

The art of Roman Opalka (1931-2011)

# The Unattainable 88888888



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**The paintings of Roman Opalka created in the period from 1965 until his death in 2011, featuring sequences of consecutive numbers painted against ever-whiter backgrounds, have a deep existential quality**

The mid-1960s, when Roman Opalka (1931-2011) embarked on the project which turned out to be his greatest work and one of the most original artistic achievements of the second half of the 20th century, was a time of dynamic flux on the international art scene. The leading trend was pop art, the conceptual revolution and the minimal art movement were gathering strength, and performance art was in a formative stage; whereas painting, after years of spectacular development, was in a deep crisis. In Poland, the explosion of talent in the late 1950s, when the political thaw had enabled a genuine renaissance in painting, had been followed by a significant regression caused by the tightening of political controls, with severe restrictions on foreign travel and the introduction of censorship.

After studying at the National College of Fine Arts in Łódź and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, from where he graduated in 1956, Roman Opalka did not exhibit his works for several years, believing that he was not yet ready for a confrontation with a wide audience. When he eventually started to display his works – from 1962 in Poland and later also abroad – his exhibitions invariably met with great success.

## Experimenting with form

He worked hard: painting, producing graphics using various techniques, constructing works of art from so-called non-painting materials, and illustrating books. His works usually came in series, which enabled him to experiment with form, mainly abstract, in which he clearly favored simplified, monochromatic solutions. And then, at a time when he had established himself as a successful, recognized Polish artist, he asked himself the question: what is the point? Will another painting, graphic, or poster

make my life more meaningful and thus give something to others? Or will it be just another instance of “littering the world” with an insignificant object created solely to please the eye? And in mid-1965, seemingly accidentally – although in art nothing is ever an accident – a few pieces of paper covered with random, scribbled digits gave birth to the project later entitled OPALKA 1965/ 1 - ∞.

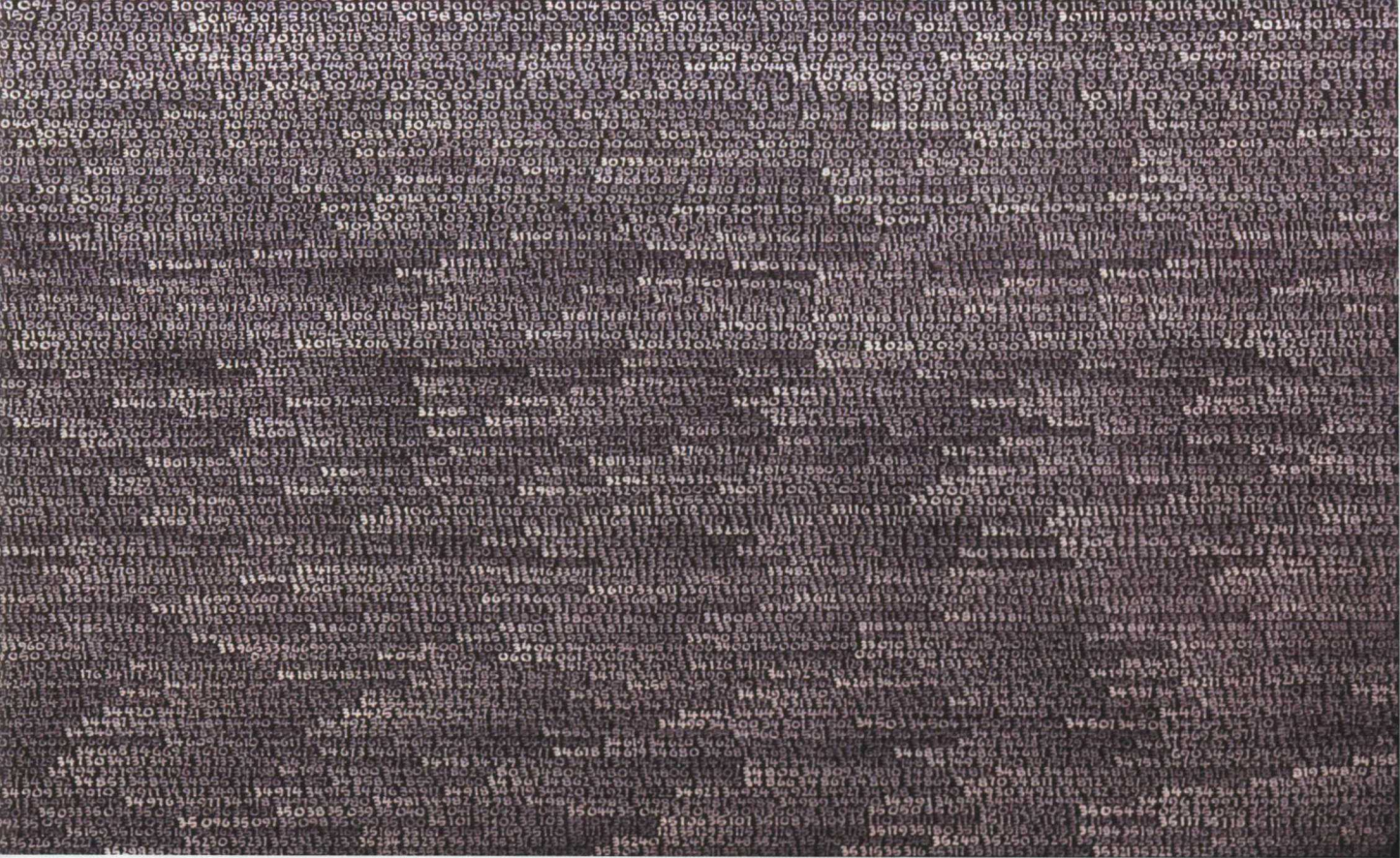
He intuitively felt the great significance of this idea, although he was not immediately able to comprehend its sense fully. Understanding of the project’s formal and existential meaning came to him slowly, during the course of his work on it. Over the next few years Opalka gradually gave up other artistic activity, and from 1970 until his death in 2011 he concentrated solely on his Details, as he later came to call the elements of his project.

