

**ROMAN OPALKA**

**TIME PASSING**

## Personal Structures Art Projects # 03

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This book is the documentation of *Personal Structures Art Projects # 03*. It has been published as a limited edition. The edition comprises 100 copies of which 50 DeLuxe, numbered from 1 to 50, and 50 DeLuxe hors commerce, numbered from I to L. In addition, there have been created 10 Artist Proofs, numbered from 1 to 10. Each item of this limited edition consists of a book and a photograph of Roman Opalka painting in his studio, mounted on dibond and behind plexiglass, housed together in a cassette. The edition is signed by the artist.

This limited edition has been divided as follows:

# 1-50: DeLuxe edition: Luiscius Antiquarian Booksellers, Netherlands

HC I-L: Not for trade

AP # 1-10: Roman Opalka

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Text by Roman Opalka, Karlyn De Jongh & Sarah Gold

Photos by GlobalArtAffairs Foundation

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# ROMAN OPALKA

## TIME PASSING

KARLYN DE JONGH  
SARAH GOLD

## ROMAN OPALKA: TIME PASSING

Today is 9 June 2010. The two of us, Sarah and Karlyn, are walking over a driveway with various roses on each side. It is 11:22 hours when we see Roman waiting for us. He is standing close to the barn in his garden and welcomes us from a distance. We say hello and after continuing our way towards him, Roman greets us with kisses and invites us to his house. We carry our suitcases in preparation for our new art project: *TIME PASSING* with Roman Opalka. We want to spend as much time with him as possible to document a part of his life, while the minutes are ticking away. Together with Roman, we slowly walk the graveled path towards his house, carrying our suitcases, now and then pausing to speak.

11:23

- "How are you doing?"

- "Good, good. And you?" Before we can answer, Roman looks at Sarah and says:

- "White hairs. Already?"

- "Yes, already for a long time."

In previous meetings with Roman it became clear that German is the best language for the three of us to communicate in. So, in German, we talk about the roses, about their different colors and scents, and about the house and its beautiful location near Beaumont-sur-Sarthe in France. When we reach the house, Roman makes a remark about our suitcases and asks to leave them outside on the terrace. While Roman goes inside we do as he asks and follow him a few seconds later. We enter a small hallway with a mirrored hat stand with two piles of hats, and continue into an office room, where his wife, Marie-Madeleine, is sitting behind a writing desk. There are three other women present: Roman's stepdaughter Alexandra, his secretary Catherine and a woman who appears to be the cook. We start greeting them.

11:24

Roman positions himself in the corner of the room, close to the hallway and leans against the doorpost, while we continue to greet everybody. When we are finished, Marie-Madeleine starts speaking to us in French and explains that we can only stay one day, not the two days we had hoped upon. She asks us practical things, about the hotel where we are staying and how we are going to get there. In the meantime, Roman is still standing in the same place and quietly observes what is happening.

11:25

We answer Marie-Madeleine's questions and explain that, if wished for, we could leave any time. After that, Marie-Madeleine asks whether we have been at her house before and we tell her

her about our previous publication *Personal Structures: Time Space Existence* and the interview with Roman that is published in it. Mentioning this meeting of two years prior, Roman says something to his wife, which we cannot understand so well.

11:26

It seems to have a good effect, as Marie-Madeleine now starts to inform us about today's program. She tells us that Roman will take us to his studio where we can stay together and talk until around 13.30, when it will be time for lunch, and after lunch, he will need some time to edit an interview text for an Italian magazine. Roman does not seem too thrilled about this. He makes several remarks about it in French and laughs. Marie-Madeleine continues making clear today's program and adds that the lunch would be enjoyed together with her, her daughter and Catherine.

11:27

After a few seconds, he gets Marie-Madeleine's attention and in French the two discuss the situation around the interview text. When they are finished, we leave the office, following Roman outside to the terrace where our suitcases are still standing. Roman watches us lifting up our bags and then turns around, silently leading us into the house. We follow him, through the dining room and a narrow hall into his studio. A large bookshelf existing of two parts with a gap as a sort of doorway divides the studio in two parts, an entrance area and a spacious working place.



11:28

We close the door behind us and place our suitcase next to the wall in the smaller half of the studio where carton boxes are standing [photo]. Roman looks at the boxes and says:

- "These are preparations for an exhibition."

- "Which exhibition is that?"

- "In New York, at Yvon Lambert."

We suggest to Roman that we take a seat somewhere in his studio and he chooses a spot on the other side of the bookshelf. He points to two benches along a small table and a rocking chair. Sarah takes one of the suitcases with her to the small table, the place where we also sat with him two years ago.

- "You can sit over there and I will sit here, like a king," Roman says while pointing to the two wooden benches. We prefer a place closer to him and when Roman takes a seat in his rocking chair, we position ourselves on the cold, brown tiled floor in front of him.

11:29

- "We have done that before, haven't we? What was the result of that meeting?"

Sarah takes the *Personal Structures* book out of our red bag and hands it to Roman. He recognizes it and is happy that we brought more copies for him. Roman flips through the book,

until he sees a picture of a young woman standing in front of Rene Rietmeyer's artwork at the Venice Biennale 2009. He asks about her and we inform him about her relationship to our project. While Roman closes the book and puts it on the floor next to him, we take the opportunity to tell Roman in more detail what we intend to do today, the reason of our visit. Sarah takes the special edition we recently made with Lawrence Weiner out of our bag and places it on the floor in front of us. Roman bends forward a little with his chair and looks at it. We explain that we brought the edition as an example, so that we could better show what we want to publish with Roman.

11:30

We repeat the intention of our project, that we want to document a part of Roman's life, while the minutes are ticking away. Roman remembers that we had told him that also during a meeting in Venice, Italy, at Café Florian on Piazza San Marco, some months ago. He likes the concept of our art project *TIME PASSING*, so, we leave that subject and continue to speak about the larger context of our art project, the series Roman's book will become part of.

11:31

Roman asks whether there will be other artists in his publication, and we assure him it will be just Roman. We tell him that we have respect for each artist we have chosen for our series, but that we have more than just respect for him.

- "For us, you are at the top."

- "How high? Totally at the top?"

We confirm and Roman laughs.

- "We admire the fact that you yourself and your work are one," Sarah explains.

- "The unity."

- "That is something you do not see so often amongst young artist nowadays."

- "Or not at all," Roman suggests.

Roman laughs again and continues to speak about his position in relation to other artists:

- "My work has a trace-history."

11:32

Now art can no longer develop as Avant Garde, that is not possible. This concept 'Avant Garde Art' is, now we are talking about it... In my case, my work is the only possible example that we can interpret as an Avant Garde art. After Opalka it is no longer possible, no longer will there be made Avant Garde. Perhaps one can get something from Bob Ryman, or artists such as Sol LeWitt. He was a theoretician. Something like Concept Art, that is no longer possible."

Having said that, Roman wants to continue to speak about our project *TIME PASSING*, his book.

11:33

We explain more precisely what we intend to do with our publication, that it will not only be a special edition, but that an excerpt of the text will also be published in our next, large substantial book, *Personal Structures: Time • Space • Existence* number 2.

11:34

Roman utters confirming sounds and shows that he likes that. Step by step, we show him the Lawrence Weiner special edition and tell him that we will discuss all aspects with him and make the visual appearance of the book according to his wishes.

-“Yes, because I do not like this blue.”

-“For you we were considering to make it white on white.”

-“That would be beautiful.”

11:35

We then mention that we would like to have part of the edition signed by him.

-“100 signatures? That is a lot.”

When we promise Roman to come over personally again, he laughs and then he makes clear that he understands the financial aspect of the special edition. He promises to sign the books.

11:36

We continue to discuss the details. Roman jokes about the editing that has to be done.

11:37

11:38

11:39

11:40

While he tells us about the difference between his sound recordings and the passing of time in his paintings, Roman points to the white canvas, which is standing on his easel at the other end of the room.

-“That is linear.”

We look in the direction of the painting and because of the light in the studio we can see the difference in shine between the top and bottom, the difference between the part that is already painted and that which is not. We keep looking, while Roman goes on:

-“But look at one of my pictures. That goes into all directions. I am probably repeating myself, but this was also the case from the very beginning. But it is very important and you should not forget it. It should not only be linear, it should result in a certain dialogue.”

11:41

The three of us continue to speak about time and how quickly it has passed since the first time we saw Roman. For me, Sarah, that was in St. Etienne at the Musée d'Art Moderne, during Roman's exhibition of his Octagon in 2006; and for me, Karlyn, it was at our symposium *Personal Structures: TIME* in Amsterdam in 2007, where Roman spoke about his program.

11:42

He says he recalls seeing us there and then changes the conversation back into the direction of his special edition.

- "White would be very beautiful."

11:43

Now, having an agreement on the color, we continue to discuss the material and the type font. Roman points to Lawrence Weiner's special Margaret Seaworthy Gothic type font and says:

- "This font, I do not like it."

- "That is Weiner's special font. We will not use it for your book."

- "The other font is much better, as it is easy to read and minimal."

11:44

- "I do like the idea of white letters on a white surface, although it is not so easy to read." More thoughts follow.

11:45

Roman then promises to tell us exactly what he wants, before the actual printing of the book.

11:46

We softly bring the conversation back to the 100 DeLuxe copies of the edition we plan to make and mention the photo we would like to take of him, painting in his studio, later on that day.

11:47

In summing up some of the possibilities that crossed our mind to include in the DeLuxe copies, we also mention the clock. Roman says that he indeed likes the photo much better:

- "A clock is simply a form of knowing at what time you come here, at 9 or at 10 o'clock. It is only a means to meet, perhaps for the train or for a flight. The time is inside. I once had a conversation with the artist On Kawara.

11:48

On Kawara creates these so-called *Date Paintings*, from his *Today* series. He says: "If I am not finished between Berlin and New York, then I must destroy this space-time, this period, this *Date Painting*." To me that is not logical, because time is in everything and because that is the case, it should not be necessary for him to destroy his painting. This determination or fixation that he has, seems to be completely Japanese. It has nothing particular to do with time. It is simply a tool so that we can find each other somewhere at a certain moment, in an infinite space-time.

11:49

Still in the Middle Ages, humans have determined themselves by the path of their life, by specific moments of their lives. But that has very little to do with time. The time in their heads, that really was perhaps time. It is in our bodies, in our minds."

- "What do you mean that time is something 'inside'?"

Roman continues and answers Karlyn's question:

- "Your body, your experience, that is something one cannot make precise, that is something one cannot determine. That finds itself between the time of Opalka and infinity.

11:50

In this period of time, my life happens. But that what passes in this period, OPALKA 1965/ 1 – ∞, is not to be specified in the sense of time. In my case, in my concept, the physical aspect of existence is strongly present. On Kawara, for example, makes this documentation of newspapers, to show what has happened. Who wants to look at that afterwards, when that day has passed? People do not even have time to read today's newspaper! This documentation of On Kawara is so archival. In the future we will have no time for it.

11:51

We already do not have time for our own lives. Why should I be interested in his? What would be the time of On Kawara? In an artwork, as in everything that happened in the artworld...

If you would for example take a look at *La Gioconda*, the Mona Lisa, then Leonardo da Vinci is there. There is this interpretation that considers the possibility that *La Gioconda* would be a self-portrait. I am sure, that is true as well, because a painter would very much like to make a beautiful portrait, whether it is a portrait of a woman or not, it is always a self-portrait. You do not need to look at the eyes or look whether the hair is white or not, it is always a self-portrait."

Roman points to his painting again and adds:

11:52

- "This concept is completely unknown as an idea about space-time, the space-time of a work, of a life, of an artist. Perhaps I have already said it, but maybe in this case you must always be clear: What is time? Basically, it is not possible to measure time. My time is not measured. At one moment it is painted with three or four figures and at another moment with only one figure. But the time itself cannot be measured."

11:53

- "The last few days we have spoken a lot about time," Sarah says, "So that we might gain a little understanding of what it is. We thought that time is measured by light."

- "Yes, yes, the trace of light. But of course, that is again a concept that belongs to the instrument, to the measuring of time. Naturally the mind wants to know a lot, but the French physicist and philosopher Blaise Pascal has already thought about this concept very precisely.

11:54

This moment as a unity, is as the smallest in the cosmic space.”

Roman brings his fingers close together and demonstrates the size of this unity.

- “But the largest one as well, since we cannot imagine it, this infinite time span.”

- “You often mention the infinity of time, but on the other hand, as you have mentioned in interviews, you seem to see a beginning of time,” Karlyn remarks.

- “Yes, this so-called Big Bang. But perhaps there are several great ideas. This is something that can be considered. It could be possible in the cosmic space, maybe we are in the aftermath of a Big Bang.

11:55

It is only our own little history, that we have understood. Today there are already theorists and astrophysicists who say that it is possible that there are billions of Big Bangs. This is really terrible and at the same time fantastic, we have shown us our space-time. In my work also our universe is shown. Basically, what I am painting today, my concept, in a certain sense could have already been realized in Greek times.

11:56

They just did not have the chance that the figures... For example, the zero was not there yet. Zero is a very wonderful concept, because with zero one can count infinity.”

- “But you have started your program with the number one and not with zero. Why did you choose this?”

Roman complements the question and then answers:

- “Zero was outside,” and after a pause he adds: “Of course, I have asked myself this question: should I start with zero or with one? A child does not come from zero; a life does not come from zero. Also the Big Bang does not come from zero. At least there was a certain energy present. It was possible for the Big Bang to explode. The idea to start something from zero is meant as a mathematical tool.

11:57

For example, when you count human beings, then you start with one, not with zero. Zero was always outside. Zero was outside of the painting. At the beginning of my program, I have asked myself incredibly deep questions. In that sense, I could not afford to make any mistakes. Would I have started from zero, mathematically it would not have been a scandal. But in a philosophical way, zero is for me outside. At that time, when I painted this figure...”

Roman shapes his hand as if he is holding his brush, looks straight ahead and moves his arm slightly downwards, painting a 1 in the air and following his movement with his eyes. During the move, he simulates the sound of his brush on the canvas:

-“Shhh...

11:58

...‘Painted’ is not well put, but the *one*... I do not know, you write the number *one* down in a telephone number. But basically, the number *one* is different here, in my program. The Greeks have already said it: the number *one* is everything; it is not just a *one*, it is a sign that creates everything. The number *one* is the basis of everything, it is the beginning.”

While making a similar hand gesture as that of Roman, Sarah asks him whether he can still remember the moment he first started and painted his number 1.

- “Yes, that was an incredible emotion. I do not remember how long it actually was, but I had difficulties with the rhythm of my heart. That comes from this emotion, this unity, this Being [*Dasein*].

11:59

And this stroll, about which we have already spoken, that was not so relaxed. I was very tense. I heard my heart beating. This arrhythmia was the reason that I was in the hospital for a month. I had good connections in the hospital and thus I was registered as an officer. I was saved. Had it been otherwise, it could very well be that I would no longer be alive. Because one can see even today in France, there is no place in the hospital, all beds are filled.

12:00

Back then, in Poland, it was even worse of course. Because of these connections, I had a chance.”

- “When this 1 already contains everything, why did you continue painting?” Roman complements the question again and continues.

