

Julije Knifer

Uncompromising

08.12.2020–25.04.2021

In collaboration with MSU – Museum
of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

This text is published on
occasion of the exhibition

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Neue Galerie Graz

Universalmuseum Joanneum

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Julije Knifer was one of the leading artists from Croatia after 1945, and worked as a painter in the field of concrete and conceptual art. In 1977 he took part in the 8th tri-nation biennial *trigon 77* in Graz. *Uncompromising* highlights the tenacity and consistency of Knifer's working process, which focused for many years on reducing the picture to the essential.

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Julije Knifer

1924 in Osijek – 2004 in Paris

Between 1949 and 1952 Knifer produced a series of *Self-portraits*, which he began even before he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in 1950. Every day, the artist sat in front of the mirror and drew himself in the same format and detail, adopting a largely emotionless and objective approach to creating his studies. 120 of these sheets of paper have been preserved; 90 can be seen here in the exhibition, placed close together to create an overall view. In all of them the artist gazes out of the picture, reducing himself to an expressionless face, shaped solely by lines, shading and contrasts. He recognised that he was less concerned with the self-portrait and more with the monotonous rhythm that emerges in the series.

This resolute repetition and variation of the same motif over and over again was the result of a study lasting years, leading from subjective view to an objectification—and also to the clarification of his artistic interest.

During his training (1950–1956) and also in the years that followed, Knifer experimented with a geometrically abstract language of forms. Inspired by Cubism and Kasimir Malevich's 'non-objective world', this became

increasingly abstract. Some examples from the late 1950s reveal dynamically composed geometric surfaces and colour reduction to a few achromatic, starkly contrasting shades of white and black.

In 1960 Knifer joined the Gorgona Group, which he described as highly significant to his subsequent development as an artist. The Gorgona Group resisted any kind of dogmatism or political claim, seeking instead to achieve freedom in art and to promote international exchange towards the West. This group of very individual members was united not by any common style or manifesto, but instead by the spirit of neo-avantgarde, the idea of monotony and emptiness, a tendency to nihilism, but also a sense of irony and absurd humour.

They published their ideas in the anti-magazine 'Gorgona', with each issue designed by a different member of the group. From then on, the search for the anti-painting became the main focus of Knifer's painting. He became absorbed with reducing the picture to the essential. He was to find this in the meander, a form he explored from 1960 onwards with an unfaltering determination until his death, never repeating it identically, but rather in constant variation.

He gradually reduced the range of colours to the maximum contrast of black and white, using blue or gold in just a few pictures, as an homage to Yves Klein and Giotto. His aim was to apply the colours to the canvas in their absoluteness. For this purpose he often added many applications of white paint, even underneath the black, layer by layer. From 1969 he began to replace oil paint with quick-drying acrylic paint. In this way the act of painting became a continuous 'flow', the paint being applied layer by layer, almost meditatively, until the perfection of the right tone was achieved.

A number of sketches and pictures from around 1960 reveal the process which ultimately led to the form of the meander. His focusing on this motif came from an elimination of anything that could disturb the 'rhythm'. At this time Knifer discovered serial music, and in particular Igor Stravinsky, for whom music was 'only rhythm'. He listened to Stravinsky's work very intensively at that time.

His approach to the meander centred on uniformity, repetition, monotony and reduction to the essential. The unique form allows for balance and symmetry on the picture surface—as well as its opposites of imbalance and

asymmetry. It is everything yet at the same time nothing, emptied to a kind of pictorial zero. Chronology and progress are of no interest to the artist: 'I have probably already painted my last paintings, but maybe not the first ones. The material shape of a "painting" also meant the utmost spiritual state of the primary idea', the artist wrote in his 'Notes' (1976/77). In engaging with the form of the meander, he explored the fundamental elements of painting. And so the picture ultimately became an anti-picture. It is, however, never the result, but always part of a larger whole.

In 1961, *Meander in the Corner* was created both as an artistic and as an art historical statement. The frameless picture detaches itself from its traditional position as a 'window to the world' and instead becomes a space-structuring and space-determining element. Ten years later, the long-awaited opportunity arose for Knifer to paint larger formats and to create pictures in wall format, thanks in particular to the support of his patron Živojin Dacic in Tübingen. From 1973 he was invited to spend several months a year working there in rooms that were at last big enough to accommodate large-scale work. In 1975 Dacic enabled him to carry out a unique project in a quarry near Tübingen.

gen. Here he managed to execute a meander on over 30-metre high walls across a 600m² linen surface, which, once completed, was stretched over the enormous rock face and remained hanging there until the next day.

Knifer called this piece *Working Process*, to be viewed more as a happening without an audience than as a painting. In the same year he also produced the photo series *The relation between the artist and his painting*, which focuses on the scale of painter and canvas. The question of the relation between picture, space, colour and form in proportion to the painter shifts the attention towards the artist's conceptual working method.

In 1977, on occasion of the *trigon* biennial, Julije Knifer was one of 29 artists from Italy, Austria and the then Yugoslavia to deal with the theme of creativity at the Graz Künstlerhaus and Neue Galerie Graz, providing a broader public with an insight into their 'daring and emerging creative processes'. 'In an over-engineered world,' wrote Kurt Jungwirth at the time, 'people are surrounded on all sides by a prefabricated world.' The aim was to offer a 'powerful showcase for the creative'. Julije Knifer continued his working process in this show, presenting works on paper, sketches, silkscreen prints and drawings on

graph paper. Many of these were ideas and parts from a bigger work that had momentarily occupied a large space in Tübingen, to be preserved only in documentation and memory afterwards.

In his work from the 1980s, Knifer's processual, utterly disciplined, almost ascetic approach is evident in a series of meander drawings, in which the black slowly condensed from the strokes of a graphite pencil alone. For months, day after day, he drew meanders in this way, writing down the date every time he started working on the same paper again.

In 1994 Knifer moved to France, where he had regularly travelled throughout his life. Paris remained his home until his death in 2004. He continued to pursue his tireless examination of the meander. He also executed the motif in the form of wall paintings. The first mural was created in 1971 in public space in Zagreb, while his painting for the catalogue room of the University Library of Dijon is one of the largest, measuring 3 by 25 metres. The mural in the stairwell at the Neue Galerie was produced by his last assistant, Stéphane Henry, based on existing plans. This design was shown in 1979 at Držićevoj ulici, Zagreb as a mural in public space and in 2018 at the galerie frank elbaz in Paris.

*'Complete black and complete white
can be a complete minimum and
a complete maximum. In my work,
everything happens between black
and white.'*