are and are about not to be)

I - The « détail »

« It is necessary for the difference to become the element, the ultimate unit, and thus for it to refer to other differences that never identify it, but differentiate it. It is necessary for every term in a series, inasmuch as it is already a difference, to be placed in a variable relation with other terms and hence for it to constitute other series having no centre or convergence, just as it is necessary in the series too, to state the divergence and shifting of the centre. Every thing and every being must see its own identity absorbed in difference, it being nothing but a difference between differences. The difference must be shown in the act of *differing*. The modern work of art tends to accomplish these conditions, and in this sense it becomes true *theatre*, generating metamorphosis and permutation: theatre with nothing fixed, or a maze without a thread (since Ariadne has taken her life). The work of art leaves the field of representation to become « experience », transcendental empiricism or science of the sensitive » (Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*).

Roman Opalka uses the painting as a theatre of difference. The media for his work are canvases, the identical measurements of which - 1.96 x 1.35 m. - are those of the doorway into his studio. His tools are the traditional ones, i.e., canvases, brushes and colours. The colour is always grey, which with time tends to fade out towards white.

On the canvas the artist draws numbers with his brush, starting from one and going on towards infinity. But infinity is not the last figure contained in the painting, but rather, the first one in the painting that comes after it. Because Opalka takes up where he left off, resuming the numbering suspended at the last number in the previous painting. The numbers follow one another in lines, with the same handwriting and the same horizontal tension, arranged in rows that cross the surface of the painting symmetrically. Time and space become dimensions crossed horizontally by the number and by its capacity to measure.

The space is two-dimensional, flattened in its numerical lines corresponding to the linear development of the temporal dimension. Here the line undoes the circularity of the representation and dissolves all condensations, to the benefit of an uninterrupted permutation which is also fully decanted onto the surface of the painting.

If the painting is a piece cut out of a broader space, then time too is removed from a continuum, each time, painting by painting; carried out and ineluctably deferred.

Time is spelt out by the written numbers following each other in lines which inscribe it as movement and pauses. Movement is expressed by the progressive passage from one number to the next, often articulated by the artist's own voice as he repeats the numbering transcribed onto the painting.

The painting also reproduces the pause, the empty space between one number and the next, the interstice between two measures. Thus time is a temporal dimension which simultaneously embraces past, present, future and that which has happened.

In between solid and empty, between noise and silence, between number and interstice, time inscribes its own total digit in that it is the sum of all the numbers and all the pauses and the pause contains a further space acting as a gap, which is a mental gap too, between one number and the next.

Between repetition and difference, Opalka entrusts the interval with the task of repetition and the number with that of the difference and vice versa, depending on the spatial or temporal point of view. In any case both elements are taken up as units of measure, as perceptible counterpoints of the invisible flow of time.

In fact, the progression of numbers, by definition, always tends to develop and is not expected to stop. Thus in 1965 Opalka began a painting with the number one inscribed upon it, and he has been continuing ever since, unflinchingly but with an intermittent pulsion due to the varying pressure of brush on canvas and to the different rhythm of his hand. For Opalka is not a machine, he does not possess the synthesis of time but only the *desire* to demonstrate it and to witness it with relative objectivity. But if time is a continuum, the number, employed to measure it, is a fractioned and fractioning unit, so that it cannot describe all the time by itself and, in order to do so, requires a pause, a suspension of the numbering which permits its continuity. Prior to the number, therefore, there is always the pause, and before the number one there is the empty interstice from which the possibility of the number departs. So the painting, and all the paintings, do not end with a numerical solid, but with the void of their final pauses. Thus the beginning is the initial pause, the piece cut out of a pre-existing time.

The number is what the artist manages to describe with regard to the temporal continuum; the pause is the symptom of an infinite which remains outside his direct experience. The pause becomes a unit of measure of this infinite, just as the number is the unit of measure of the painting's finite. The pause is the number repeated endlessly, even when

there is no longer any portion of the painting to be filled or even any existence that can be used up in that respect.

Now time and space are set in a frontal and differentiated position vis-à-vis each other, with time as the virtuality of absence (the pause), and space as the contextual presence of fragrance and absence. The pause follows a geometrical recurrence of its own which makes use of the number as a noise preparing silence. Opalka has understood the deeply dramatic sense of the temporal continuum, with its numerical progression tending towards infinity, in that it is outside the reach of the individual's circumscribed existence.

