

both obvious and unknowable, engendered the art of Roman Opalka, another phrase from Jean Starobinski in *The Ink of Melancholy* (2012) points, without fixing anything, towards focusing our approach to the icons the Polish painter never stopped *writing* (according to the expression used) and *saying* (aloud, recorded over the course of the sessions): "Writing is making signs on a blank page that become readable only because they are darkened by hope. It is to cash in on the absence of future in a multiplicity of distinct words. It is to transform the impossibility of living into the possibility of saying". Of saying to oneself.

Roman Opalka did not look for the fragmentary, the torso, the sketch; his work is not a *pars pro toto*. He did not aim for the *non finito* at the outset, but consciously took the risk or accepted the stakes intimately inscribed in the nature of the "work in progress"—that the intrinsic incompleteness defined as universal entropy, the degradation of the material. Unlike *The Art of the Fugue* (circa 1745) by Johann Sebastian Bach, which seems to have remained unfinished (in the manuscript at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, the writing of counterpoint XIX stops at bar 239) and authorizes any assumption of extensions, OPALKA 1965 / 1-∞ excludes any standard of completion, rules out any horizon that has been constitutively stopped (even death is a variable). That appearance too easily suggests naming incompleteness is its very fulfillment. The genesis, always threatened, continues to be in progress. Even the last number is, like the first, inaugural.

Explicit and ambiguous, linear and discontinuous, inexhaustible and limited in its execution, simple as much as complex in its meanings, of an imperturbable approach prey to external differences, the painting of Roman Opalka gives exemplary body to what Umberto Eco explored and theorized in *Opera Aperta* (1962): beyond the deliberate modalities and meanings, the "form and indetermination in contemporary poetics" welcome the wealth of possibilities, unravel the limits of meaning and give rise to openness, where the multiplicity of significations abounds. Every *Détail* is an open work.

## Words that Resonate

I remember the first time Roman and Marie Madeleine visited my studio in Venice, many years ago. Marie Madeleine, to whom I will always be grateful, was encouraging and affectionate and helped me overcome my enormous awe, while Roman commented on my work with measured, precise words, instantly grasping its meaning,



Mariateresa Sartori, *Il tempo del suono. Onde*, 2018, charcoal on paper, 200 × 810 cm  
Cairn Centre d'art  
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and seeing meaning in it that had not yet occurred to me.

Years later, again in Venice, I remember one of our aperitifs and how he listened to my explanation of the video I was working on, *Studio N.10, Op.25 Tribute to Chopin*. As I write these notes, I now clearly see how Roman immedi-

ately captured the element in that video that could have proved misleading in terms of what I wanted to convey. He pointed out the solution: "Swap the roles", he said, "alternate between man / woman, woman / man, so as to accentuate the circular movement in a sort of endless carousel ...".

He had intuited the potential of video and discreetly showed me the way ...

The video is dedicated to Roman, who died before seeing the solution he conceived.

But there are many other words too: for me it was a privilege to hear him speak, and see him interested in my series of drawings *Tutti quelli che vanno*. We talked about time, the concept of time and how to translate it. In this regard I recall that we talked about mechanical transcription, about how the simple act of transcribing something onto paper or canvas ensures the continuity of memory and therefore the integrity of the self, thanks to a rigorous procedural protocol. I remember that there was always an element of humor lurking, even when we talked about the effort of constant attention, determination and discipline that this kind of protocol requires.



Typus of the plant and of the insect. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *Die Schriften zur Naturwissenschaft. Zur Morphologie*, directed by Dorothea Kuhn. Bihlau, Wienmar 1977, vol. 9A, plate 9, pp. 239-240.

I do not remember when or how Goethe, Goethe the scientist, came into it: his quest for "pure phenomena" that cannot be perceived in isolation but only in continuous succession.

I was surprised to see many of the topics Roman and I touched on during our conversations explored in a beautiful book on the history of scientific illustration, of which I would like to quote some excerpts. I include a short text by Leibniz on the *continuous succession of small phenomena* that per-

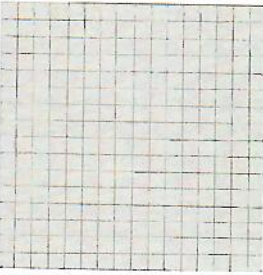
haps Goethe was familiar with, and a poem by Wallace Stevens in which I can hear echoes of Opařka's dry grandeur, the rigor of his work, his quest for an "inevitable knowledge" that we cannot escape, "as a necessity requires".

