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Julije Knifer

The Meander as Destiny

On the occasion of the centenary of Julije Knifer's birth (1924–2004)

Curated by Zvonko Maković

November 23, 2024 – January 11, 2025

Opening reception: November 23, 5 PM to 8 PM

2024 marks the centenary of Julije Knifer's birth (1924–2004). Numerous exhibitions and events have been dedicated to the artist across the globe to honor this milestone. To conclude this year of celebrations, galerie frank elbaz is delighted to present its seventh solo exhibition of Julije Knifer's work, *The Meander as Destiny*.

This exhibition highlights the motif of the meander, a central thread in the artist's oeuvre, explored throughout his career across various mediums and formats. It traces the evolution of this emblematic form, spanning each decade of Knifer's work: from his early self-portraits in the 1950s – which already hint at his fascination with the repetition of a single motif – to the creation of his first meander (*Meander 1*, 1960), culminating in works produced until the end of his life.

The exhibition is accompanied by a text by Zvonko Maković, art historian and leading expert on Julije Knifer's work.

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Le Méandre comme destin, galerie frank elbaz, Paris, France

Julije Knifer: Works from 1950 to 2004, Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, USA

Meanders without bounds, Art Encounters Foundation, Timisoara, Romania

Julije Knifer 100, International Symposium, Institute for Contemporary Art, Museum of Contemporary Arts, Zagreb, Croatia

Julije Knifer / Tomo Savić Gecan, Apoteka, Vodnjan, Croatia

Knifer I Osijek, Archives of the city of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

Julije Knifer: From the Collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Museum of Contemporary Arts, Zagreb, Croatia

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The Meander as Destiny

Texte by Zvonko Makovič

When considering the work of Julije Knifer as a whole, the year 1960 emerges as a pivotal moment. Although his first artistic endeavors date back to 1949, it was in 1960 that Knifer introduced the meander motif into his paintings. From that point onward, his entire oeuvre would revolve around this motif. The artist stated that he was motivated by the idea of creating anti-painting and sought a radical reduction of formal means. This reduction was expressed through the rejection of any reference to the world of objects and illusionistic elements. To achieve maximum contrast, he limited his palette to two colors—black and white.

The system of the meander itself is based on opposition: the interplay between horizontal and vertical elements, which establish a uniform and monotonous rhythm within the painting's space. However, this series of works should be viewed in a broader context, with the spirit of the time and place in which they were created. The period when Knifer's first meanders emerged was marked, on the one hand, by the decline of Informalism and, on the other, by the rise of neo-constructivist poetics, which simultaneously appeared in various parts of Europe before being recognized in Zagreb in 1961 during the first exhibition of the international movement New Tendencies. Knifer participated in this exhibition with his early meanders.

The significance of his meander motif becomes fully apparent when examining its genesis across hundreds of drawings and paintings created between 1958 and 1960. Initially, these drawings served as sketches for future works but later became ends in themselves. The artist produced them daily on sheets of paper, treating them as a kind of journal. By analyzing the gradual progression in the arrangement of rectangles, we can discern the system of the meander. Fragmented and spaced rectangles gradually coalesce into groups forming a stretched vertical and horizontal grid pattern. The meander thus emerged through the elimination of all that was "superfluous," as the artist himself claimed—that is, anything that disrupted the regularity of rhythm by introducing confusion into the vertical and horizontal layout.

The ultimate goal of this process was, according to the artist's explanation given some years later, the creation of anti-painting. During the period of his early meanders, Knifer discovered serial music, which he listened to extensively. He was also influenced by an interview with Igor Stravinsky, where the composer remarked that music is nothing more than rhythm. "I tried," Knifer noted, "to achieve such expressive effects through visual means." The horizontal and vertical elements of his meanders, along with the interplay of black and white, embody maximum rhythmic oppositions—an "escalation of uniformity and monotony" that became a defining constant in his work.

Around the same time, Zagreb hosted the Biennale of Contemporary Music, an event that introduced a younger audience to the works of Schönberg, Stockhausen, John Cage, Ligeti, Boulez, Nono, and Kagel, who presented their compositions at the Biennale.

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In 1959, Knifer co-founded the artistic group Gorgona with several friends. Active until 1965, Gorgona included painters Josip Vaništa, Uro Seder, and Marijan Jevšovar; sculptor Ivan Kožari; architect Miljenko Horvat; and art historians and critics Radoslav Putar, Matko Meštrović, and Miha Bašičević –Mangelos, whose artistic contributions also defined the group. They collectively sought to transcend conventional artistic domains, such as painting and sculpture, through new forms of expression that would later be recognized as conceptual art.

Knifer's work, viewed from a strict reductionist perspective that moved toward the disappearance of painting as an object and approached the forms of expression seen in 1960s conceptual art, is particularly indicative of this trend. He himself stated that his art was "evolving toward the complete disappearance of painting."

Gorgona artists closely followed the actions of Rauschenberg and Cage, as well as European artists like Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, not to mention the Fluxus movement. Knifer's affiliation with Gorgona, which coincided with the creation of his first meanders, reveals much about his artistic endeavors.

One segment of Julije Knifer's oeuvre perhaps best illuminates the nature of his art and personality: a series of self-portraits created between 1949 and 1952. During this time, Knifer sat before a mirror daily, observing his face—not with the aim of producing psychological portraits, despite his mastery of expressive elements. By drawing his face every day, Knifer sought to depict something more complex than conventional topography: he attempted to capture the invisible—something belonging to the realm of time, manifested through the continuity of the act of drawing the same motif.

This daily, almost ritualistic repetition marked the transition of these drawings from self-portraits to a processual endeavor, presented as an infinite series of rhythmic displacements, identical or nearly so. It was the same "escalation of uniformity and monotony" that he would describe later in connection with his meanders. Knifer demonstrated that he was uninterested in spectacle or imagery (imago). His focus was on the transformations occurring at the level of language, rather than representations of material reality.

In the mid-1970s, Knifer began creating drawings first in pencil and later with graphite, covering the surfaces of his meanders with thousands of strokes until achieving maximum saturation of black. He continued this practice until the end of his life, allowing repetition to reach its zenith. Reflecting on this, he commented: "When I began working, I noticed that after two or three days of drawing, no particular effect appeared. I thought to myself: all of this is absurd, but I will push the absurd to its limits [...]." Around the same time, he wrote in his journal: "Absurdity is, for me, an essential component of my action. Absurdity is a form of freedom."

Today, as we commemorate the centenary of Julije Knifer's birth, the question arises about the future of his art. In my view, the main challenge lies in radicalizing practices, pushing boundaries, and opening new pathways—something Knifer pursued from the outset and remained committed to, uncompromisingly, until the end.

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Biographical Note

JULIJE KNIFER was born in 1924 in Osijek (Croatia).

From 1951 to 1957, he studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb. In 1959, he co-founded the Gorgona art group, active in Zagreb until 1966, which advocated for new artistic expressions, often aligned with happenings and Fluxus.

In 1960, the meander motif appeared in his works. He developed it through the reduction of expressive elements, striving to create anti-painting. Within monotony, he found the perfect rhythm, which he sought to translate into his paintings. After creating his first meanders, Knifer never abandoned this motif, endlessly repeating it in countless variations in his paintings and drawings. In 1961, he participated in the first exhibition of the international New Tendencies movement. From the early 1970s to the late 1980s, he frequently worked and exhibited in Germany, and from 1990 onward, in France. He lived in Sète and Nice before moving to Paris in 1994. In addition to painting on canvas, Knifer created meanders on walls, both indoors and outdoors. He passed away in Paris on December 7, 2004.