- “One can ask the question: why? Strictly speaking, it is this dynamics or power of existence, of nature. I could have said: “I do not want to, I will not!” A child could know what is our existence. No, no, I do not want to. I do not want to exist; I do not want to live. But this strength of life, this power, is so strong.

12:01

It is strong like an animal. We know how that happens in nature. Of course: man has that ability, that he can ask himself philosophical questions. Animals do not have the difficulties that we humans do have: why are we born? That is a very well known and very banal question. If a child asks such a question however, his parents do not have an answer, at least not in a philosophical sense.

12:02

But this is without any intellectual right. A philosopher can say that it makes no sense to exist, but he is already there, he is alive. But what do you do? Commit suicide? This question also belongs to my work. Should I buy myself a pistol? Or should I nevertheless execute my program? I decided to do that, to realize my program. Doing it is a certain type of

suicide, but it is a suicide that creates a work. This moment in time is a work. But that is only one aspect of the question why we exist, why we live.

12:03

The other is in my case also a response to this time, this situation in contemporary art: what is there still left to do with regard to the history of art?"

Roman reminds us of what he said before about Avant Garde and suggests that maybe in the future, it would be possible to make something like his concept. Intrigued by what Roman said about suicide, Karlyn asks him whether he had ever thought about killing himself.

- "Yes, it is a certain type of suicide," Roman lightly replies and continues, "But at the same time it is a work. The French call it an intellectual pirouette. It means that I can be very aggressive towards existence, but that I have not killed myself. I did not commit suicide.

12:04

I was rescued. To paint a work, that was my rescue."

Roman now refers to a story by Marguerite Yourcenar about a person building a boat and rowing into infinity. He explains that it is important for him, because the suicide of the Chinese is represented as a metaphorical act. The Chinese is 'simply gone' and loses himself in space-time.

12:05

- "In a sense, that is also my work. I have determined that I move towards the horizon and the horizon moves along with me as well. In my case, infinity is like an instrument for death. Let me repeat that Leonardo cannot say when his *St. John the Baptist* is finished. He knew already, he was incredibly intelligent, he had no answer to the question: 'when is a work finished?' He has used the sfumato as his painting technique for the *Gioconda*, because of that one cannot say: "My painting is finished."

12:06

One can go ever more deeply. And my work—only just—has an answer. A work of mine is always finished, completed. Always. Just like our existence. In the moment that a child is born the completion is already there. In the moment of birth, death is already there. For that reason, my method is so fantastic. My number *one*, I could have died immediately. Of course, it was complete inside of my existence. But with regard to my work? It was an idiot, there in Warsaw, there on the roof, who considered to give himself such a life, like today..."

Roman sticks his finger in the air and pauses, before continuing:

12:07

- "...Fortunately, already for 45 years, it has created itself. And maybe that is a good message for my current existence. I am often asked why I did not create other things after I painted my number one, why I have continued to paint my numbers.

I was already quite known as an artist before starting my program and could have done it. But when I would have done that, my work would have been an anecdote, and not a program. It would not have been meaningful. The work would have been like a gimmick, like a plaything."

- "You have often said of your work that it is nonsense."

12:08

- "Yes, our existence, it does not make any sense. When you would be religious, you would probably say something else."

Roman tries to remember a story in which this situation was being discussed, but he cannot recall it. Then he comes up with:

- "But what was there before God? This is a diabolic question."

12:09

Roman seems to be looking for words in German, Sarah takes over and says:

- "But Roman, for us, your work is no nonsense at all. For us, it is very important as it shows humanity the importance of time, the consciousness about time."

Roman remembers now what it was he wanted to say and asks whether he can continue his explanation.

- "The sense in my work has a really strong dimension of nonsense."

12:10

In French we call it *le sens du non-sens* [the meaning of non-meaning]. That means the sense of nonsense, this strength or power. Never has a work demonstrated this nonsense so heavily."

Roman repeats in French what he just said and then continues to explain in German:

- "Perhaps 'answer' is not the proper word, but my work is a response to nonsense. Such nonsense has never happened before. At least not as a work of art."

After sketching an anecdote of a situation where people are complaining about the nonsense of life while drinking liquor in a bar, he refers to Marcel Duchamp. Roman tells us that he was a student of Duchamp, but that he criticizes his teacher for not asking the question about 'what can still be done?' and instead of making art, rather chose to continue playing chess.

12:11

When Roman seems to have finished his statement, Karlyn continues asking about his work.

- "You have been painting numbers now for 45 years now and you seem to only be painting a few numbers a day. How do you feel about dedicating even the last moments of your life to painting, realizing your program?"

-“Yes. Of course. You can always and extensively ask yourself this question. An old man who wants to continue living forever, but in an intellectual or logical sense you could say: “I quit.”

12:12

Elderly people may not have the material possibilities to continue living. But this nonsense, and the difficulties with the body... You might say that it is not sufficient enough and that you make an end to it. This idea is a really great idea and it is always there. Suicide is a very strong freedom. But then still you can ask: is it still possible? If you do not want to continue to exist. This suicide is good news.

12:13

It is good news, just like death itself is good news.”

Sarah disapproves of this and softly whispers that she does not agree and wants to live forever.

- “Yes, we always have this physical aspect that is included in death. Yes, of course, when I am saying this, I am not thinking of the people whom I have known and who are no longer alive, such as my first wife. The physical condition of my body is terrible at the moment, now that I am telling you this. But these thoughts are present as well: “What is still left to do? What is still inside of it? Not much, but still.

12:14

It is a very strong feeling when you visit the graves.”

Speaking of graves, Roman mentions Leonardo da Vinci again and talks about the uncertainty regarding the location of his grave and adds that today’s technique makes it so easy to find out details about corpses. Concerning a possible location for Leonardo’s grave, Roman sees a possibility in a spot in Bologna where an unbelievably large skull was found.

12:15

- “How do you feel about your own death at the moment?”

- “Terrible! That, which is so terrible about death, is precisely this physical part. But in a philosophical sense, in the sense of Being, of existing, death is a gift. It is a gift, because we are finally liberated from our bodies. Sleeping is comparable with a certain ‘little death’, because at such a moment, we are no longer there. Perhaps we are dreaming.

12:16

Perhaps there are dreams which give certain information.”

Time is passing, while Roman speaks about the enigmatic quality of dreams. He tells us that he does not dream often, but remembers the strong feeling of information he had each time he dreamt about his mother. For the next few minutes, he wonders that something like that can happen, although his mother has been dead for a long time.

12:17

12:18

We try to bring the conversation back to his work and Roman's concept of time and ask whether he would be able to give us a 'definition' of what time means to him at this moment.

12:19

- "Basically... There is a definition that has already been said by the philosopher Immanuel Kant: time does not exist. Time is an idea, like we have when going for a walk. For Kant it was at approximately 11 o'clock. When, back then in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, people would see Kant, that was the moment on which they could determine: this is the stroll. But what has happened in Kant's head during this stroll, this is time and that cannot be measured. Then Kant made a mistake by saying that time does not exist. But time is the only thing there is. Time is not there in the sense of measuring time.

12:20

I repeat: what has happened in his head during his walk, that is time. The steps are already there, but in between the steps that we take, is our life, our thoughts."

12:21

The stroll of Kant, reminds Roman of another philosopher whom he considers very important: Martin Heidegger. Roman mentions Heidegger's *Feldweg* and we shortly discuss the political climate that was present during Heidegger's lifetime.

12:22

30

12:23

Roman compares Heidegger's Nazi complications, with the concessions he made himself because of the communist era he grew up in. In addition, he mentions Malevich, who—as Roman puts it—as well, made "communist propaganda."

12:24

12:25

Karlyn wonders whether this communist climate he was living in, was not also fruitful, because of a lack of commerce.

- "Yes, that was my chance. Maybe it was the biggest chance I have ever had in my life. It was because I have lived in a system where such a work could come about. The work has no sense of course, but the nonsense was so strong that it could happen. It was not a political work, but on the other hand, when you would go deeply into it, that is not correct: in a certain sense it was also political.

12:26

I had an exhibition in Warsaw, Poland. At the moment I would have that exhibition in Warsaw, I myself was actually in New York, so I filled the show with my *Carte de Voyage, Travel Details*. Someone then said: "The exhibition is closed because of ideological reasons." A very intelligent member of the Communist Party came to the opening; he sat down and said, "Now you have gone too far." He understood the nonsense better than anyone else.

31

12:27

The nonsense in my work is so strong. It does not make any sense, just like our existence makes no sense. For a communist life is meaningful: you have to work for the society!

12:28

For your country! Of course, there is something to it, to be active in one's life. But for such existential matters, I do fight."

- "Do you believe you did something good for society in making your work?" Karlyn continues.

- "No," and after a pause, "No, and especially not for the society. Did Socrates do something good for the society? Philosophy has absolutely no purpose for society.

12:29

There is a part of philosophy that deals with the society, but the Greeks were already an elite. We were the ones who have popularized it."

12:30

- "By displaying your *Autoportraits*, your self-portraits, in an exhibition, you usually have a certain distance between the photos, larger or smaller, depending on the time that has passed between making them. In this case, how is for you this relation between time and space?" Karlyn wonders.

- "It does exist, but not in an entirely accurate way, because it belongs and depends on the space. If I have to prepare an exhibition in a gallery, I make a journey to this gallery. It is necessary, I do it to know what works to exhibit and how many. Maybe I do not go back and forth to New York; in these cases I will get a floor plan of the building.

12:31

From these plans I already have certain information, but it is always best when I travel over there. Apropos your question: it is always best to create the room, the space, in such a way that the different sequence of photos... I have already made so many photos that I cannot show all of them. I have this dialectic in my painting as well. But one single photo of my face is not enough.

12:32

That would nearly be similar to a photo in a passport. If there would only be two photos, it already becomes interesting. Why? The two are not the same. It is the same human being, but not in the same period of his life. It is there that my work begins. To have the possibility to see that time has passed, perhaps not in your hands, but in photos it shows up clearly and exactly. In more than one photo this stroll becomes clear, this process of my program. This project has already been developed since years and years.

12:33

And this person that you see on the photograph has found himself in another space-time. A young man of the 1960s..."

Roman points to a sequence of pictures, three *Autoportraits*, hanging on the opposite wall. Through the opening in the bookshelf, we see Roman in various stages of his life, from the 60s until the present time. We turn around again and look straight ahead at Roman, who is sitting in front of us today, now.

- "That is really a very strong situation. That what belongs to my work, also belongs to this Marxist dialectic, in which one makes a project, a program. The Soviet had planned everything.

12:34

Every ideology, whether it is right- or left-wing, makes a certain program. But the Communists and Fascists, they are from the same family. They naturally already had a concept, which existed in programming the people. And also in my work there is a certain program, but my program is nonsense. But this nonsense creates an artwork. Because of this *planification* [precise planning], my work could happen.

12:35

In Paris or New York it would not have been possible. The whole Daniel Buren group was then close to art, but they may not have made it. How can you develop yourself? Buren makes very different things nowadays."

- "Does that also mean that you have programmed your own life?" Karlyn wonders.

- "Yes, exactly, that is because of this *programmation* [programming]. This man in my exhibition, of whom I just spoke, had understood my work exactly.

12:36

This *planification* for nonsense. A laborer will work and sleep. I am going to work and sleep, but what about my work? What is my artwork? It has no sense: I cannot eat it, I cannot... Yes, it is nonsense. It is perfect nonsense. Such a work in this contemporary system would have no chances of surviving. The government, the Communist Party has—quite paradoxically—bought it.

12:37

The Polish have always had two parallel sides of intelligence: we do something for the Party, but perhaps also for our culture. And they bought my work."

Roman continues with, for us difficult to follow, thoughts about the cultural climate in Poland at the time when he started his program, and tells us about the practical complications of being ideological and about how politicians create installations of their power and abuse their powers.

12:38

12:39

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12:43

- "You have just spoken about the Prime Minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin, who according to you, cannot forget the past and moves into a certain direction and makes decisions according to that. Roman, are there for you certain restrictions that you cannot free yourself from? Or things that determine the decisions you make?" Karlyn wants to know.

12:44

- "No, maybe in the sense of the power that was present there, that was a chance to live. And it is also important to say, I was not so naive as perhaps the artists in New York and Paris were. In a philosophical sense, that was the world, that was the future. I did not dream of a revolution, of course. I had already gotten to know about it and experienced it as something negative and bad, as far as it comes down to the result of the revolution. I knew that the result would always be the same.

12:45

Sooner or later, each power seizes the same: a certain confiscation of freedom. The ancient Greeks had considered freedom for their people, but that was only meant for the elite. The others lived like animals. It is always possible that the elite uses the other people."

After this part about politics, the conversation moves in another direction when we ask Roman about the religious aspects of his work.

12:46

Roman comments that the word 'religion' is maybe not so adequate in this context. He prefers the word 'metaphysics': his work is more metaphysical than religious.

- "Metaphysical is physical. It is strong, and it is meta: it is larger than that, it goes beyond that. And that is something that always belongs to a work like mine.

12:47

The power of metaphysics is this nonsense."

Roman's words remind us of what he said in his interview for our book *Personal Structures* two years ago, about the 'path to white'. We wonder whether that cannot be seen as something religious or metaphysical and ask Roman what this path means to him. As a response, he compares the white on white square of Malevich with his own work in relation to the possibility to continue painting, the question whether there came an end to art. Roman mentions the *planification* of his work, its *programmish* aspect, which—as he puts it—is nothing like the contemporary programming in computer-based art.

12:48

12:49

- "When you first started your program, you made that choice to show time with numbers. Why did you do that?" Sarah asks.

-“That belongs to what you see here on the wall.”

Sarah and Karlyn look at the interesting, dotted painting that is hanging on the wall next to the window behind Roman’s rocking chair, while Roman explains that this was painted possibly in 1963, as a result of the wish to show time. He had considered several instruments then and at that time in his life, the hourglass seemed a good way to show the passing of time. It became the start of a series of works, called *Chronomes*.

12:50

But—as Roman adds—the hourglass had the disadvantage of repeating itself and was limited to an amount of three minutes, which to him was not enough to show time passing.

-“This work was the last stage in the experiment I made about how one can make a time manifest.

12:51

At that time, I painted with tempera. Again and again, I always washed it off and then painted these time-dots new again, just like they are in an hourglass.”

Roman paints dots in the air, in a seemingly random way.

- “In the hourglass however, you cannot tell where you are. “In this picture,” you could say, but that is a little vague.”

Roman shows the chaos regarding the ‘moment’ in his hourglass painting by moving his head in many directions.

-“I was here, here, here, here, here, here...” he adds, while still moving his head, “There is no completely precise point where I am. I was here when I showed this point.”

12:52

Roman tells us that he noticed that people had the feeling they were looking at the cosmos, when viewing his work. As a consequence he stopped the series, because:

-“This dot,” he paints a dot in the air, again shaping his hand as if holding a brush, “Was not obvious.”

He tells us he painted other things for about a year, but he was not content with them.

12:53

“They were the type of canvasses that the French artist Pierre Soulages makes nowadays, the difference being that Roman made them white on white and Soulages black on black, but forty years later,” he adds.

12:54

-“What you just said about your hourglass paintings, that you are here, here, here, sounds similar to your voice recordings of Polish numbers, the *mixage* [mix], that there is no direction, nothing to hold on to,” Karlyn remarks.