Infinity is everything that cannot be measured through numbers, or direct experience; it is the present pushed continually forwards and postponed until the successiveness of the painting.

« The synthesis of time constitutes the present in time, and although the present may not be a dimension of time, only the present exists. The synthesis, which therefore constitutes time as a living present, with past and future as dimensions of that present, is nevertheless intratemporal, which means that the present passes. Naturally a perpetual present can be conceived, a present that is co-extensive with time, but only if the contemplation is made to converge on the infinite of the succession of instants. But such a present has no physical possibilities, in that the contraction into contemplation always qualifies an order of repetition according to elements or cases, necessarily forming a present having a certain duration, a present which runs out and passes and is variable according to the species, the individuals, the organisms and the parts of organisms considered » (Deleuze).

What is truly always present in Opalka's work is the pause, the momentary delay that separates the number and allows it to move forwards towards the future. The number is what is never present, inasmuch as it is never constant in its own quantity. It becomes the difference that crosses through space rather than through time. When it sets out to meet time, then the number too becomes repetition, since it gains access to an irreversible and perennial continuum.

In this way Opalka demonstrates that painting ratifies an entropic state tending towards infinity, in the sense that the last painting never corresponds to the last time but only to the instant of the last number succeeded by the last pause.

The numerical progression is unstoppable, but so is the chromatic progression, which adheres to the same laws, moving from grey to white. Ever since the first painting done in 1965, the figures have been gradually taking on a tonality that attenuates its legibility until

it reaches white on white, and the obliteration of all signs.

Just as the pause, in its repetition, always represents a return to number one and all the pauses multiplied are always the same pause ($1 \times 1 = 1$), so the white number transcribed onto the white surface, becomes the indecipherable unit of time.

The reduction of individual existence is symmetrical to the entropization of the differences, that is, of the number. Opalka traces these differences and validates them under the white sign of repetition. With the passing of time the paintings will acquire a steadily increasing absolute tonality of silence and they will become *theatre*, enclosing the tracks of a voice as it fades further and further away.

Whilst the traces represent the eternal return of the present, the work is organized in detached fractions, as «détails». Opalka says: «There are a few small differences in each *détail*, concerning structure and progression, which stem from the correlative moments of everyday life, such as interruptions, breaks caused by telephone calls, cups of tea or coffee, like a psychogramme. These little differences are certainly not questions of quality, but the imprint of a moment».

Just as individual existence is a *détail* of the infinite temporal continuum, so also the painting and the job of doing it is a detail cut out of the work's process, in the sense of a *quantum*, a circumstance interfering with the whole.

II - (the problem is that we are and are about not to be)

But there is no progress towards the future; infinity is unfinishable. What founds the present is repetition and hence the stalemate, the distance that remains and cannot be bridged. The terms of distance are still one and infinity, the impossibility of any real movement capable of altering their identity. As in Zeno of Elea's paradoxes, in Opalka's paintings the progression definitively validates the initial stalemate position, as it does not alter the initial differences: i.e., the initial pause and the pause which is always postponed and can never be seized.

Opalka accepts this assumption with stoic awareness. He knows very well that infinity is the constant pause that obliterates every initial and final number. In point of fact, infinity is the cell conjugated to the present which also contains, in its fragrance and persistence, the apparent differences between one number and the next. Since every number seems to set a different pause and to start from an inertia circumstantiated onto itself, to say and to paint the number 3 entails a different time from saying and painting the number 5.

And yet the different numerical quantities are always zeroed and sucked back into the void of the pause, which becomes the propedeutic immobility desired from progression. Between immobility and progression, Opalka exercises the *ethics of saving*. Rather than a wastage of expressiveness and subjective fantasy reaching beyond the work's boundaries, Opalka prefers an *economy* of elements, of minimal terms, like numbers, which contain all the references and coordinates

of movement, of the interference between the circumstance of his existence and the infinite dimension of real time. Opalka upsets the diagram and position of incidence between subjective time and objective time, between the horizontality of temporal infinity and the accidental verticality of individual existence.

Now the artist changes position and synchronically, almost specularly, contrasts his own horizontality with that of time. With his own numerical progression he pursues temporal irreversibility, not so much in an attempt to catch up with it as in assuming its structural mechanics and its unrepeatability. But the unrepeatability of time compels Opalka to carry on his everlasting repetition, his permanent oscillation between the pause and the number. The ethics of saving indeed spring from this awareness, which also coincides with the obsession, with the coercion to mark and the inhibition against resuming the past.