This, for me, is the only way I can really talk about Roman Opařka, his work and our bond: indirectly, through the words of others, words far from the narrow sphere of visual art. I have to take diversions into different fields to arrive at what for me is the crux, following associations, semantic leaps, hidden intuitions. These are words that speak directly to me, and in which I perceive Roman Opařka's intelligence and greatness, extending in depth and height.

Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison, from *Objectivity*, Zone Books, 2010

"This chapter is an account of the ethical-epistemic project of producing a visually grounded mechanical objectivity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By mechanical objectivity we mean the insistent drive [...] to move nature to the page through a strict protocol, if not automatically. This meant sometimes using an actual machine, sometimes a person's mechanized action..."

Mechanical objectivity required a certain kind of scientist—long on diligence and self-restraint. Was mechanical objectivity ever completely realized? Of course not, and its advocates knew they faced a regulative ideal [...].

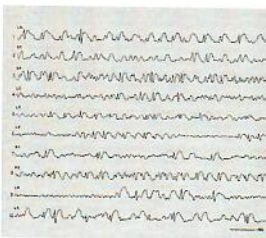


Crosshatching used for the drawings of the series *Tutti quelli che vanno*

Mechanical objectivity remained an always-receding ideal, never fully obtainable. But despite being an ideal, it was not without direct and immediate effects on (scientific research) [...] there was a continuing and insistent emphasis on moving from the interpretative to the procedural.

The effort of attention was the supreme act of will.

In the case of weather and natural history diaries, the diurnal rhythms of the observer were intertwined with the observations, and the observation of self was often inseparable from the observation of nature. Even if recorded impressions could not be molded into a narrative, the bare act of transcription ensured the continuity of memory, and therefore the integrity of the self [...] Enlightenment savants struggled with fragmented and impressionable selves, and ministered to them with journals and regimens. Attention, conceived both as a mental capacity and a scientific practice, fused myriad impressions into unified and representative objects of inquiry.



Frederick A. Gibbs, Erna L. Gibbs, *Atlas of Electroencephalography*, Cambridge 1941, p. 75

Objectivity and subjectivity are as inseparable as concave and convex; one defines the other."

I am moved by the words of the British physicist Arthur Worthington regarding the series of drawings he made and published in 1877, offering a precise

and detailed illustration of the splash made by a drop of mercury falling onto a glass plate: "You will therefore be good enough to remember that this chronicle of the events of a tenth of a second is not a mechanical record but is presented by a fallible human historian".

Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, from *New Essays on Human Understanding*, written in 1704 and published sixty years later.

"To give a clearer idea of these tiny perceptions that we can't pick out from the crowd, I like the example of the roaring noise of the sea that acts on us when we are standing on the shore. To hear this noise as we do, we have to hear its parts, that is the noise of each wave, although each of these little noises makes itself known only when combined confusedly with all the others, and wouldn't be noticed if the wavelet that made it happened all by itself. We must be affected slightly by the motion of this one wavelet, and have some perception of each of these noises, however faint they may be. If each of them had no effect on us, the surf as a whole—a hundred thousand wavelets—would have no effect either, because a hundred thousand nothings can't make something!"

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Wallace Stevens, from *The Auroras of Autumn*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950.

The plain sense of things

After the leaves have fallen, we return  
To a plain sense of things. It is as if  
We had come to an end of the imagination,  
Inanimate in an inert savor.  
It is difficult even to choose the adjective  
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.  
The great structure has become a minor house.  
No turban walks across the lessened floors.  
The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.  
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.  
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition  
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.  
Yet the absence of the imagination had  
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,  
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,  
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence  
Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,  
The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this  
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,  
Required, as a necessity requires.

*The plain sense of things*, stripped of all extraneous trappings, brings with it the indication of an ending, of being directed towards a conclusion. Wallace Stevens' poem, like Opařka's opus, sings "in ever weaker sounds of an unintelligible absolutism and an end". The horizontal line of the inexorable flow of time, its touch becoming gradually fainter and more uncertain, triumphs over the exuberant verticality of an impossible, lost transcendence. Depth lies in the here and now, in succession, in what is discarded, in continuity and flow—"as a necessity requires"—towards the endpoint.