-“ Yes, if this *mixage* is here as well, we know that we are dealing with a part of the whole. I mean, one of the many different

parts of the entirety of the program. If we take a walk, speaking of Heidegger's *Feldweg*, what happens in the mind, goes in all directions."

Roman points to the hourglass painting on the wall behind him again and continues:

- "That goes also in all directions, but in this painting the directions are not precise.

12:55

If you take a point here, in one of my *Chronomes*, then you are in this total. Here, in the *Chronomes*, you are in the whole. But where has it started? If I look at the figures that I painted today, I know that this number 1, this figure, moves itself. This number one that was there at the beginning, is the same figure, but has a different meaning. It is like our existence. A number is only its potential. After this moment comes this space-time. And my program makes that very clear.

12:56

But in my hourglass paintings it used to be like this: each point is a number one. And that is what happened to me, when I was waiting for my wife in Hotel Bristol in Warsaw, Poland. When we have time, we have the chance to ask ourselves interesting questions. Because normally we are running from one place to the next. In philosophy that is well-known: when one is waiting, that is the chance that we have, because then you have time.

12:57

To be waiting is a gift," but he adds, "When you are intelligent. In other cases it is just like: "Oh, shit..."

Together we laugh at Roman's acting. Then Karlyn continues asking questions.

- "You have determined your program in 1964. In the years that came after, have you ever had the temptation to change the visualization of your concept? That you thought, maybe I should make the figures a little bit bigger, for example."

12:58

- "Yes, that is one of the very important questions that I have asked myself. I have made sketches for example. We had laid them on the floor of my studio and my brother found them there and sold them to a museum. In a certain sense, by selling them he saved some of these sketches. This is the paradox; otherwise they would have just ended up in the trash.

12:59

On these sketches you can see how I have considered my way of showing the passing of time. You can see how I tested the size of the figures, but you can also see how I considered painting a one for example. And 2, and 3 as well, of course, and the figure four especially: shall I paint it like a chair or like a hill? Angles would naturally not be good. To make sketches like that... that is the way it was back then. Nowadays, with the computer, that all became much easier. The figures have already been programmed beforehand.

13:00

For me this was very important and I have made such sketches for almost a year. But then I said to myself: now I will start. And that was really a very great emotion. I thought, I have to keep away from my studio window, because the building stories are so high. This moment, this one, was so incredibly important. It was so very strong that I—but I have already mentioned that—developed a problem with my heart.

13:01

This is not only because of the tension, because of the intellectual emotion, but also because of my body. If you paint or present numbers like that, whether they are large or small, you are very free with regard to respiration, breathing in and out. That is something I have learned afterwards. I have found a certain profession for myself, my Opalka-job. And in this job that I created for myself, I now have to let my body function in a certain way. The first picture that I painted in my program took me seven months.

13:02

That is not exactly the right amount of time, but it certainly did not take longer than those seven months. I placed the picture against the wall, with its surface facing the wall, not with its back. I did that so that I could not always look at it. From time to time I looked at this painting, repeatedly. A magical piece. And the size? The size of the number is derived from the size that I am able to see when I am standing in front of

the canvas. On the *Travel Details* the numbers are much smaller, that is because the format is smaller. Once, I have made a gift for someone on which the figures are still even smaller.”

13:03

Roman remarks that he does not make gifts anymore and tells us an anecdote about a situation regarding his *Travel Details* for an exhibition at a Gallery in Vienna, Austria. The gallery apparently never sent him back his work.

-“The *Travel Details* have developed from the idea to work differently some times. Otherwise, it would always be like that,” Roman says while pointing at the unfinished canvas resting on his easel.

13:04

-“I had to travel to bring my propaganda into the world. Because: what do I do in the time that I am in New York? The *Travel Details* are in a format of at least A4, they are not exactly A4 because they are not so precise.”

- “How is the continuation of your numbers with regard to your *Travel Details*? Do you continue painting your numbers? Or is there a gap in your painting of the numbers that you used for your *Travel Detail*?”

-“No, I have to finish it first.”

We can sense the dedication of Roman to his program and the three of us joke about the things he has to do before going on a journey.

13:05

- "Of course, in this case I have to finish it to the end. But today this is no longer my problem, because since the border between East and West is no longer there, I do not make any more *Travel Details*. Back then, when I went to New York, I did not only go to make an installation at John Weber's Gallery for instance, I had also used this trip to stay in New York for some time. Nowadays, I do not have time to stay in New York. A week is already too long for me.

13:06

In the communist times, I had to work for months to get a passport and afterwards three more months to obtain a visa, in order for the Americans to accept my trip to New York."

13:07

- "So you did not make any *Travel Details* in the last 20 years?" Sarah asks.

- "No, the last one was maybe in 1990."

Karlynn suggests the possibility that it might have been a pragmatic or financial decision to start with the *Travel Details*, that because of them, Roman would have a painting that might be easier to sell. But this is not the case. They are even more expensive when considering the number of figures on the picture, Roman says.

13:08

- "In the case of my concept of white on white, that is so very complicated that I may never in my life bring it to an end."

We look at the prepared canvasses that are leaning against the wall. There are five. Karlyn notices that two years ago, when they visited Roman, there were seven paintings lined up. The other two seem to be also still in the studio and Roman shows them to us from his rocking chair. The seventh is finished and stands behind the others; the sixth is standing on his easel and is now painted halfway. We are told that Roman keeps them there just in case, because he already sold his last two paintings: the next-to-last to a museum in Poland; his very last, unfinished, painting of Roman's program, he sold to the Sammlung Lenz Schönberg, which bought it together with the complete studio-installation of microphone, tape recorder, easel and camera. When Roman finishes the one he is working on right now, he will be able to move this 'sixth' canvas. He tells us about the paintings that he has sold and the ones he bought back. He tells us that the painting where he passes the 1,000,000, is in the back of his studio, on a stand behind his easel. Then an anecdote follows about how Roman got that painting back into his possession.

13:09

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13:12

- "You have spoken about your number 1 and your 1,000,000, are there any other numbers that have been similar important for your own life?" Karlyn asks.

- "In a personal sense, no, but in the sense of my program, yes. The special passages, the million-passages. Because these structures are very, very strong and particularly in this picture from the first million, this painting has such a moment... The structure with six figures and after that each number has seven figures.

13:13

And especially it was the moment that I knew: I am going into the million. And that is an incredible emotion. To get to this moment, to reach my one million, has taken as long as seven years. And this structure is phonetically in Polish... Have I already done that for you once?"

- "No, you have not,"

- "So, I was painting my program already for seven years and then I come to the point where the numbers consisting of six digits change, into numbers of seven digits.

13:14

I am saying," after a short pause, Roman straightens his back and seems to concentrate himself on what is about to come, then he continues in Polish. His voice is softer and deeper now and has a slow, monotonous rhythm. We are impressed and quietly watch as Roman is approaching his one million.

- "*Dziewięćset dziewięćdziesiąt dziewięć tysięcy dziewięćset dziewięćdziesiąt dziewięć...* Maybe I am going a little fast, but the rhythm is there. The emotion was so very strong on the tape that I recorded... Unfortunately, a gallery owner has lost the tape. Back then, I had not taken this emotion, this passage, so seriously. I repeat," Roman pauses and goes back into his position of pronouncing his numbers in Polish, "*Dziewięćset dziewięćdziesiąt dziewięć tysięcy dziewięćset dziewięćdziesiąt dziewięć...*," Then Roman states that the French count very badly, "The history of the physicist and philosopher Blaise Pascal with his systems of numbers... The French count illogically."

- "That is different in Polish?" Sarah asks.

13:15

- "Yes, for example 21 in German language, is not right, because one comes before twenty: *einundzwanzig* [one and twenty]. The Polish language and Latin are perfect. In Italian it would not be a problem either. So to come back to the story with the millions, I repeat: six times the figure zero. They do not repeat themselves. You always communicate the six digits in one total. When I reached that particular moment..." Roman pauses for a moment and straightens his back. His right hand bends, pretending to hold a brush. In his left, he is holding an invisible cup of paint. He dips his brush into the paint, while describing to us in words what he is doing.

- "Now I am preparing my brush and everything that is about to come.



13:16

I say *jeden* [one]... So, I am not announcing this million immediately. I take the air into my lungs."

Roman does as he says. We see his chest move up.

- "*Jeden*," he says in a deep, slow voice.

We hold our breaths and watch while Roman quietly paints six zeros in the air.

- "Then I paint these six zeros. I do not say a word, because there is nothing to say. Listen to me. I say: *jeden*... *million* [million]. First come the six zeros, and then I say *million*," while saying it, Roman breathes out, "After the six zeros, I can say *million*, previously there was only the figure one: *jeden* then a pause in which I am painting these six zeros and *million*. It is very difficult to understand, this emotion, and also this moment in time. And the emotion that I have as an artist..."

13:17

And then it continues: *jeden* and this time followed by five zeros and then the figure 'one' again. Twice the figure one. Because of the five zeros, the logical right is created to represent this other 'one'"

Watching Roman, painting the million in the air and saying the words in Polish, his eyes seem to be filled with tears. There is still quite a strong emotion present. We ask him about these emotions which he still seems to feel very strongly.

- "What I have experienced... Of course, I could not go on. My work has already become known, but as good and as strong as I have felt it, no one else has felt it like that.

13:18

This means: I can continue to function in this work. We have already discussed that. But it is this emotional part that is really wonderful to experience. What is without emotion is this Big Bang, which is making itself always stronger. If God had existed, he would also have been very excited about this space."

Sarah proposes to take a look at Roman's work. We get up and together we walk through Roman's studio to where his work is standing on his easel [photo].

- "Roman, are there any specific numbers that you are still looking forward to paint?"

13:19

At the moment there is not, he says while switching on the light in front of his canvas: the lamp he uses for taking his *Autoportraits*. Because of the white on white it is even with the light on difficult to see where Roman painted his last numbers. Slightly we can decipher the place where he stopped painting the day before. But which number it is, also Roman does not immediately know. He has to put on his glasses to see it. While walking away to get his glasses, Roman remarks that he can see without his glasses, but that he needs them for the contrast: 5 million 591... Even with glasses, it is almost impossible to see. We try to decipher it.

13:20

13:21

- "It is terrible," Roman says.

- "It is not so easy anymore to see it."

- "Yes, of course," Roman puts on his glasses, but he still has difficulties to read his last number. Slowly he reads in German:

- "5,591,675."

- "It is an incredibly meditative work," Sarah remarks while looking at the painting.

13:22

- "Yes, now with my glasses on, I can see it, but to paint it... Of course, when I am already painting, I have the numbers fixed in my head. And then I know: now I should paint a number more, so then comes 676 and so it continues like that. This means, that I do not necessarily think about the last number, because I have it fixed in my head."

- "Do you work every day?" Sarah goes on asking.

- "Yes, but nowadays I cannot do very much. I paint approximately one hour per day. No more. I cannot do that anymore. That is not due to my eyes, but because of the standing. And that is precisely the time, the conceptual time, when I say that my work is connected to my own personal life.

13:23

When I look at one of my *Details*, I see my life. Every artist can say that, Renoir or someone else: my painting is my life. It is like a playground, but much deeper. 'Play' is a bit too banal. It also has to do with: it is my moment in time. There is nothing like a space-free space. These microsomes, these dots, they are like a body.

13:24

When you are looking at a body that is painted by Leonardo da Vinci or any other artist, the shape of that body is only an image. Here it is not only that which you see, but also very clearly that what you carry in your body. Everyone, including Leonardo, could say: "That is my painting, that is me." That is correct. But it is not as strong as in my work.

13:25

My life and death, everything is inside of my work, in the eternal time, in the work process. That means," Roman clears his throat and continues, "That is already defined in Christian thinking: it is my blood, my body. Body is blood. That is a logical error, actually, the body alone is enough. This is the host. It is everything: my blood and my body.

13:26

And like this," Roman points at his canvas, "It has never been shown. At least, not as strong as 'this is my body'. It is almost religious, but I am not religious. Speaking of believing: it is so strong present here, my Being in a painting."

Standing in front of Roman's work, Sarah asks whether it would be possible that, when Roman would paint today, that we would be there as well.

13:27

Suddenly, Roman wants to be aware of the current time. We do not know what time it is and Sarah walks quickly to the other side of the studio to check her phone. In the meantime, Karlyn asks more questions, about how it feels to see one of his old paintings.

- "When your work is so closely related to your life and your own body, do you see yourself as a young man again and who you were at the moment that you painted the work?"

- "You always see yourself every time you represent yourself, our existence. You also see yourself as a child and what we have been like in our existence.

13:28

But that is like a stroll, the *Feldweg* [Pathway] of Heidegger if you wish. That is when the other moments in time show themselves along the way and in the sense that they are thinking... These are the various pathways and the reliefs of this pathway, at the time when I read this text. It was only much later, when Heidegger was seen very critically in Poland, as a fascist.

13:29

Of course, I could not read a text by Heidegger. But later I read it and saw that it is like an Opalka. But maybe there is something else that could be said in this context. Philosophers and poets are always much more difficult to understand than art, visual art. He could have understood them, my stupidities. But in a logical sense, the pathway is perfectly well meant.

13:30

Speaking of *Feldweg*, this story of the million-passages, the six-digits and afterwards the seven digits, they are very, very strong. I am not making myself a compliment. He [Heidegger] would probably have been impressed by it. But that remains only a probability, because I know a lot of people, friends and so from Warsaw, who did not understand it.

13:31

To read Heidegger's *Feldweg* takes a couple of hours, maybe a few days, but my own Pathway takes such a long time. To understand this, why you would do something like this, it is almost like a sacrifice. Such a concept, to realize a work like that, in this sense that is a certain insight. The word 'sacrifice' does not sound very well to me, but it certainly is a sacrifice.

13:32

I had to do it, although it is better not to work, better not to do anything, to just lie down and look at the stars. Someone had to do it. That is why it is a sacrifice to the history of art. I understood that, but who wants to realize that? No one. I

could not say, "Do that, please." In order to do it, you have to understand its necessity, that you have to do something like that. In that sense it is not a sacrifice, because I knew that this sacrifice would also be a chance for my existence in the history of art. So, now we are talking about it: I do not fear history.

13:33

It is not possible to wipe out such a work. That is simply not possible. I have no fear. Death is also a gathering of everything. Probably, apropos the number one, everything is contained in it and this period between birth and death... In the theory of Raymond Moody, for example, a time span takes in the whole, and that cannot be measured.

13:34

And with him, death would be an ending. But this end would already be present in the time between death and 'one', which you cannot measure. And this little point of Pascal, this unit, is the largest. This means: death carries all of that inside of itself."

After Sarah's remark that it is already half past one, Roman explains that we will soon have lunch and that he will take a short siesta afterwards. After that we will be able to continue with him. While switching off the light in front of his canvas, Roman asks us about our plans for the night.

13:35

13:36

On our way to the door we pass a wooden sculpture of Jesus on the cross, hanging on the back wall. Karlyn remembers that Roman once mentioned it as being important to him, and asks him about it. Roman pauses next to the sculpture and looks at it while saying:

- "I am an agnostic, but that what is happening here within this sculpture, in this statue, is better than the sculptures that we see in churches. The pain of Christ is often shown in a bit of a banal way, with blood and all, but here the wood is creating it. The pain is so strong, it is inside the wood. That is why I bought it.