The first Detail consisted of all the whole numbers from 1 to 35,327, rendered consecutively in white paint against a black background, and this was followed by other works which betrayed the artist’s search for the final form of the project. They had different formats, with variously-colored backgrounds and sometimes different materials being used, but they had one common element: each started from the number following the last number on the preceding work. It took Opalka several years to finally settle upon a set of standard dimensions for his paintings (196x136 cm), and around the same time he decided that with each new painting of the series he would increase the proportion of white paint in the black background by 1%, which meant that, as the series went on, he was painting in white against an ever-lighter background. He called this “the pursuit of mental whiteness”. With time, he abandoned all other forms of art apart from painting.



Roman Opalka at the opening of ms2, Łódź, November 2008

Piotr Tomczyk/The Museum of Art, Łódź



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A fragment of Roman Opalka's "Describing the world," tempera, canvas, 1965f rom the Museum of Art, Łódź

### The infinity project

In 1973 Opalka traveled to West Berlin, and from there to France, the country of his birth, where he decided to settle. His increased exposure to foreign art, at that time mostly conceptual, and the great success of his exhibitions in Europe and the United States convinced him of the rightness of his decision to focus exclusively on his OPALKA 1965/ 1 - ∞, the radicalism of which remained incomprehensible to many. In Poland, few critics appreciated the intellectual and emotional value of his undertaking - a consequence, surely, of the politically-based hostility to avant-garde, in which his project was rooted. On the one hand, one can detect in it the influence of Władysław Strzemiński's unity theory, which advocated the pursuit of the complete unity of the objects presented in a painting with its background and the lack of any sensorily recognizable representation of reality. Yet on the other, this art is closely tied up, more strongly than in the case of other forms, in the artist's existence, and thus constitutes a certain response to Witkacy's rejection of what he called "visceralness," or psychologically rooted realism in art.

Opalka produced conceptual art but at the same time was still a painter, using canvas, brushes and paints. His paintings did not present real objects, but reflected his emotional states, expressed in the way he applied paint to the canvas. The performance quality and the existential dimension of his "infinity project" were reinforced by Opalka's pronouncing aloud in Polish the numbers as he painted them, which is of great importance here as it shows that his work was deeply rooted in his personal experience and in the Polish language. This begs the question: would an artist whose mother tongue was for example French have been able to create such a project at all?

### Portrait of the artist with a painting in the background

Relatively early in the project, Opalka decided to photograph himself after finishing each painting. These pictures, always showing him front-on, in the same clothes and with the same hairstyle, demonstrate the passing of time in a more obvious and traditional way than his paintings.

But the progression of numbers in his paintings became hugely significant for him. From the outset, Opalka was confronting infinity; the sequence of numbers he was painting - unlike every material existence - had no end. The numbers 1, 22, 333 and 4444 were in his first Detail, 55555 was at the end of the second, and 666666 came after seven years. He assumed that after around 30 years he might reach 7777777, but he knew that 88888888 was unattainable; this number lay beyond the potential span of his life and thus took on a mystical quality. In his final years, in parallel with his painting, he worked on the design of an octagonal building in which seven sides would be used to exhibit his paintings, with the eighth used as an entrance.

OPALKA 1965/ 1 - ∞ is an extraordinarily radical but also tragic work of art: nobody else has ever shown in such a brilliantly simple way the nature of life and the passing of time. ■

#### Further reading:

- Kowalska B. (1996). *Roman Opalka*. Kraków: Modulus.  
Opalka. (1997). *W stronę liczenia* [Towards Counting]. Gdańsk: Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku.  
Opalka R. (1992). *Opalka 1965/1-∞*. Commentary by Ch. Schlatter, trans. Frącz K. Zabrze: M-Studio