

ROMAN OPALKA
interview by Mirella Bandini

MB) One of your Milan shows in 1972 at the Galleria Salone Annunciata included a tape of your voice reciting the same numbers you were simultaneously writing with the brush, besides the works themselves showing various moments in the numbered sequence you painted in time-progression. Does this oral recording always accompany the moment of writing-painting in the numerical sequence depicted on the surface?

RO) No, not always. Otherwise my living space would be full of tapes. The recording only has to do with a *détail* of the *détail*. When I'm in Warsaw, in my studio, I always photograph my face at the painting, every day after work. This act is a complement to my work: what I expressed in my work is reflected on my face. As a record of time passing, this program of photo repetition always entails the same light, camera, and distance (there's this element in my work of repeating the same thing, only it's no longer the same). It has to do with my progressive counting, all my life, for a linear view of time in space, in the illusion of arresting it, recording it each day like the first; my works bear only one date, that of the start, 1965. The last picture I manage to do must be joined to the first. The idea carried out links with the idea's birth; there's only progression in between. I call my pictures *détails* because they're moments of the program in a numerical progression from one to infinity. Each *détail* has its first and last number, like a written page its first and last word.

MB) You've also said how in the past few years, the surface of these *détails* of yours has been passing imperceptibly but progressively, from gray to white. The writing of the numbers, in white, which was on a black background in the first pictures, goes gray for many years, becoming white on white, unintelligible. This lulling of color seems very interesting to me, in that having begun from black and white, which are the two opposites, positive and negative, so that toward the end you proceed to the absence. It is an annullment, but also the belief in positivity, not in negativity. Since you think you will arrive at the end after having flattened all contrasts, giving you not black, but white, which is to say, light.

RO) About three years ago I decided that the surface of every *détail* would have 1.1 % more white than the previous one. That's from when I counted up to 1,000,000. After having used a black background in my first *détail* with the writing in white, I did some research to determine the color I could accept for life. So I decided on gray because it's not a symbolic color, nor an emotional one, and contains in itself all colors in movement. Besides, it's neutral, nothing and everything (in fact you can say gray of a monotonous life) and it's the color that reduces itself most easily, going down toward white. It'll take about twenty years at least to arrive at the number marking the transition to white on white. I did a statistical study on the life of man, as a study of the average man's time, together with the phenomenon of aging with its slowdown of action. This idea came to me at the age

of 34; only by getting to 1,000,000 was I able to grasp the statistical possibility of arriving at 7,777,777 in my work (which only by accident can be read as symbolic) which could coincide with the white on white stage. The whole operation takes up an arc of time of 30 years, about what I expect to live out. Today I'm doing ten pictures per year, working ten and even fifteen hours a day. And I'm still young and strong. With the passing of years the progression will become slower and more difficult, due to age. Otherwise when I get to white on white there'll be a physical-optical complication, in that you can't see white written on white. But I'd like to stay a long time in that period, even if I think it will be tough, being the end of my life. My objective is to get up to the white on white and still be alive. At this point the tape recording will be very important, as my voice counts the numbers as I write them on the white background: I won't be able to see the numbers; the documentation will be written. It could even happen while writing that I mix up a number, which the tape put down right; there's also the problem of giving a document of the work.

MB) This number writing that goes ahead with regularity from one surface to another — in which time in life is registered like on a timeclock, in a sequence of biological pulsation, and of thought — beyond having a clear mental letter, could, it seems, also offer a pictorial one. In the sense of the common origin of picture and writing; and consequently a vibrant optic grill arises, formed by the articulation, more or less thickening from the color white, and the numerical additions on the gray background.

RO) I don't think it's the same thing. My work is not painting. I was a painter, when I arrived at this idea; now I am executor of the idea. All my work is a single thing, the description from number one to infinity. A single thing, a single life. The first and last *détail* of this story are particulars and not certain by quality. I was close to the problems of conceptual art, but when I started carrying out my idea, this was something else again.

MB) From '65 to now you've done about 55 large *détails*, not counting the voyage sheets, up to the number 1,683,000, which you hope to bring up to 2,000,000 within 1975. Drawings are also included in this figure, which you call voyage sheets, done during trips, when you can't to ahead on the large *détails*. These could be seen lined up in a space-time measure of themselves, that of your mental and physical experience, always self-condensing, through the logical structure of the numerical system, in the latest *détail* you're doing, that represents both the departure and the point arrived at.

RO) Yes, it's always the problem of the first *détail* together with the next. It's the moment when they become one. That's why I'm against engravings, reproductions, multiples. Since each of my works, each *détail*, is a *détail* of time. When I decide to go on a trip I try to finish the large *détail* I'm on, to go on with voyage sheets at the next number to start the new progression. Each *détail* has the same size of 1.96 x 1.35, the di-

mensions of my studio door. Since the problem of formality or of quality doesn't interest me, neither does that of measurement. I've always looked for a mental space to work on, to get an object showing important information, more important than painting. Something may be outside the formal problem and this esthetic. Every *détail* has small differences, of structure, progression, that come from daily life: interruptions, phonecalls, tea or coffee, - like a psychogram. These small differences aren't a problem of quality, but bear the imprint of the moment. The very fact of repeating the number out loud as I write it cuts in on the writing, as the variation of tone and pitch of voice reflect on the hand, capable of bearing down firmly or less firmly; such maximum or minimum intensity also depends on swing of the brush dipping in pigment. If one of my *détails* ever got lost or burnt it would be impossible to redo, simply because the *détails* first number and last would be lost. When I start writing I decide mentally to trace the numbers fairly equally; but they come out bigger or smaller among themselves. It's an organic problem, since I'm no machine.

MB) Another very important aspect of your work, one that's tied in with your program of representation, is the determination to never do anything new, but to follow a preplanned sequence all through life.

RO) A question that's often asked is what artists to me seem close to my work. For me it's a strange question, because my position is not to believe that an artist can go on always doing new things. All artists are doing *avant-garde*; gallery people, museums, critics, are all waiting for something new. So artists go on cultivating the illusion of doing something extraordinary. This is the normal rapport of art, of painting, with life. But for that matter it's natural for man to seek something new. I am really outside any of the situations in art. My reality is to have found out that nothing's new, and I use my life to make this document. I don't think there's ever been an artist conscious of not finding and not doing something extraordinary. That's why I don't fit into any group or nametag. I deny the new, also in the sense of new shows. For example, in New York last year, in March I did a show for John Weber, with seven large *détails* and fifteen voyage sheets. This year, in March, in the same New York gallery, same walls, same position, I presented seven large *détails* and fifteen voyage sheets. It goes to show that I don't want to do a new exhibit, but to repeat the same thing, no more interesting than the last. The difference lies in the universal progression and the background of the *détails* that has a slightly whiter color. Nothing else. Before the eyes of New York's art public I had on the same suit, same shirt and tie, as the year before. My work illustrates that no other thing besides time has changed. In the photos I take every day in front of my work I have the proof of this question: today I'm the same, but it's not the same. My organic structure changes each day, but I want to always have the illusion of being the same: the problem is that we are, and are about not to be.

Translation: Alan Jones