13:37

We know the artist Lucio Fontana. His works also have a sexual part. Here in this sculpture the pain is so strong, a sculptor cannot do that. This has been done by the material. The pain is so very well present."

13:38

- "Do you see similar pain in your own work?" Karlyn asks.

- "Yes, I repeat: Christ has also made a sacrifice for the people. I am not religious, but already the way we know the story of Christ, you understand that that was a sacrifice. And he wanted to do it. I myself also have this question."

13:39

Slowly, we leave the studio and go through the dark hallway with its low ceiling into the dining room. On the wall are two

paintings by Roman from 1949, from before the start of his program, and a light installation that is placed in most corners, lights the room. The long, antique wooden table is already set. It is luxurious, with beautiful plates, wine glasses and silverware. Alexandra is looking through a service hatch, between the kitchen and the dining room. We say hello. Roman starts speaking to her in French and walks over to the kitchen. He returns after a few seconds.

13:40

The three of us take a seat on a divan that is in the corner of the dining room next to the large, stone fireplace with piles of wood on the side, and wait for the lunch to arrive. In the meantime, Roman tells us about what his days usually look like:

- "It is not very German."

13:41

The Germans always have the problem of their schedule, the timeline. I am going for a walk, but not necessarily in the way the philosopher Immanuel Kant did it. I go for a walk before or after taking an afternoon nap. Or often I do not sleep at all, maybe today I will not. But maybe it is for the better and we can talk again later on, in the afternoon. I am not so disciplined or organized with my time, not like the German mentality.

13:42

I am more relaxed. The *Feldweg* of Heidegger is quite beautiful in this line of works. The works are not all the same, they

are different. This is also the rhythm of my existence: sometimes I do not sleep, at other times I do sleep, sometimes I sleep more, or less. This is the best: not to program yourself like that. In my work I have created a program, but this program has a lot to do with this imprecise time span. Speaking of which, in the beginning I could have died.

13:43

Every artist, when he is painting a picture, can say that he is making a certain sacrifice.

13:44

Speaking of *Feldweg*, sometimes it rains. I was a realist once and then at times I had problems with the weather. It rained and then I painted anyway. This is almost anecdotal. In my case, the program is that, which belongs to my life. It is always like it is in our lives, meaning: anecdotal.

13:45

I can sleep or not, but that is entirely voluntary. With you here, I have to watch my energy a little. It costs energy to tell you about everything, these stupid things. If I so terribly say "stupid things", you can see our existence, or interpret it like that. Our life has no meaning. My work is the nonsense that manifests this. It is comparable with the Germans drinking a glass of *Schnaps*, or the Frenchman having a glass of wine: life has no meaning.

13:46

The German and the Frenchman are right. They are also philosophers, but then they have to show it. That is almost hypocritical, but I think they should show it. The consequences are very different when you very seriously have these thoughts that our existence has nonsense."

13:47

Karlynn goes on asking:

- "Roman, you say that life has no sense, but don't you on the other hand try to make each day as beautiful as possible?"

- "Yes, as good and as... strong is not the right word, but it is not far from what I mean. My concept, my work, makes an accumulation of a sacrifice."

- "An accumulation?"

- "Exactly, it means that the sacrifice is getting bigger and stronger as time goes by. This also has to do with the explosion of the unit. This means: one painting is not enough. Ten paintings are already something, but 230 works in one concept, then it is becoming stronger and stronger.

13:48

It is already strong, but what is even more so, is that what part is of my existence, my body. In the stage where I find myself today, it is there that you see the power of this sacrifice. You can hardly see anything, that was the idea. Normally, nowadays when I finish a picture, when I finished this diagonal line

from the top left side and working my way down to the bottom right, then I write the title of the *Detail* on the back of the picture as well as on a separate piece of paper.

13:49

Because in previous times, I was still able to see the last numbers on the canvas, but as we have seen today, today's current number, I might not be able to see it. Nowadays, I need a piece of paper, so that I certainly do not make a mistake. When I stop for the day... For example, I have painted yesterday, and then I wrote down the last number with a pencil. In that way I have no fear of making a mistake. This error, it is all right with me. This is the paradox in my concept.

13:50

It is about the pathway, this stroll. If you go into one direction, and in a sudden moment you understand that this direction is not right, generally in our existence or simply somewhere at the train station. And you realize it is not the right way to go, then you go back or perhaps further, or maybe in a different direction. But this error is already there. You cannot take it away from your existence. Therefore, if I make a mistake, I mean a wrong number, then that is correct. Of course: I will not make errors on purpose.

13:51

But it is a liberation, because most of them, at the beginning or maybe even still today, ask me: "Why make such an incredible work? Why such a responsibility?" No! This is a total lib-

eration. Because this total liberation is part of my existence, stronger than any other activity. Someone does something in an office or like the two of you, who come to visit me, this is a very precise goal. But in my case, this time-path, this direction, if I have made a mistake in this period of time, then this is true. This is a very important thing to understand about my work.

13:52

In this sense, there has been no concept, no program, that has been this free."

- "Does the accumulation of numbers also has something to do with your own lifetime that is passing?"

- "Yes, of course. You do not see it in the painting, but it is inside of it. One can imagine it. I do not tell about my life, I manifest my life. This means that because of this difference between telling and manifesting, every person is able to imagine such a time span. That means that the word 'sacrifice', despite its pathetic connotation, does have a meaning.

13:53

It is a certain sacrifice that is made by a man—his name is Opalka—to show something about a period in which the meaning of nonsense is very strongly present. In French it is called *la dimension du non-sens*. That dimension of nonsense has never been as strong as in a work like mine. Each work, like one of a poet or another worker, has a meaning: he has his family, his necessities to live.

13:54

That counts for me anyway, but maybe I could have done something else. I did not have to do much, in the sense of sacrifice, that I can live. I could have done something else without having to make such a sacrifice, to have my minimal existence. What was important, is this nonsense in a socialist country as it was back then in Poland, it was a Marxist world back then. To work was the goal. Work was like a certain religion; it was something positive for the economy and for the people.

13:55

This example, that is my work, is such a big nonsense... I can tell to no worker that what he does, makes no sense at all. He needs to earn money. The nonsense of my work has never been so strong with regard to production, it is a productive mentality: I had to create something. But I made something that has nonsense: I could not eat or sell it. People often say, "But Opalka sells his paintings." But back then, in the early days of my program, I was not able to sell my work. At that time, I could not even imagine that it would ever be a selling product, a product for the material side of existence.

13:56

When the museum in Łódź, Poland, bought my picture, I could not imagine that this was possible. And the price back then was approximately 50 US dollars.

- "\$50 for your first painting?"

62

- "I worked on that for about seven months. Fifty dollars. And now I do not have enough money to buy it back from them."

Together we laugh at this paradoxical situation.

13:57

- "Does the sacrifice of painting become bigger, while you are getting older and have probably less and less lifetime left?" Karlyn wonders.

- "I do not have time to live in the same way as before, because before I was very active. Nowadays I have much more time to lie back and not do anything. In previous times I did not take a siesta and I was able to work 17 hours per day. 17 hours... I did that, because I was naive. Afterwards my concept became known. First in Italy, after that in Germany and then later in New York. In the beginning it were the Italians, they usually learn about these art things quickly. "*Pancia della mamma* [in the belly of the mother]," they say. The Germans perhaps, but much later. The French did not notice my work at all as a situation in art until the 80s.

13:58

I have lived in Paris, but nobody knew about this idiot Opalka, who was painting something like that. Nothing, no interest. Nowadays they are interested, but back then, no interest. The other painters in France were political. I was also political, but not in the sense they were. The others were naïve; I was already much further with my thoughts, because I thought: revolution? No result.

63

13:59

Revolution, yes, but do not make great sacrifices for society.”

- “Were you disappointed that there was hardly any interest in your work here in France?”

- “No, there was an interest in New York and in Germany, and Italy. They were very, very open to it.”

- “How did you get to Italy?” Sarah wants to know.

14:00

Roman tells about an exhibition he had in Turin, which was his first in Italy. The entire ZERO group came to visit Roman in his 36 m<sup>2</sup> studio. The artists Günther Uecker and Thomas Lenk and several others were there. It was packed and each artist wanted to buy a work. But Roman did not sell anything. He explains how everything was planned and prepared for the exhibition.

14:01

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- “My first picture had white figures painted on a black background. The next one had a gray background and the third one was red on red, for which I used a cold red for the numbers and a warm red for the background.

14:04

This picture is fantastic and I would love to have it back. Thomas Lenk was clever and said, “That one I can probably have. That one is not in this program of yours.” “Yes,” I said to him then, “That one you can buy.”

We hear the sound of the clock while Roman continues his story:

- “Buying... How can you be buying something in a communist country?”

14:05

Then Roman tells us about a Polish museum director who promised that whoever would be able to make Roman quit his program, would get a one-year stipend.

14:06

14:07

The sound of the clock again. Now we also hear the voices of the others in the kitchen, including the voice of Marie-Madeleine. Sarah gets up from the divan to get our books, just in case we would get a chance to show them to her.

14:08

In the meantime, Roman explains to Karlyn that they luckily do not always pay so much attention to their lunch, only when they have guests. Again there is the sound of a bell, a different

one this time. Right on that moment, Marie-Madeleine comes walking in the room. Roman asks who it is. There appears to be someone outside in front of the fence who wants to get in. They switch on a large television screen that hangs from the ceiling. With the remote control Marie-Madeleine is looking for the right channel. In a quite snowy black-and-white we see someone standing in front of the fence. Roman and Marie-Madeleine speak with each other in French about the television, but it is difficult for us to follow what they are saying. Then we take place at the side of the table, the part that is not set for lunch. Roman leaves the room. We wait.

14:09

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Roman comes back into the house. After a short visit to the kitchen, he returns to the dining room holding two boxes in his hands. A quick "How are you?" and immediately he leaves through the other door, the one towards his studio, to get some medicine. We wait.

14:13

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When Roman returns he immediately continues his way in direction of the kitchen again. His wife, Alexandra and Catherine enter the dining room, speaking French. Marie-Madeleine points us to our seats. Me, Sarah, opposite of Roman and me, Karlyn, on his left. Roman enters the room again and starts to speak with his wife in French. Roman seems to be still busy with something while the starters are already brought in and we are asked to serve ourselves. It is a salad of tomato, cucumber, beetroots and tuna, beautifully placed on a large plate. Roman now also takes his seat. The cook comes in and asks Marie-Madeleine a question, Roman interferes. Alexandra also joins in the discussion. Now they are discussing the wine, whether it should be white or red and which one it should be.

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Now everyone has his place at the table and we start eating our lunch. The women speak with each other in French about the interview text that has to be discussed later that afternoon. At first, Roman does not say a word and simply eats his

salad, later he speaks with Marie-Madeleine. When they are finished, Roman takes the initiative to bring out a toast. While the women discuss the two different types of sauce—the real one and the diet version—and the place where Alexandra lives, and speaking foreign languages, Roman quietly eats his salad, now and then making a remark to his wife. The conversation goes on.

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The main course is being served: baked potatoes with a gratin of spinach and tomato and with roast beef. Although two of the women left the table, we are asked to start eating immediately, as otherwise it would not taste so good anymore. Roman squeezes a bunny-shaped pepper mill several times over his plate and then offers 'the hare' to us. Roman eats his food, continuing observing us, while we continue to speak about Venice with his wife.

14:49

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Roman asks for salt and starts grinding it over his food.

14:52

He now participates in the conversation and asks about a gallery where he once had an exhibition. Afterwards, the conversation continues about Venice and the weather.

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Roman seems to worry about the television screen and speaks about it with his wife. When his worries are gone, they discuss whether he should take a nap after lunch. Afterwards we all continue the conversation.

14:56

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15:00

15:01

Roman says something in French to Marie-Madeleine. Sarah takes the opportunity to explain to Roman in German even more precisely the reason of our visit, about the reason behind our wish to document his life while time is ticking away. We should not have any fear, Roman says. Marie-Madeleine takes over the conversation and asks us about the division of our work. Roman does seem to listen to our explanation with one ear, while continuing a conversation with his secretary in French. In the meantime we are served different types of cheese.

15:02

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Roman is making jokes in French, which we do not understand, in the meanwhile he serves himself some more cheese, in particular a soft goat cheese. Meanwhile Marie-Madeleine makes the arrangements for the afternoon. A little later, Roman suggests her to take a siesta, whereas Marie-Madeleine politely excuses herself. She tells us that they will go to sleep for about an hour, afterwards we will have tea together and tonight we will have fish for dinner. Then, our conversations go on for some moments again.

15:05

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Marie-Madeleine now leaves the room. We stay with Roman and each of us has a little bit more cheese.

15:09

- "I can sleep like a hare. When I go to sleep now? Then I sleep."

Roman becomes more talkative again. The expression reminds him of an encounter he once had with a hare during one of his walks and another anecdote about a hare that sometimes visits their garden.

15:10

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- "Roman, will you be taking a siesta now as well?"

- "Yes, and what will you be doing?"

- "We will go for a short walk now and we hope that later we will be able to see you paint."

- "Yes, we will make a small step within my painting. Only a small step, because it is probably a problem with respect to this moment in time as well as for my physical possibilities."

15:14

Roman pours us another glass of wine and comments to Catherine, who just asked if we wanted dessert, that the Dutch are good drinkers, just like the Polish. And he continues with an anecdote about a French expression, that came into being after Napoleon was in Poland during the war.

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- "Are you still visiting Poland regularly?"

15:18

- "Something like once or twice a year I make a visit to Warsaw."

- "To visit old friends?"

- "Less and less each time, less and less. Because of my generation. But there are still a few left and I also visit my gallerist."

Roman explains that at the moment, the biggest market for his work is in Poland.

15:19

- "My work became expensive, but at the moment there are big capitalists in Poland too. The largest collectors of my work are currently in Poland, but not as many as there still are in the United States. In the United States there are approximately 120 or even more of my paintings."

- "That is almost half of your work."

15:20

- "The latter part of my paintings has stayed in France. The French have only understood my work after several years. They were very naïve in that sense. And American Minimal Art is also in this sense a bit too dialectical and too dry. Art should have a certain drama. From a conceptual perspective, a square, such as one by Carl Andre or Sol LeWitt, is good, is intelligent, but in our existence, intelligence is not enough."

15:21

- "What do you consider to be the drama in your art?"

- "Being. This is not a drama; it is the simple strength in my work, to show Being, to represent it. There surely is no pessimism in my work, but certainly also no optimism. There is a certain realism in my work, which is perhaps derived from my experience with Marxism. A human being is not as much as one often imagines it to be. As with Blaise Pascal in his philosophy: human beings are still small, but grand at the same time, because you know that you are so small."

15:22

A drama can sometimes help a lot in art. Why should I make something? Why not simply live and love? That is nice, is it not? What more could you want?

15:23

There is no art without drama. Leonardo da Vinci was a homosexual, and being a homosexual was a problem in the society at that time. Nowadays it is no problem. Back then, however, it was and created a problem. But for Leonardo this drama was very influential for his art," says Roman, while the three of us are served sorbet ice cream with pieces of fresh nectarine.

15:24

- "Without traumas, there is no great art. Otherwise it is just too easy. This *chance d'or* [golden chance] is dangerous."

- "Once you told us: there is Leonardo and me. How many other big artists are there for you?"

