

# ARTFORUM

## *Niele Toroni*

*Marian Goodman Gallery New York*

By George Baker (May 1997)

Since 1966, Niele Toroni's working method—making imprints with a No. 50 brush, repeated at regular intervals across any given support—has remained constant: no alterations, no deviations, no retrospective development. Like his former collaborator Daniel Buren, Toroni's degree-zero of painting advances only through repetition. Perpetually rehearsing its limits, painting becomes a tool for exposing the medium's structural logic, its institutional contextualization, its architectural frame. We may feel that we know this story by now, but Toroni persists in telling it, proving us wrong with each instance of his method. "Would you waste your time," Toroni once defensively mused, "on someone who said: 'I'm not interested in making love; it's always the same'? Well, that's his business."

Two general concerns seemed to characterize Toroni's latest, extremely spare exhibition in New York. First, none of the eight works was painted on a traditional canvas support. Each relatively diminutive piece experimented with a large variety of possible substitute supports, some extremely ephemeral: Plexiglas, newspaper, Japanese paper, Xerox copies, even the posters that served as the exhibition invitation. More important, many of the works appeared to reference earlier moments in Toroni's career. Three pieces subtitled *Plexiglas (200 x 80)* [all works 1997] were displayed directly on the ground, exposing in their transparency the floor below, bringing us back to one of Toroni's most crucial interventions, in a 1967 Lugano exhibition with Buren. On that occasion, in which the two called on the audience to make and appropriate the duo's "signature" works, Toroni advised the participants, "Work on the floor so as to avoid drips": one of the most programmatic rearticulations (and negations) that the mythical procedures of Jackson Pollock have ever received. Toroni continues to work whenever possible on a horizontal surface; in this case, the three works remained there, returning us to the literal base of almost all contemporary artistic endeavors: the physical support of the gallery itself.

A more explicit reference to Toroni's past was part of the actual structure of what was perhaps the strongest work in the exhibit: *La Pittura Non e Fotografia Rosso, 1974 Bianco, 1994* (Painting is not photography red 1974, white, 1994, 1974–94). Half the piece was a 1974 scroll painting originally installed during the same decade in Antwerp's Gallery Wide White Space, where it unfurled to a length equal to only seven of Toroni's regularly spaced imprints. In New York, the scroll, fully unfurled, extended from floor to ceiling; one noticed that the gallery wall corresponded in scale to nine imprints. Toroni placed four photocopies of a photograph of the original Wide White Space installation next to the scroll in a vertical strip that matched the exact

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height of that earlier exhibition. Producing a vertiginous *mise-en-abîme* between photographic inscription and present realization, between the actual painting and its photographic and painted copies, Toroni covered the Xerox strip in white imprints—seven units high—corresponding to the photographic record beneath them. Perhaps the most important implication of Toroni’s method has always been his reduction of the painterly gesture to the status of an infinitely repeated indexical imprint; semiotically speaking, the photograph is itself, as we know, a special type of index. However, all indexes are evidently not created equal; here, painting and photography subtly miss each other, creating an irreducible disjunction between the two media, and between two installations of the “same” painting. Not unlike Buren’s idea of the “photo-souvenir,” Toroni’s imprint—no matter how often repeated—is always unique; if painting has any magic left, he emphasizes, it is this: no two indexes of the brush are ever the same. And no matter how mechanized, painting will never achieve the infinite technical reproducibility of its photographic rival. No, painting most definitely is not photography; but yes, Toroni seems to say, if properly aware of its own historical status—if utterly regularized, rationalized, and repeated as a technique—painting may paradoxically become useful as a last hold-out against the chilling triumph of the unlimited fungibility of things, a refuge from the authoritarian principle of our century’s ubiquitous law of exchange.

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