

Untitled Harald Szeemann

I

A rose is a rose is a rose . . .

Who doesn't know Gertrude Stein's poem, in which, through repetition, the image of the rose is first evoked by the word, before being transposed into a purely verbal image and becoming fragrant poetry?

Niele Toroni has been repeating his paintbrush imprint in time and space since 1967. And it's never the same twice, because the same is the same is irreducibly dissociated from identicality. The pleonasm becomes a battery; the energy of the iteration becomes an open structure. It is not the highs and lows of the artist's soul that are the inhibitors of identity, but the sites of explicitation of the method. The performance of true painting, rid of the junk of all the value judgments and all the old winks and nudges, is the constant: it finds its essence in each artwork by returning back to that essence. The world is not reduced to two dimensions the way it otherwise is in a picture, but painting is a fixed situation, and it thus becomes an open structure that can be freely reimagined in every aspect.

The wall is the "picture" and the picture is the life of the wall; the individual imprint becomes an alliance. The radical retracing of a practice to the visualization of a method spills into the essentials and "painting" comes into existence: it is different and varied like the abundance of the apparitions created by a given limitation, which is nonetheless inwardly open in all directions. Modesty and wild claims, imagination and order, reflection, visionariness and inertia—everything finds a place in the method as soon as it is revealed. Having been launched first as a concept in a direct clash with the art world, the method becomes a vital topos. Tribes of imprints of a no. 50 paintbrush, replaced at intervals of 30 centimeters, survive in spite of their ephemeral fate. The walls preserve the memory of their presence (identification and superimposition) and their value as indicators of open structures. They are walls that paradigmatically show the way, born of the inclination to anonymity that is implicit in the concept, in a time of unrestrained affirmation of the ego. The artist who covered them lives his method fully, in the time allotted to him. The reduction of art to a method becomes the seed of transaesthetics and atemporality; it takes its place in history only in a person who has seen/experienced the artworks. The monk-painter of Muralto makes this epiphany possible. Through him, the Museum metamorphoses from a container of paintings into an artwork. The walls give thanks.

II

The sensual joy of the medium given by the contact at regular intervals

He comes from the great tradition of wall builders (Borromini), and of artists who ennobled the walls with frescos or stucco (Serodine), from the crowd of purifiers of the walls (chimney sweeps and decorators), who, to date, alongside a myriad of architects, mark out the art of southern Switzerland. But in his case too, the Ticino region saw another of its great sons depart abroad, to Paris, in 1959. Like his predecessors, he keeps his love for the wall very much alive, making it a resonant painting medium. Nonetheless, he radically breaks with the representation of a given thing, apart from what there is to see as a result of his working method; he acts in tune with, and through the use of, what is available, that is to say preferably the walls of a neutral artistic context or of a piece of architecture that has grown over time, or even the floors, or more familiarly cloth, cotton, paper, oilcloth, or glass. The method that Niele Toroni applied

for the first time in Paris in his thirties—in a joint exhibition with Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, and Michel Parmentier—is simple, readily imitable by others, but, like all simple things, highly complex, full of life, full of surprises, full of treachery, full of play. It is an action made visible, a work that can be as controlled as great freedom in painting; in the first instance, it can follow the format of cloth in a disciplined way, just as in other circumstances it easily covers large surfaces, alongside the differences between transparency and opacity. Faced with this method of “imprints with a no. 50 paintbrush repeated at regular intervals of 30 centimeters,” all the criteria of art history becomes obsolete: the vibration of the artist’s hand surely goes before anything else, as each brushstroke is different from the next, even if none of them stands out as the most expressive or the cleverest; the “modern” postulate of the opening-up of the painting space becomes superfluous before a method that can master any format, whose limits of application are suggested by the medium, and whose orchestration in space is defined by the artist in collaboration with that space. And then there is the composition: no problem here, it is part of the process of making the working method visible, and the same applies to the intensity of creativity, implicit in the method. The creative act is incorporated into the equation of working time = painting time, the work ethic into what is visible, the torment of decision into the sensual joy of the medium and the great possibility amongst others; the celebration of the All finally ends in the ephemeral nature of the intervention-interaction in time; the artwork/painting is generally transitory, but even after being covered over, it remains unforgettable for anyone who saw it in that place, since now no ideology weighs down the dignity of the decoration. There is no respite: here it is perhaps not about the new, poetic, nomadic, and sedentary humanism that transports the radicality of the procedure to a new horizon and that leads, through “the eternal difference in the eternal same.” And anyone who knows Niele Toroni knows another quality of methodological economy: it gives and creates time to live, to think, time for the oral tradition, and thus time to get rid of any overburdenedness; these are all qualities that shine, contained and proud, from the beloved medium, rigorously fertilized. The best iconology (neither God nor Marx nor Freud nor postmodernism) is its own iconography, regularly recurring in the repeated icon which, as an imprint, collectively resists any interpretation with ease. What remains is the reason for the location of the first and last imprint on the medium. This is the point. Understood? Where there is an imprint, there is generosity.

A version of this essay was originally published on the occasion of the exhibition Niele Toroni, held at the Museo Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Ascona, Switzerland, September 6–October 27, 1991.