Karlyn's question leads to another anecdote, about Michel Baudson this time. Roman tells us about how the Belgian art-historian once picked him up from the airport in Brussels.

15:25

- "He said to me. "Roman, I appreciate you very much, for me you are one of the ten major artists in the world." I said: "Please!" Apropos your question: There are no more than that."

If you would ask today: How many artists were there in the Impressionist period or in Renaissance times? There are not so many anymore that we still remember, as there were during the Impressionist times. The other artists are also there. The others are also good, in the sense of being professional, in the sense of their *métier*.

15:26

But that is not everything."

Roman lifts his hand and shows us his five fingers.

- "That is all. And not any one more than that," and while pointing to different fingers with his other hand, he adds, "Whether I find myself here or here at the moment, that is something I do not know."

- "Most important: your are in the hand." Sarah jokes and then more serious, "Also: time will tell."

- "Yes, art is very ruthless. This résumé of a history is very tough.

15:27

The Impressionists were Monet, Manet, and Sisley perhaps. Then I only have three. And today, I think there are maybe Bob Ryman, certainly Carl Andre, Richter and Opalka... You can still exchange one or the other, that is always possible."

15:28

We eat our dessert, while Roman tells us about how he met Robert Ryman. Ryman came to the opening of one of Roman's New York exhibitions, with his entire family under a rainbow colored umbrella, and was very positive about Roman's program.

15:29

- "Meanwhile Robert Ryman has become very expensive on the market. This market I do not have, because I am not an American. The market is created by the collectors. In Poland there is a good situation for my work, because there is a certain patriotism present there now, it is the attraction for an artist. But on the other hand: in Polish art collections there is also American art, surely Bob Ryman.

15:30

But there is a certain trend visible: he is Polish, therefore I like him better than the others. It is unfortunate for the European or international art scene that the American collectors are so rich, because for that reason American art is valued much higher, higher than European art.

- "What do you think about the stability in the market value of your work?"

- "They are not so stable, but there are no big fluctuations either. It is constant: it keeps going up higher and higher.

15:31

But slowly," Roman adds, when Catherine whispers whether we would like coffee.

- "I believe that is also because you are not a hype artist." Sarah remarks.

- "I am more universal. I do not find it bad at all, that my prices are not as high as those of Bob Ryman. But I am sure, and that may almost be pretentious, in the future my prices will be similar to those of Bob Ryman.

15:32

I am sure of that, because I have produced so very little and also because of my determination. Even though my work is not as aesthetic as that of Ryman, with Ryman it is just a little white on white, a little bit like this and a little bit like that," with his hands, Roman shows the way Ryman paints his canvases and then demonstrates the difference between himself and the other artist, "With my work it is not like that, my work is more like this. Maybe my work requires an awful lot of time to understand its profound meaning."

We continue to discuss the work of Bob Ryman and the possible motivation behind his work over coffee.

15:33

Karlyn asks when Roman eats his ice cream:

- "Roman, you now painted approximately 230 canvasses. When you created the concept of your program, did you take

into account that you would probably paint a relatively small number of paintings?"

15:34

- "Of course, it was evident to me that I would not generate so many paintings. Maybe I have said it before, but in principle, I am against polluting the world with art. People produce so many things. I would not say that there are many artists. But in that time art had a criterion, such as realism. You could say what is well painted and what is not. But today: well painted, what does that mean?

15:35

There are still artists who paint realistic works, but this type of art does not belong to this world called 'Avant Garde'. I belong to this Avant Garde history, and because of this: Avant Garde makes no sense anymore nowadays. Today there cannot be an artist who was at that time part of the so-called Avant Garde, such as Soll Lewitt or Bob Ryman, and say: "We are Avant Garde." The things that Ryman is making today are unrelated to Avant Garde. Avant Garde is only this first line of soldiers at the frontline in the army.

15:36

Why should Bob Ryman spend his whole life attacking at the front? That makes no sense. It is naïve to think something like that. But such a concept like mine belongs to this Avant Garde story, but it says that it is no longer possible. That is the para-

dox. Be Avant Garde and leave, you might say. Basically, this means: Avant Garde is no longer possible only through one work. One could say that it has nonsense to continue making art. You can say that, but what can or should you do then? Duchamp played chess in New York. This is however not a solution, he should have done something.

15:37

That was a very passive choice. Duchamp was very intelligent, but without art."

- "But maybe there is a development possible after your work?" Sarah softly suggests.

- "I do not think so. Unfortunately not. People have wondered about that, but it makes no sense. When you pour water into wine, the wine does not taste that good anymore. Do you understand? A life is a life.

15:38

In sport, in *Estafette* [relay], they say that something like that does not exist in our life."

Although Sarah seems to remain skeptical about Roman's words, the conversation moves in another direction and we continue about Roman's exhibitions and the spaces his works were presented in.

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- "Now, after so many years, I can hang a white painting where the black one is. Conceptually, that would be very strong.

15:43

I could imagine having an exhibition, with today's white paintings in one room and another room with no paintings at all. But something like that, the audience would not understand it. This is the dialectic that is so very specific to my work. You can see what is not there."

15:44

Roman continues with an anecdote about how the media dealt with one of his largest exhibitions.

15:45

15:46

We finish our coffee and it is time for Roman's siesta. He looks at his mobile phone to check the time: apparently, on his phone, it is 15:41.

- "Shall we say we meet again at 5?"

-“Perfect.”

Sarah proposes that we could get our bags from the studio.

-“Shouldn’t we first finish our wine?” Roman firmly suggests.

15:47

We toast to beautiful people and blue eyes.

-“When you get older, you retain the color of your eyes. But my eyes have become a bit brighter. I noticed that actually only because of my photographs. I take pictures of myself wearing the same shirt, and with the same facial expression. This is the basis on which you can think: how are the eyes?” Roman reflects while he gets off his chair, “My eyes are bright, but not as bright as in the later photographs. Today my eyes are much brighter than they were back then. But that is a long process.

15:48

And just because it belongs to my work, you can see this very well. From my work you could make medical observations.” Roman adds while getting up from the table.

-“Ok?” Roman says and walks to the door.

15:49

-“See you later.”

-“So we will see each other again at 5 o’clock.”

Roman walks away and closes the door behind him. We talk.

15:50

15:51

After some rambling, the door opens again and there is Roman:

-“I am back again. Possibly to continue drinking my wine.”

He offers us more wine, but we decline and Roman continues in the direction of the kitchen. We can hear him, but do not know what he is doing.

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Roman enters the dining room and walks in the direction of the other door.

-“Nice legs you have.”

-“Thank you.”

-“I will be back at 5 o’clock.”

And he closes the old wooden door behind him.

15:56	He leaves again for his siesta, this time for real.
15:57	16:05
15:58	16:06
15:59	16:07
16:00	16:08
16:01	16:09
We hear footsteps and the door opens again.	16:10
-“Would you like this book?”	16:11
Roman gives us a copy of one of his publications and continues to walk in the direction of the kitchen.	16:12
16:02	16:13
16:03	16:14
Through the service-hatch we can see Roman in the kitchen and hear him speak in French.	16:15
16:04	16:16
When he is finished talking, he comes back to the dining room.	16:17
-“Do you know this book?”	16:18
-“No, we do not.” And we wish him a good rest.	16:19
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16:55	17:12
16:56	17:13
16:57	17:14
16:58	17:15
16:59	17:16
17:00	17:17
17:01	17:18
17:02	17:19
17:03	17:20
17:04	17:21
17:05	17:22
17:06	17:23
17:07	Suddenly Roman stands in the door opening of his house, still a little sleepy. His clothes of that morning look a bit crumpled now. He takes a seat on one of the wooden garden chairs next to his wife, with whom we were just having tea under a white parasol on the outside terrace.
17:08	
17:09	
17:10	17:24
17:11	Marie-Madeleine has a pile of paper in front of her.

- "A lot of work."

- "You can say that again." Roman replies as if he is already tired of it.

Marie-Madeleine continues the conversation we had with her before Roman arrived, and asks us about our plans for the Venice Biennale.

17:25

17:26

Roman gets offered a cup of tea and thanks the woman who brought it to him in a whispering voice, as not to disturb his wife in making her statement. He quietly drinks his tea and eats several cookies.

17:27

Roman blows his nose and afterwards supports his wife in her argument. Catherine joins us at the table with an even bigger pile of paper and Roman takes the opportunity to say something to his wife in French. They have a short discussion and after that, Marie-Madeleine starts reading the interview that they were planning to edit. It is in Italian.

17:28

After reading the first paragraph she asks Roman whether he understands, in a way as if she just wants to hear a confirmation from him. Roman laughs and teasingly says:

- "No."

He seems to enjoy himself. They decide to continue and Marie-Madeleine starts to read the next paragraph.

17:29

After a few sentences she halts and suggests she would translate it in French. Roman does not agree and they start a discussion. Marie-Madeleine now attempts to read the text in French, but after a short try she switches back to Italian, in which the text is written.

17:30

Roman replies to something she reads out loud and together they edit the text.

17:31

She continues reading. Roman is content with the argument he himself has given the interviewer and comments on his text:

- "*È giusto* [that is correct]."

17:32

Then he makes a few other comments about the art of painting, which his wife corrects in the text. The telephone rings and Marie-Madeleine enters the house to answer the phone.

17:33

While she is inside, we ask Roman about the interview he gave and where it will be published. He does not remember and checks the document.

-“Shit,” he says when he counts the number of pages.

Roman flips through the pages, randomly picking parts of the text to read.

-“Can you remember when you gave it?”

-“No.”

17:34

-“It is such a long interview. And I have already looked over it, a long time ago.” He adds.

-“Do you know what the interview is for?”

- “It is for an Italian magazine,” says Roman and flips again through the pages of the interview.

17:35

17:36

-“Done.”

Roman finishes reading his text, taps the stack of paper on the table and continues his conversation with us.

-“Do you speak Italian?”

-“Actually not. And you?”

-“Good is said too much, but I do understand it quite well.

17:37

And when I am reading a text, then I understand it. But sometimes there are problems, but probably also for Marie-Madeleine, for all of us. Such a text, as my thinking, is always dangerous in a translation. There are the Italians who have a saying: a translator is a traitor. It is true. Especially for such things. It is very easy to just get it wrong. I believe for example, like here: *dai numeri* in Italian can also mean ‘an idiot!’”

17:38

Roman explains mistakes people make in translations with several examples in French and starts to make fun of himself.

-“It’s true!”

17:39

And we continue to speak about the difficulty of translating texts by artists and writers, such as the author Marcel Proust.

17:40

17:41

- “Who would read such a long text?” Roman wonders just when Marie-Madeleine returns.

In French the two then discuss something we do not understand, but it seems Roman just told his wife that he finished correcting his interview. But Marie-Madeleine wants to continue reading and does so, restarting from the sixth paragraph.

17:42

She wants to change something in the text, but it appears that Catherine has another part of the text lying in front of her. Roman is leaning back in his chair, his hands together, and observes the situation while sometimes making soft-spoken remarks, but he seems to not really interfere.

17:43

17:44

Marie-Madeleine continues to correct the interview, sometimes reading parts out loud in Italian and marking things on the paper.

- "She is strong." Roman comments to us about his wife and adds other comments in a softer voice as if he does not want to disturb her. Marie-Madeleine looks up from the text for a split second, but does not seem to bother and just goes on as before.

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Everything is fine, until there is a part about Leonardo da Vinci. When Leonardo is mentioned, Roman has several things to say and starts a dialogue with his wife in French.

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Marie-Madeleine continues reading, Roman sometimes comments on the text.

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They arrive at page 6.

- "The time of Christ." Marie-Madeleine reads out.

- "*È vero* [it is true]."

Although Roman likes this part very much, Marie-Madeleine does not seem to want to continue reading it. She does not

agree with Roman's words and they start a discussion whether or not to take this part out of the interview.	18:05
17:57	18:06
Amazed about Roman's argument, she continues to read. Roman jokes about her reactions and they continue their discussion.	18:07
17:58	18:08
- "As you like." Roman says in English after some time and Marie-Madeleine reads on.	18:09
17:59	18:10
She reaches page 7.	18:11
- " <i>Per fortuna</i> [luckily]." Roman remarks, still leaned back in his chair.	18:12
After that it goes a little quicker, but still in the same way: Marie-Madeleine reads, Roman makes remarks and together they discuss several aspects of the text.	18:13
18:00	18:14
18:01	18:15
18:02	18:16
18:03	When they reach a part about the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, they disagree: Roman used Morandi to explain about the monotony of his work; his wife does not like it and does not think it is accurate.
18:04	18:17

Roman now seems a little disturbed about the corrections his wife would like to make in his text, but she continues reading and a few seconds later, they discuss another topic.

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-“I am sorry about having to deal with this interview. But it is interesting, I think.”

-“For us it is also interesting.”

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They reach a part in the text about Roman’s first wife. Marie-Madeleine edits the text to clarify it is his ‘first’ wife.

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Again a part about Roman’s wife. It is unclear whether it is about his first or second wife, but Marie-Madeleine goes around it in a humorous way. Everybody laughs at her reaction.

18:33

After continuing to read the interview for a short moment, she starts to tell us about how she first became acquainted with Roman’s work. The beginning of her story is told in a compilation of various languages, we therefore cannot follow very well. Roman approves of the story and makes additional comments in French, while Marie-Madeleine is talking. He probably can tell from the expression on our faces, that we do not fully understand and in English he tells his wife:

-“Continue in English, please.”

Immediately, she switches to English and simply goes on telling her story, without repeating the beginning.

- "Nobody knew Opalka," Marie-Madeleine says, "It was really the first time his work was in Basel. We needed 5 hours, no highway, from Geneva to Zurich with the Passat.

18:34

I drove all the time. We arrived and saw Basel. At 5 o'clock, I said: "Now I am leaving. I don't want to see any more paintings." The man who accompanied me said to me: "I have seen something and I want to know your opinion about this artwork." At first I said: "No." But after fifteen minutes I agreed to go with him. It was just one painting, Opalka. I am talking about 1974 or 72, I don't remember. It was as if I received... it was: "Ah!" Why?

18:35

I did not immediately realize they were numbers. I just saw the waves, the respiration. It was for me something so open, nothing closed. And it was so different from everything I had seen. Maybe it was an intuition but I found it very sexy. Really, I don't know why, it just looks like an Opalka. There is a famous French poet, Bernard Noël, who wrote about the painters of the sexual desire, and he chose Opalka. Strange, isn't it? It was really a big shock and I thanked the man who for the first time showed me a work by Opalka.

18:36

Two years later, in 1976, this man decided to do an exhibition about the French artist César in Rotterdam. In the following

suite, there were sixteen paintings by Opalka. When I saw the paintings, I was completely shocked. I realized, all these numbers, this dedication.

18:37

Back then, I did not have the knowledge about contemporary art which I have today. This man used to show me the most important works in art at that moment. But only the most important?"

- "I," Roman answers in English, smiling.

18:38

18:39

18:40

18:41

18:42

- "Now, I give you back Opalka."

- "Thank you."

- "Don't abuse him." She says in French.

We laugh, but not sure whether we understood her, she asks Roman to translate:

- "I have one request, please do not exhaust him too much."