This coercion to plot the passing of time corresponds to the wish to be synchronic with temporal movement, which is in itself tautological, a long horizontal line winding endlessly, and which determines the finiteness of individual experience. The inhibition of the past springs precisely from the idea of one's own finiteness, because to pass from the pause to the number and from the number to the pause does not mean to be re-born and to resume time every time from the point zero, but merely to connect with a temporal instantaneousness which entropizes life.

The pause and the number become the iterative stations within which the artist is constrained, a new Sisyphus obliged by laws that are external to him to carry out a movement which leads to nothing new but constantly reaffirms the value of the act, where the act is always definitive in that it is a repetition of itself. Sisyphus does not choose his own penalty; the punishment is imposed upon him from above: to carry to the top of a hill a heavy stone which then ineluctably rolls down to the bottom again, forcing Sisyphus to carry it back to the top, in a perpetual movement.

Opalka establishes by himself the penalty and punishment to be inflicted upon his own work and his own desire. If the desire to catch up with time is heroic, that is to say, beyond the reach of human forces, he subjects himself to a *domestic penalty*, namely, a numerical progression obtained through miniaturized figures, in the sense of a never-ending embroidery. The miniaturization is also an attempt not to emphasize the penalty, to make it less striking, less glaring and so to take some of the heroism out of the desire and bring it down into the almost cordial terms of an agreed impossibility.

The miniature, however, does not suspend the obsession, though it seems to make the desire domestic. Rather, it carries it out and conjugates it along the horizontal iteration of lines placed so that they are symmetrically specular to one another, with just that one, almost sentimental, vibration of the grey slowly being transferred into whiteness. The grey is a path through everyday life, which crosses through all domestic activity. It is the monotonous tone whose

neutrality stands for the interchangeability of every act, never emerging from the traction of temporal horizontality.

And yet the monotony, the repetition of greyness, is stirred by a slight inflection which moves the digit towards imperceptibility. This becomes the slight modification, the delicate exorcism, the permanent repetition. Whilst the myth of Sisyphus moves along a rigidly unalterable course, Opalka's work accepts that fixed course but, almost imperceptibly, waters it down, painting after painting, through the toning-down effect of white.

This modification, although extremely subtle and almost subliminal, is what allows Opalka to feel he is the *master* of his own penalty, of the coercion to count, which becomes a choice, albeit a necessary one, and indeed the only possible one.

The fading colour which gradually extinguishes the visible figure corresponds to the astonishment of time, considered no longer as an infinite line but as time lived. The colour, in its distinctive capacity of physical sensitivity, is the indirect link between the artist's body and his biological rhythm. The initial grey corresponds to the maximum of initial energy; the final white corresponds to the loss of biological rhythm, to the running-out of the perception of time and of the artist's capacity to record it.

Thus Opalka matches the image of time with his own image. Every day, when he has finished his work, he takes a photograph of his own face in front of the painting. In this way he records the imperceptible variation, the desire not to alter, and at the same time the relentless mutation. As it briefly clicks, the camera's objective registers his obsession, just as the figures in his numerical progression mark the *entropic miniaturization of time*. For time has an imperceptible sound. It lets itself be seized only in its elapsing, or else in the interstice, in the interval between what has happened and what is going to happen. Because, as Opalka says, «we are and are about not to be».

In actual fact, Opalka's work is not painting as a separate activity, but it is a piece cut out, a detail, of the singleness of existential circumstances, always seized at the moment in which movement and immobility seem to coincide, where the coincidence corresponds instead to an unattainable present. «We are and are about not to be» becomes the existential state of those who do not recognise any value in life experienced or in the fragrance of one's own past, but privilege, at a level of obsession and fear, the present as a lack.

The «we are and are about not to be» coincide. The present is always the lack of a future, whereby what Opalka is doing with his numerical progression is, in fact, a detraction from one as infinity. Progression, as a symptom of the fear of annihilation and as its exorcism, ends up, each time, by being slightly ahead of it. Thus the two terms of distance, the initial pause and the final one, move closer together and yet remain the unaltered poles which are the basis of existence and establish the detail of the work in its relation to existence.

Translation: Rodney Stringer