18:43

We take the last cookie and leave the table together with Roman. Before we enter the house, Marie-Madeleine tells us that we will have dinner together around 20:30 o'clock. Inside we wait for Roman, who is still on the terrace exchanging a few words with his wife.

18:44

- "So," Roman says, taking a deep breath.

- "So many languages. You have Polish as your mother tongue, then Russian." Sarah says.

- "Yes, a little bit. Then German. French, that is my second language. They are almost equal. And I also understand Italian. My English is weak," Roman says while he leads us through the dining room into the narrow hallway and back into his studio.

18:45

- "Shall we sit down again?" He suggests.

Before doing so himself, he goes to the other end of the space to switch on the lights and to do something else we are not sure of what it is exactly.

18:46

When he returns, we give him some more books and two bottles of red wine.

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- "What type of wine is it? French wine?"

- "They are special."

We unpack the bottles and give them to Roman.

18:47

He holds the bottles in his hands and checks the labels.

- "*Chateau Latour.*"

Roman suggests that it would be good to give them to Marie-Madeleine and that now would be a good time to do so. Together with the two bottles, the three of us walk back towards the hallway, where we are stopped by Catherine.

18:48

Roman tells her that we want to give Marie-Madeleine the wine as a present. Marie-Madeleine is busy for the moment, and we wait in the hallway while Roman goes into the kitchen.

18:49

From the hallway, we see Roman taking a battery from one of the shelves and then going behind a corner in the kitchen.

18:50

Roman returns, followed a little later by Marie-Madeleine. He tells her about the wine. She sees the wine and seems excited.

103

- "Oh, a *Chateau Latour* 1989," and a few seconds later, "Oh bravo, also a *Volnay Caillerets* 1985."

18:51

We tell her the story about how we got the wine and how it has traveled through Europe before ending up in her hands now.

- "That is a very grand, big, wine," Marie-Madeleine says.

- "She is a great connoisseur," Roman informs us.

- "Maybe we can save it and drink it together when you have finished the book, because it is really very special wine."

Marie-Madeleine explains why she prefers to not drink it at the moment and suggests how we can arrange to meet again when the book is finished.

- "Maybe we can drink it in Venice. You came with a car? Ok, so then you can bring it to Venice."

18:52

We get kisses from her.

- "You do not forget it is for us?"

- "We will not," we promise her. "We received the bottles several months ago and kept them for this occasion, when we would be here."

Marie-Madeleine gives us back the bottles and says:

104

- "You bring that to Venice."

18:53

We speak about several small issues, such as our drive from Venice to Roman and Marie-Madeleine over the St. Bernard and the possibility of flying with low-cost airlines.

18:54

18:55

18:56

18:57

18:58

18:59

19:00

19:01

19:02

We follow Roman again through the dining room and the small corridor to his studio. When we come in his studio, we check the books on Roman's shelves. They are all publications about him or with the inclusion of his work. He takes out one large book and shows it to us.

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- "Oh, beautiful."

- "That's for you." He gives us the book.

19:03

Together we move in the direction of the place where we had been sitting that morning. Roman now brings us a pillow, for more comfort. For a moment, we speak about Roman's interview text that had just been discussed. He interrupts to get another pillow and says he will be right back.

19:04

Roman returns with the pillow and we take a seat. Then Sarah gets the camera from our bag and starts taking some photographs. In the meantime, Karlyn asks Roman whether he will be painting today. He seems to have forgotten about it and says:

- "We will do that in a minute."

19:05

We get up from our seats. While walking in the direction of his easel, Roman says:

- "Usually when pictures are taken, I always wear the same clothes."

- "The white ones."

- "Exactly, the white shirt with the white pants. It is important, because only then you will see the time. If I would be wearing different shirts or sweaters, then the situation is not so

clearly presented. If this same type of shirt and the same type of pants... Well, I will get dressed, okay?"

19:06

Roman goes to a room at the back of his studio to take off the black pants and shirt that he is wearing.

19:07

19:08

Roman returns, dressed in white.

- "All right, now my numbers."

He walks over to a small window in the back wall of his studio on the left-hand side, where he keeps his paint and brush. There are several small cups, not much larger than a coffee cup. Everything is ready, so that he can start any moment. He wets his brush in a glass of water and with a very small cup of paint, not much larger than one used for a roll of film, and a brush, he comes over to the canvas.

- "Basically, I do not need that to do this, I could just pretend to paint now. I could do it this way, and that would be enough," he says while he holds his brush close to the canvas without touching it [photo].

In the meantime, Sarah takes some photos. Roman is curious about the result and looks at the digital images on the back of the camera.

19:09

- "That, what is important in this case is the wetness of the paint," Roman explains, while Sarah continues to take more photos, "Otherwise you cannot see anything at all," and after a pause, "Well, I will continue."

19:10

It is quiet for a few seconds. Roman is standing straight in front of his canvas. In all concentration, he now places his brush on the canvas and starts painting a number [photo]. When he finished, he tells us:

- "Do you see it from the side? Now it is shining, because it is wet."

- "And you are now at five million five hundred ninety-one thousand..."

- "6... 676... Yes, as I said before: in German it is not logical."

19:11

Roman stands in front of his canvas and paints again a number, while Sarah takes a few more photos of Roman painting that particular number. [Later we decided to use one of these photos for this DeLuxe publication.]

- "You can see how slowly it goes, can't you?"

19:12



- "Yes, it takes several seconds before you have painted the entire number. Do you always have your paint ready, so that you can start anytime?"

- "Yes. I always have a bit of paint and water, in order for it to always be damp enough."

19:13

- "So," Roman considers it is done and puts his paint and brush back in the window-sill [photo].

- "Would you like to make the recording?"

- "Yes, please."

Roman positions himself in front of his canvas again, makes a pause, scratches his throat and then starts in a slow, deep voice. Sarah takes more photos, while Karlyn focuses on the recording.

- "*Piec milionów pięćset dziewięćdziesiąt jeden tysięcy sześćset siedemdziesiąt piec... Piec milionów pięćset dziewięćdziesiąt dwa tysiące sześćset siedemdziesiąt sześć...*

19:14

*Piec milionów pięćset dziewięćdziesiąt jeden tysięcy sześćset siedemdziesiąt siedem... Piec milionów pięćset dziewięćdziesiąt jeden tysięcy sześćset siedemdziesiąt osiem...* That is enough for now, is it not?"

19:15



Roman clears his throat again and returns to the windowsill to clean his brush.

- "When it is wet, then you can see it."

He returns to his canvas and shows us the numbers he just painted, to later go back to his windowsill and clean out his brush a bit more.

19:16

- "How long do you use one brush?" Sarah asks.

- "For each one of my *Details*, I use one brush." Roman says while he is ticking his brush against the glass cup filled with water.

- "In the beginning I painted several pictures with one single brush, but that did not work out very well, because when the brush was used a lot, the trace it left behind was not clear anymore. So now I have only one brush for one painting. Have a look at that, what is over there."

Roman leads us to an antique cabinet that is placed in front of one of the columns in his studio. It is filled with brushes [photo]. On the right side is a bunch of brushes and on the left there are three separated from the rest, quite distant from each other.

- "These are the brushes that I have used for painting my canvases. Those three that are a bit on the side, they have been used for the pictures I have already painted here in this studio.



19:17

That is the reason why they are placed like that. Each brush has its own title.”

Roman takes out one of the brushes and shows it to us.

- “Can you see? That is the title from the *Detail*,” he clears his throat and goes on, “So; the numbers on each brush are the first and last number of the *Detail* I have painted with it. And there I have even more opportunities to continue working,” Roman ‘jokes’ while pointing at a bunch of at least thirty new, unused brushes.

- “But I will not be able to achieve that,” he adds in a very serious voice, “You have seen how slowly it goes.

19:18

The brushes say something about the quantity of my paintings. Shall we sit down again?”

- “Well, we follow you, so please do what you want. If you want to continue painting, please do so.”

- “For me it is enough. It is already late.”

Roman walks to the backroom for a short moment and returns with his necklace.

- “Did you see this before?”

-“You bought it in Venice, did you not?”

-“I have bought it there once, when I was still a young rooster.

19:19

I wanted to have something of Venice. My wife always had a lot of rings and things like that. And here... That has now become very important,” Roman pauses to put on his necklace, “When I select my photographs, then I can see: where is the necklace? And then I decide: this is the photo I take,” he says while putting the necklace in the center of his chest, “And when the necklace is like this, I will not take it,” and he places it out of center. “This balance is a *repère* [mark] as the French call it.”

Roman takes us to the entrance part of his studio on the other side of the bookshelves, where he has all the boxes packed for the exhibition in New York. On the floor lie several *Autoportraits*.

19:20

-“These are the last portraits I have taken,” Roman points to his portraits and says, “This is important: from this photograph I can say that it is taken in the morning. But that does not belong to the paintings... Well, maybe partly, but it especially counts for the photos.” Roman shows how he selects his *Autoportraits*, “So, I put everything on the floor. Then there are hundreds of photos lying there. Which of them do I take as a good picture? The selection is very complicated, because the criteria are so very clear. That means: I should always have the same facial ex-

pression, the eyes should not be up or down, and I should not have a problem with my eyes like now,” Roman takes off his glasses and points to his left eye, which is a little irritated and red, “This is something I have now... I cannot take any *Autoportraits* because I have this problem. Otherwise, you cannot say: it should always be the same situation.

19:21

This means: always only time is visible.”

He takes us to the photos that are hanging on the wall.

-“In the beginning I looked like that. Afterwards I have developed, but there I am still young. But that is the basic concept. Always lighter, lighter, lighter. Fortunately, my hair has become brighter, just like my paintings. That is quite interesting.

19:22

Did you ever see what I made as a student?”

Before showing us, Roman goes to his bedroom to change back into his other clothes again.

-“I will be right back,” he says while passing his ‘one million’ painting.

19:23

19:24

- "I will be right back," he shouts from the back room.

19:25

19:26

- "Ready in a minute."

Roman enters the studio, when we are looking at one of his *Chronomes*.

- "It is a small difference, but you cannot see where it has started, where the first dot is placed.

19:27

What was before the Big Bang, we have not found in this period of time, in cosmic space.

- "It is interesting to see that time had an effect on the work. You see the *craquelé*," Sarah remarks.

- "Yes, that is because it is tempera. And it is bad tempera, communist tempera."

Roman asks whether we will be back tomorrow.

- "No, we will only document you today."

19:28

- "Okay, then we have done everything here. Shall we go?"

Roman turns off the light in front of his current painting and we follow him through the studio. We pause in front of a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting of Diogenes, which is hanging close to the door.

- "I have no clue what time it is."

- "I will tell you straightaway," Sarah checks her phone again and says: "It is 19:27."

19:29

- "Shall we go for a little walk?"

- "Not for me, but you can go."

- "We prefer to stay with you."

- "But it is so cold for you!"

We decide to go anyway and take our camera with us, to make a few more photos. We leave Roman's studio, continue through the corridor and dining room and pass by the kitchen before going outside.

- "It smells good, does it not?"

Outside we meet Marie-Madeleine and her daughter, who are sitting on the terrace and organize the transportation of Roman's *Autoportraits* for his New York exhibition. Roman asks his wife about dinner. She says it will take at least one more hour.

19:30

- "Okay, then we will go for a walk."

- "That would be very nice."

- "It is an order from my wife. Shall we go?"

19:31

Before we actually do, Roman makes jokes with Alexandra.

- "It is an order to go walking with you."

- "There are worse things."

- "Hopefully."

- "That's right," and after a pause, "What we will walk now, is exactly the path I take when I have time, when I go for my little daily promenade. We will go exactly the same way as I always do. And besides taking the same path, I also have my ideas of how it should happen."

We go slowly over the path leading to the garage and pass the small sideway with roses on each side that we took that morning, before seeing Roman. He points to the sideway and says:

- "Sometimes I go that way," then he moves his hand in another direction, along the path to the garage and the other storage buildings, "But the best thing is when I walk like that and then over there, in a square. This property is six hectare large."

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19:32

- "What are the things you think about when you go for a stroll?" Karlyn asks him.

- "To have time for time. As you know, I started in such a small space in Warsaw, 36 square meters. And here it is so large, and my studio is so big. This has developed. But I also often say: I have deserved this. This means: I have done so much in my life; I am already 78 years old."

We pass by one of the storage rooms, when a cat wants to go inside the building. Roman halts to close the door.

19:33

- "Space plays a big role, but I could also create what I wanted to realize in a small space. It was a small room back then in Warsaw. You have probably seen images of that studio in the book I gave you earlier: in that picture you can see my bed and my easel. My easel is an installation, like the naive artists paint even today."

At a certain point we turn right, and go behind the storage building. We have reached the end of the estate at this side and there is a wide view over the fields that are separated by a large green metal fence. We turn right again and walk along the backside of the buildings, where several cars are parked. Sarah starts taking photos, while Roman and Karlyn continue talking.

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-“You once told us that one has to deserve a number. What do you mean by that?”

-“To deserve a number?”

19:34

Yes, maybe in the sense... I have deserved the number, and today we have painted up to the number 5,591,678. I can remember that. Apropos your question, that means that I have deserved that number. I mean, you can easily imagine a number. They are references for the police, for example. But the number that I have just painted today, that one I have earned. I deserved it in the sense of sacrifice. I earned myself 5,591,678.

19:35

I have arrived there. In a very banal way, you could say: “How many years do you have?” My answer could be: “I have realized 5,591,678.” That is just like the time span that constitutes our life. Only that is the reason for the difference. Here there is always a single clock, when we talk about time. The clock already has taken 45 years. And time does not repeat itself. Normally, the time on this clock is repeated every 24 hours or every 12 hours.

19:36

You take the time, 12 hours or 24. Normally, one does not talk about 19 hours and several minutes, but they talk about

7 o'clock and these minutes. People often lose themselves in this system of 24 hours. 19 o'clock, 20 o'clock, which is all quite logical, but most of the times people say: it is 8 o'clock, and also that is logical.”

19:37

We continue to walk over the driveway in the direction of the entrance to the estate, where we were standing in front of the gate that morning [photo]. The large trees on either side make it now quite dark.

-“You just posed the question “How many years do I still have?” How many years do you think you will still have? Or how many would you still like to have?”

-“To live? This question is of course a very important question. Everyone takes this human relation with their parents, for example. How long did my father live? And that is also the case for me. He died. And something about that was interesting: he was nearly 88. Two times 8. That is interesting with regard to my work, is it not?”

We continue walking again:

-“One could imagine: it may also be my number.”

19:38

Roman pauses again and while looking Karlyn straight in the eyes, he says:



- "But it is also very well possible that I live longer, or live shorter than my father has."

We go on, following Roman's pathway.

- "I say, when God is a little bit mad at me, I could perhaps live 100 years. Then I will have to continue painting my numbers even further, perhaps only one number in one day, not more than that."

Roman illustrates what that would look like when he is 100 years old and still painting one number each day. The three of us laugh at his 'joke'.

- "But that is just the way life is. At the end of his life my father said, that he would like to go outside on his balcony one more time.

19:39

This was a far distance from his bed... perhaps 3 meters. I was not there, but he has probably not been able to do it. Those few steps, which he still wanted to take in his life. Maybe this story also belongs to my numbers."

The cat that some minutes ago wanted to go into one of the sheds is now following us, keeping a few meters distance. Roman notices it and likes the idea that the cat is joining us on our stroll.

19:40

While looking at the cat, the fence opens and a car enters the estate. We switch roles: now I, Sarah, speak with Roman, while I, Karlyn, take photos of them.

-“Speaking of Heidegger, that is my pathway.”

-“How old were you when you first read Heidegger?”

-“I had heard of that philosopher early on, but I read him much later, because in the years that I was living in Warsaw, that was in the Stalin era, you could not read Heidegger.

19:41

At that time I had only heard of a man who is philosophically very strong and had written about Being.”

-“Was it translated or did you read it in German?”

We turn right again and now enter a narrow forest path [photo].

-“It was translated into Polish and French. The French translation may have already existed before the war,” and after a pause, “This is my stroll. It is beautiful, isn’t it?”

We agree.

19:42

-“For me it is simply very pleasant to go for a walk once a day. Like this, a square. The distances are fairly symmetrical.”

Roman tells us that he and Marie-Madeleine have been looking two years for a new place to live, and that they like this house because of its size and location close to Paris. In this way, journalists and other visitors can easily come over and spend time with Roman. At a certain point, we turn right again and continue our walk over a grass field, and pass the house and Roman’s studio on our right.

19:43

19:44

19:45

19:46

19:47

19:48

- “I make a life manifest through my sacrifice. Most people think, and that is something also I myself have thought in the beginning, that the audience already understands my work, even without my commentary. But now I understand that they have understood nothing of it. I had to intervene myself as well. It is, for example, when we are sitting at a table with some people and someone tells the others about my story, and then I will say: “Yes, that is quite true, but not exactly.” That is something I am already doing for years now.

19:49



In the beginning I thought that people would understand my work without my intervention, but no."

- "You need to have a lot of patience." Sarah remarks.

- "To tell about my life, over and over again? Yes, that is right."

- "I do understand what you mean with 'sacrifice'."

- "It sounds a little pathetic."

Karlyn took enough photos and joins the other two again, continuing Roman's square-shaped pathway. We reach the end of the estate again, and turn right behind the guesthouse to see if there are fish in the river behind the house.

19:50

Roman tells us that, when it is hot outside, the carp stick their heads out of the water to get air.

19:51

- "Roman, your wife told us this afternoon that for her your works have a sexual feel to them. Do you agree?" Karlyn asks.

- "No, it is a certain rhythm and also the voice... She has had or still has this feeling. But she is not the only woman who interprets my work like that.

19:52

It is especially the women who react like that. The men respond differently. Because a man responds almost aggressively to a work like mine. "Ah rubbish!", They say. Because this egocentrism is so strongly present, one could think. And one rooster does not like the other rooster. A rooster may have many chickens, but not another rooster. And that is the way life is, also in the artworld of course."

19:55

19:56

19:57

19:58

19:59

- "I can understand your wife's opinion: when I hear your voice with the numbers in Polish. It is powerful." Sarah remarks.

20:00

- "Macho."

20:01

19:53

20:02

Roman goes to the small door in the fence, and shows us the river below. It is probably still too cold to see the fish snapping for air above the water.

20:03

20:04

19:54

We reach the house and with it the end of our walk.

- "Are you cold? Come on, let's go into my studio."

We slowly continue our walk through the garden. The garden from Roman and Marie-Madeleine is something special, an accumulation of bushes, trees and beautiful flowers, all being very well maintained, and this all surrounded by fields which offer a view to a far away horizon. We talk about the plants and trees that are present in the garden, as well as the sun which seems still high for the time of day. The cat joins us again and asks for our attention. We stroke the cat until she has had enough. We continue and take in the surrounding.

Together we enter the hallway and smell the scents that are coming from the kitchen.

20:05

- "Ah, that smells good." Roman says.

Alexandra is there and she and Roman exchange a few words in French.

- "Come, let's go. I always say "to Poland." Really! My room, I call it 'Poland!'"

In the dining room, Roman takes the book, which he gave us after lunch, from the table. He says that he would like to have it back as he does not have so many copies of it.

- "The big book is much better anyway."

20:06

We enter Roman's studio again. Roman shows us 'Poland', his own bedroom at the end of his studio. He shows us around:

- "Here is my shower, toilet and here is the heating. I put it on in the night, so that it is warm when I want to take a shower."

20:07

Roman sees a fly in his bathroom and starts chasing it. Clapping his hands, he shouts:

- "Shit!"

Again he claps, and misses: the fly keeps circling in the bathroom.

- "No success!" Roman says, seemingly disappointed.

Roman shows us his television and tells about the channels he has on it.

- "I have Polish and French television on this thing, so I can practice both languages. I watch the news. Just now there

happened a catastrophe in Poland, everything is flooded. That was it, my kingdom and my peace."

20:08

We enter the studio again.

- "And that is my million," Roman says proudly, pointing at his painting that is on a wooden structure, with its back to the canvas he is working on at the moment.

He shows us the place of his 1,000,000. Karlyn decides to take more photographs; Sarah talks with Roman about the painting [photo].

- "One and then six zeros... And then one, zero, zero, zero, zero, zero, one."

- "That moment must have been incredible," Sarah remarks.

- "Yes, that is the reason why I bought it back. It is incredible also in the phonetical sense. That it is incredible, visually and structurally, that is very clear. Any painter, Mark Rothko for example, could have made this painting. But to deserve this, this trace or lead, that is something quite different. Rothko was a great artist, but my work is very different, I mean that, mentally and conceptually it is something completely different. How a form like this presents itself and is realized.

20:09



It is without the certain formalism that was present in the 1960s, also in Conceptual Art. In my case, in my work, it happened like this, and not in any other way. It is because of this concept; the work comes from a principle. What happened here, in this painting, is something that has happened after seven years of painting."

- "It looks as if, because you have reached this point after such an effort, now the numbers are stronger." Sarah remarks.

20:10

- "That is right: I had painted the six nines. Then I said "one" in Polish, *jeden*, and painted the six zeros without saying a word. And only after the sixth zero, I say: "*milion*." Up to here, I have not yet reached that point, logically. Only after the sixth zero, can the million be reached in a logical way and that is when I can say: "*milion*."

20:11

It is fantastic."

- "You say it and I can feel it in my heart."

- "It was so very strong! As a movement, as this walk, our pathway. To reach this number after seven years..."

20:12

I just spoke about my father who became 88 years old. Maybe I will reach that age, or not. If I am damned—you can say it like that in German, can you not?—then I will reach 100 years.”

- “How happy we would be, should we be damned!”

- “Yes,” Roman laughs.

We walk towards the light installation in front of Roman’s current canvas. He switches on the light and positions himself in front of his painting, with his back towards it, facing the light.

20:13

- “The light is so strong, because now, in this way, it is equal in all directions. Only after I have finished for the day, when I have deserved it, I make a photo. Normally I take a photo after I have been working, which nowadays is no longer than an hour. In the afternoon, after my siesta, then I can make the photo. I have to do it at that particular time; I have to wait until it is night, because of the light. I need this equal lighting.”

20:14

Roman shows us the window that is right under the rooftop of his studio facing the canvas, and follows with his finger the beam of light that is coming through the window onto his canvas. Then he says:

- “Right here is a beam of light. That was also the case in Warsaw, this situation that I could only take a photo at night,

because then the light is almost equal. I say ‘almost’ because there are nights that it is full moon, or at least the weather plays a role as well. But when the prints from my photos are being made, I am always there. Not only because of the prints, but also because this aspect of the lighting. In that way I can measure precisely how long a good reproduction of my photo takes, how many seconds and so on.

20:15

If I am not there during the printing process, maybe that is not yet so dangerous in the sense of lighting, but more so for the aspect of my facial expression that is on these *Autoportraits*. One cannot know when I would be satisfied with the photograph. The expression should always be the same. So, like this.”

Roman puts his face in the way he wants his *Autoportraits* to be like.

- “I should be very neutral, and show no emotion. I should be empty. But I do not like to make that expression when I have two beautiful women standing next to me.”

20:16

Roman switches off the light and we continue our way until we pause for some time in the center of the space, while Roman tells us about his evening activities. He goes on about the problems he had with his heart at the beginning, when he first started painting the passing of time.

20:17

20:18

20:19

20:20

20:21

20:22

- "My first wife has always asked the question of what we should live. Because of the prizes that I won before the beginning of my program, we had always been doing well. And now this idiot, this Roman Opalka, wanted to start a program that could bring no money whatsoever. Then until 1970, I still made graphic works, realizing my program at the same time. The first graphic work I made was about the October Revolution."

20:23

We join Roman to another room that is in the little corridor between his studio and the dining room, where he shows us the prizewinning graphic. Looking at the graphic, he tells us the anecdote about the work.

20:24

- "I won the prize although they did not understand the work. The work is also a critique about the terror of the Bolcheviks. After they found that out, they hid my work."

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20:25

It is a critique about the revolution."

Roman steps away from the work and wonders about the communist's songs they were singing at that time. He hums a stanza:

"Na na naa na. How are the lyrics in the German language? The last battle, one could say."

20:26

We walk by an old master painting that is hanging on another wall.

"This is also interesting to see. I bought this picture. It was burnt and I have restored it myself."

We look at the painting and are amazed by the result.

- "Yes, you do not even see it."

- "Michel Baudson told us that you are so good at painting realistically."

Roman shows us the exact place where he restored the work.

20:27

- "But to match these colors on the palette..." Roman makes an expression as if he is still tired of it, "Nowadays, I would not be able to do that. It took me a few months; you cannot achieve this same color in an instant. You have to paint several layers before you can have the transparency of this red."

139

Roman continues to explain us about the difference in the use of paint between the Renaissance and the period of his own painting.

20:28

-“The woman in the picture is a certain sacrifice, so that is why I bought the painting.”

- “Actually, it seems that you only have works by yourself hanging in your home.” Karlyn remarks.

20:29

- “Yes, you saw that well. There is only a picture of my mother when she was a little girl, which is made by someone else. Today she is dead, already for a long time. So, let us still visit Poland once more,” Roman says and we follow him back into his studio.

-“Shall we switch on the light?”

-“No, we do not really need it, maybe.”

20:30

Roman takes his place in his rocking chair and we sit down on our pillows on the floor in front of him and speak about his studio.

-“It is pleasant to just walk through here. “I’m going to Poland,” I say to Marie-Madeleine. I often sleep in Poland, because Marie-Madeleine often watches these American films. I hate them.

20:31

Because of these films, the American culture has deformed the world completely. At times there are good films and some days ago I watched one that was actually quite good. It was made fantastically, in the artistic sense. Otherwise it is nothing but paf paf paf! That is stupid, is it not?”

The conversation continues about films. Roman criticizes the ease with which people can make films nowadays and later tells us about a Russian film about WWII that he appreciated very much.

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20:38

-“You often speak about a rhythm. Your paintings have a certain rhythm and now you speak about this film and mention it. Why is that so important for you?” Karlyn notices.

- “Yes, this walk. It is of course an important part of our life, our rhythm, our respiration. The Chinese do gymnastics. So and so,” Roman shows the movements with his hands. “But in

addition to that, I have to tell you a bit more, because right at the beginning it was the other way around. In the beginning I had not reached this rhythm yet, this rhythm of the steps you take while walking.

20:39

Now I have this rhythm, but to be standing vertically like that, for a long time. Today a 'long time' means an hour. At the beginning that were six hours. But this rhythm has developed itself slowly, naturally, also as respiration. Between the colors... If I dip my brush into the small *gobelet* [cup] as the French say. Every time it is different, it is not always the same quantity of paint.

20:40

Therefore, this rhythm is various. And it is also different because of my eyes. Sometimes I can work very well, concentrated, physically as well as visually, and then I can paint more numbers with the same quantity of paint, and at the end, the white color fades away. Then I must dip my brush in the white color again. In previous times, it did not happen that I would have to dip my brush in the paint in the middle of a number. For example, now, while my numbers have seven digits, it would be such a pity, when I would not be able to reach the seventh digit with one amount of paint and I would have to dip my brush in the white paint when I am at the third or fourth digit.

20:41

In this way the rhythm would be comparable to half a step. To put the brush back and forth into the white paint has a certain aspect of the pathway. The walk as a painterly image. The walk has become clearer after some time, even in my thinking, in my reflection and interpretation.

20:42

Even in my interviews, at the beginning, I could not say so much, not express so adequately and explain as to 'what is my life?'. After 45 years I know a lot more. I know enough, I mean: in the sense that it is more than other people can understand, because they have not had the experience. For my work experience is very important.

20:43

Everyone can tell about what he has experienced, but with the work I do, that what I have experienced, no other man who is looking at my work from the outside can have that same experience. It is rarely possible and there were already some, there are people who have understood more of my work than I have... Maybe not exactly the things that I have told you about today, but these people know about things that I did not notice in the meantime. They are saying: "So and so, beautiful!" while I did not see or understood that aspect."

20:44

- "It probably is a continuing development." Sarah comments.

- "Yes, perhaps there have been published new texts in philosophy that I have not seen. When I started my program, Immanuel Kant was already there, Jean-Paul Sartre was already there. One may say that these philosophers did not understand it, but they have seen certain issues that Heidegger had not experienced."

- "The last few days we have of course spoken a lot about time, but we have not come further than the 'definition' that time seems to be 'a series of consecutive events'.

20:45

The realization that events happen consecutively, and that we call this time." Sarah explains.

- "We have experiences, cultural experiences... books and so on. But what happens in our head, especially the best is when you cannot sleep. In bed you are a very good philosopher. The synthesis is very strong then.

20:46

Kant had his walk for this. For me, the best walk, the best thoughts happen in bed, when you cannot sleep. And sometimes that is very dangerous. It is dangerous because of this absolute way of thinking.

20:47

For example, when I was in the hospital at the beginning of my program, I had the opportunity to ask myself many ques-

tions about death. And I repeat: in my case, death is not bad news; it is an important message for a work like mine. It is always finished, because this *memento mori* [remember your mortality] is always there, but not as a bad message, it is rather the solution to find my freedom. This *memento mori* was the thinking of a monk. In my case, *memento mori* is a tool.

20:48

This rhythm to infinity, this *memento mori* is Roman Opalka: 1 to  $\infty$ . And exactly that is always complete. There is always enough to die, and in that sense it is always finished, perfect because of death. This is the eureka of my work. These 45 years that I have lived it, was enough for the work to save itself.

20:49

Maybe after ten years the artworld had already noticed that this person, Roman Opalka, had started to paint his own moment in time. Luckily, I have been able to make this sacrifice for such a long time—or has God damned me for such a long time? Because now this moment in time has become such a large work. Bigger and bigger, each time.

20:50

These large trees that can become 1000 years old, they are called Methuselah. That is also a metaphor for what Leonardo da Vinci has said about the number one. For example, he asks: what would be stronger? This small fruit of a large tree that will later become a large tree itself? Or the big tree? Leo-

nardo thought it was the little fruit, because this small fruit achieves so very much. This is also my work. The number one was already so strong. It was as strong as a potential for becoming the tree."

20:51

- "Do you think about the time that you yourself will not be there anymore?" Karlyn wonders.

- "It is also important to say this: death has a certain period of time, it is so that you never know that you have died. This bad news, which we always carry with us in our existence, is so scary. We are afraid of death and we have the right to be afraid, because death is unaesthetic.

20:52

The physical condition of the body and so on. But death, in the sense of how it is mentally, in the head, is a certain gift of nature, perhaps from God, because you never can reach that point where you say "I am dead." We can only know that we are damned, for example when you know you will get the electric chair or guillotine.

20:53

But that also is just an idea. The moment itself cannot be determined, not by the person who himself has died. When are you dead? Only the family of the dying person can experience death.

20:54

That is very, very wonderful."

- "But is that not also a hope, to be able to close ones eyes for death? Not having to experience that moment of death is also something pleasant, isn't it?" Karlyn asks Roman.

20:55

- "Yes, yes, this is a gift from nature. Only human beings know that they will die. In our era, that is the biggest problem we have: we have to die. That is also the case in my work: I use this bad news as something positive for the finishing of my program. That is why my work is always completed. And human beings will die and are in that sense complete as well.

20:56

Marie-Madeleine did not like it, in the interview that we edited this afternoon, but Leonardo's sfumato is never finished. Throughout the entire history of painting, even in the realistic works, an artist like Rembrandt for example, says: "The picture is finished." I say, "That is not true." The picture is never finished. Every time I have an exhibition coming up, I have to send a painting at some point in time. In my case, the painting is always finished.

20:57

But this is dangerous because the painting can perhaps get damaged through transportation. But a work, in my case, is completed totally. Because it belongs to my Being. If the author dies... That means: when I die, the end is perfect! I re-

peat, it is no good news that I have to die. Every person has problems with his death, of course. Always in bed when you cannot sleep, you have problems, because of having to die. But this problem is liberated in my case through my work. Like any human being, I leave a certain trace.

20:58

Some people leave a child behind or, in case of the Rockefeller family, a bank. It is a good aspect of life that you can leave something behind. What I as a person leave behind after my death, is very specific, especially as it is a sacrifice for other people. I could not have asked another person to do what I have realized as a program.

20:59

I was the one who could still do it, because it was my idea, my program. It is meant very Christian, too. My blood is my body; it communicates to say it like that. But if one would have told Christ: "I will do this for you," that does not work. This transformation cannot be done, and especially not in my work."

21:00

Roman makes a comment about Leonardo and then continues about his own work:

21:01

"In my work the numbers are always deeper and deeper, and also more objective in order to rationalize this depth."

Then, seemingly out of the nowhere, a voice tells us that dinner is ready. While getting up, Roman continues speaking:

- "I can say I have gone deeper, because today I have painted a few more numbers. This is the depth that I am talking about."

On our way to the dining room we ask Roman about his death.

- "Roman, you have told us that death is a gift..."

- "For everybody, in general. Why people often commit suicide? They want to free themselves from life."

- "But when you lie in bed at night, do you fear death?"

- "Yes, like everybody else. But I however, have certain thoughts that come with it: I leave a work behind."

21:02

But of course, almost everyone can say that, for example if he has children."

We are the first to arrive for dinner; the others are not there yet. Standing in the dining room, Roman goes on explaining:

- "Especially in this context, if I had children, then I possibly would not have come to such an extreme idea. Because a human being who has a child, is already saved. The trace of his existence continues."

-“What would you like to happen with your work after your death?”

-“As with any artwork that has a certain historical significance to the history of art, I want to save my work, because otherwise you could have tried many other things in your existence as an artist.

21:03

The work can be saved by authors who write about my work, even in posthumous editions. A book. They say: “A book can be written without having a publisher.” That is not correct. Every writer has the hope that once it will be printed. My paintings are everywhere in the world, you could say.

21:04

Australia, the United States. Not in South America, because that is a different world. My work and the history of art, the first hand-print in a cave until the work of Duchamp, it is a way to better understand art and to experience it.

21:05

We do not need to go to a museum when we already have information about art history. It is enough if you know: Duchamp was there and he did something like this, Rembrandt was present, and Opalka was there. This is always a unit. One single artist would not be possible. It is art history that makes the artist. The artist alone in the air, that is not possible. Only this message of that what happened in Altamira with this hand, which was already a desire to leave a trace. We do this to this present day. I make this trace.

21:06

We will not yet take a seat at the table, that is not done.”

-“Do you have such beautiful dinners every day?”

-“No! Unfortunately not. No, actually that is not ‘unfortunate’. It is very fortunate. But it is nice to experience something like this every day. Normally, I would have gone to bed already. I have an apple or a banana and eat nothing else. Or I will take a glass of wine, which is a possibility as well. That is good for sleeping, to be a little bit relaxed. But I only take one glass, more would not be good.

21:07

One glass is healthy, it is good for your blood circulation.”

We wait for dinner and talk about the light installation in the house. When the clock strikes the hour, Marie-Madeleine enters the room. Roman asks her whether we can already take our seats at the table. When she agrees, we get up from the divan and take our place, the same as during lunch.

21:08

Roman and Marie-Madeleine speak in French until she returns to the kitchen.

21:09

21:10

Although the others are not there yet, Roman pours us and himself a glass of red wine.

-“I am a barbarian. Marie-Madeleine often says: “A good barbarian.”

21:11

And he starts taking from the appetizers that are already on the table: thin slices of salami, ham, pâtés with pickles and bread and butter. In the meantime, Sarah speaks with Marie-Madeleine about where we come from. Roman is quiet again, enjoying his food, sometimes interrupting his silence with a short remark.

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Roman takes another slice pâté, which he likes very much and tells us about its quality.

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After that, his wife continues the conversation with us in English and Roman goes on quietly eating his food.

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When everybody is at the table, we toast to our Art Project with Roman. Roman asks Marie-Madeleine what the main course will be. Hearing it is fish, he takes some more meat.

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Marie-Madeleine tells us about their program for the next few weeks and that they will soon visit Poland, mainly because a man made a film about Roman.

-“An hour, a film of one hour. That may be interesting.”

21:22

Roman tells us about the film and then starts to speak with his wife in French.

21:23

When Alexandra joins the table, Marie-Madeleine focuses her attention on her and Roman continues to eat his food quietly. We discuss the two bottles of wine we brought, the water on the table, the move of Roman and Marie-Madeleine to this house and the presentation of events in Israel in the media. Roman makes remarks now and then, but mostly the women are talking.

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The main course is served: a white fish with baked almonds on top, with rice and a white wine. While Alexandra continues about the Jewish tradition, Roman uses the pepper-grinder and starts eating his fish, later offering the pepper to the other people at the table. We all continue a lively conversation.

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Roman pours us another glass of white wine and takes one from the bottle of red himself.

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21:41

While Sarah and Alexandra still speak about Judaism, Roman wonders whether the white wine he just poured is okay. After I, Karlyn, tell him that I enjoy it, he goes on eating his fish.

21:42

When for a moment the conversation is about fish, Roman interferes and speaks about the raw herring they sell on markets in Holland.

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21:48	21:57
Although Alexandra is still talking about Judaism, Roman now starts to speak with his wife in a soft voice about something else in French.	21:58
21:49	21:59
21:50	- "Before I met Marie-Madeleine I did not know much about wine. I liked to drink it, but the essential differences between the wines, she taught me." Roman explains.
21:51	22:00
21:52	22:01
Marie-Madeleine now tells us in English about Roman's exhibition at the Biennale di Venezia in 1995 and the difference between Roman and On Kawara in showing time. Roman makes short comments in French.	22:02
21:53	22:03
21:54	- "Your taxi? When will you call for it?" Roman asks.
21:55	- "When we are finished."
When both Marie-Madeleine and her daughter have given their opinion about On Kawara, the conversation turns in another direction after some jokes by Roman. The three of them continue about several things in French, mostly about wine.	22:04
21:56	We tell Roman about the Dutch artist Rene Rietmeyer, who will pick us up later that evening.
	22:05
	22:06

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The sound of the clock, when Roman starts to speak with his wife in French.

22:10

22:11

Roman tells his wife to go to bed, but before she does Marie-Madeleine asks about some boxes she asked us to take with us to Venice for her. She wants to pack them a bit better and carefully asks if we do not want to stop by the next morning to say goodbye. Roman laughs.

22:12

Now there starts a conversation about the packing in French between Roman, his wife and Alexandra.

22:13

We tell them we have Scotch tape in the car and that they do not need to worry about it.

22:14

Marie-Madeleine accepts and exchanges phone numbers with us. In the meantime, Roman takes a bit more of the soft goat cheese and whispers to Karlyn:

- "The cheese is very good."

A second later Roman is asked whether he has Scotch tape in his studio.

22:15

Roman gets up from his chair and walks to the door leading towards his studio.

22:16

Roman is back, but without the Scotch tape and now goes in the other direction, to the office room to look for it there.

22:17

Roman returns again, this time with tape.

22:18

When he is sitting down again, he speaks with his wife about the boxes.

22:19

Marie-Madeleine now wants to go to bed and we kiss her good-night. She leaves for the other room, but returns to say some things to her daughter. Roman sits quietly at the table.

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Now Rene is on his way to pick us up, and we use the moment to thank Roman for spending time with us.

22:23

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22:25

We get a dessert: a fruit salad served in a glass. Marie-Madeleine is back again and joins us at the table, the bell rings. Roman leaves the table to get the remote control and put on the television.

22:26

Roman is standing there, looking at the screen that shows a man and a car in a snowy black and white.

-“Now he is coming. Fantastic!” Roman laughs.

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He sits down again and together we enjoy our dessert.

22:27

Having finished it, he leaves the table again to open the front door.

22:28

22:29

Roman enters the dining room together with Rene.

22:30

After he offered him something to drink, Roman sits down again.

22:31

Rene is talking with Marie-Madeleine in French; Roman sometimes makes comments and jokes.

-“If you are naive, the world is still interesting. An illusion.”

Rene responds and Roman now asks him about the work that he makes and gets an extensive answer.

22:32

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22:35	22:46
Roman acknowledges the integrity of Rene's work and then the conversation turns to the projects we make. We explain more about the publications, symposia and exhibitions we organize.	22:47
22:36	22:48
22:37	22:49
22:38	22:50
22:39	Roman takes over again and explains his side in German and later in French. He continues about the time of the Iron Curtain and how the situation was.
22:40	22:51
The topics change, and Roman starts to tell a story in German about how he used to pass the border between East and West Berlin.	22:52
22:41	22:53
22:42	22:54
22:43	22:55
22:44	22:56
22:45	22:57
Marie-Madeleine takes over and now tells the story in English from her point of view. Roman laughs.	22:58
	22:59

23:00

23:01

While speaking about the boxes of tableware we have to take with us in our car, we decide to call it a day and get up from the table.

23:02

Roman leaves the room for a moment, without saying where he is going to.

23:03

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23:06

Roman returns, just when we are about to leave the house. We kiss Marie-Madeleine goodbye and thank her. Together with Roman and Rene, we walk the graveled path towards the garage to pick up the boxes.

23:07

After Roman shows him directions, Rene leaves to get the car in order to park it in front of the garage. We wait with Roman in the opening of the garage door and see Marie-Madeleine coming out of the house.

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23:08

We enter the garage with Roman who asks us whether we still remember which boxes we have to take. We show him. Roman tells us to be careful, when we pick up the boxes and place them at the door.

23:09

- "And that as well?"

- "Yes, and this one too."

When he sees that we know which ones to take, Roman goes outside to check whether Rene is arriving with the car.

- "He is coming."

The four of us watch him parking the car.

23:10

- "Good! He is also from Holland?"

We confirm.

- "Ah, the Dutch are intelligent!" Roman says with the sound of surprise in his voice.

23:11

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Roman speaks with Rene, while we carefully place the boxes in the car. Marie-Madeleine joins us and checks if everything is all right.

-“Well, beautiful women?”

Roman kisses us goodbye and we thank him again for a wonderful day and just before we want to enter the car, Marie-Madeleine calls Roman to her side.

23:12

She and Roman exchange a few words and then Roman tells us that they have decided to give us an *Autoportrait* from his program as support for our project. Amazed by this precious gift, we are quiet for a moment and then start thanking Roman and Marie-Madeleine extensively with more kisses.

-“See you soon. Drive safely,” Roman says, while we get in the car.

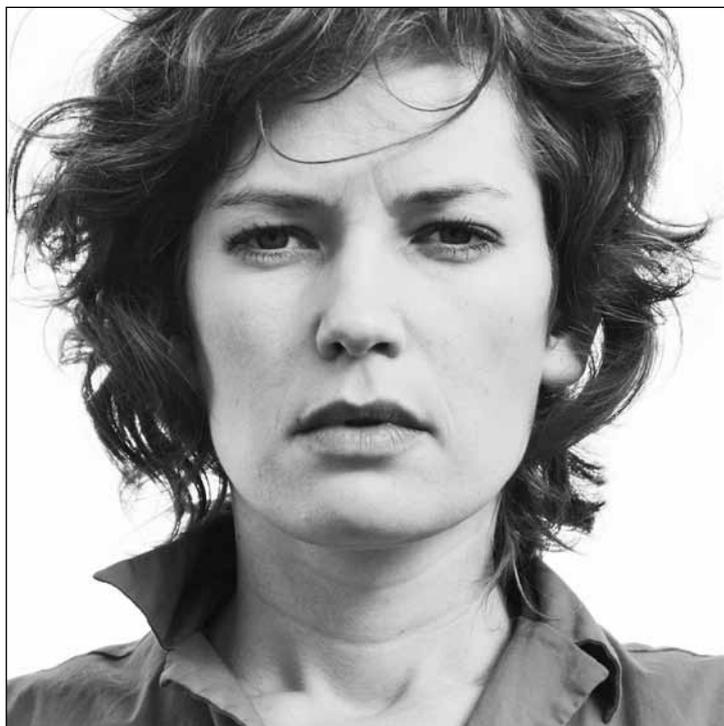
-“Bye for now!”

23:13

We close the door behind us, open the windows and wave goodbye to Roman and Marie-Madeleine.

23:14





## Karlyn De Jongh

Karlyn De Jongh (\*1980, Netherlands), independent curator and author. Study of Fine Arts in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, Netherlands. Received M.A. in Philosophy and M.Phil. in Art History and Theory at the Universities of Leiden, Netherlands and Santa Barbara, CA, USA. Since 2007, working with the project *Personal Structures*.

[Photo: La Restinga, El Hierro, Spain, 17 January 2011, 17:25.]



## Sarah Gold

Sarah Gold (\*1978, Netherlands), independent curator and author. University education in Germany (Heidelberg) and received her M.A. degree in Art History from the University of Leiden, Netherlands. Worked as an assistant curator at the Caldic Collection in the Netherlands and is engaged in the project *Personal Structures* since 2005.

[Photo: La Restinga, El Hierro, Spain, 17 January 2011, 17:35.]

## Personal Structures Art Projects # 03

ROMAN OPALKA

TIME PASSING

*Personal Structures Art Projects* are projects which are documented as special edition artists' books. Each project centralizes one artist and emphasises his work. All books in this series will be published by GlobalArtAffairs Foundation, the Netherlands. An excerpt of each project will additionally be published in the ongoing series *Personal Structures: Time • Space • Existence*.

Previously published in this series:

LAWRENCE WEINER: SKIMMING THE WATER [MÉNAGE À QUATRE]

HERMANN NITSCH: UNDER MY SKIN

As part of *Personal Structures Art Projects* will appear in 2011:

ON KAWARA

ARNULF RAINER

LEE UFAN



