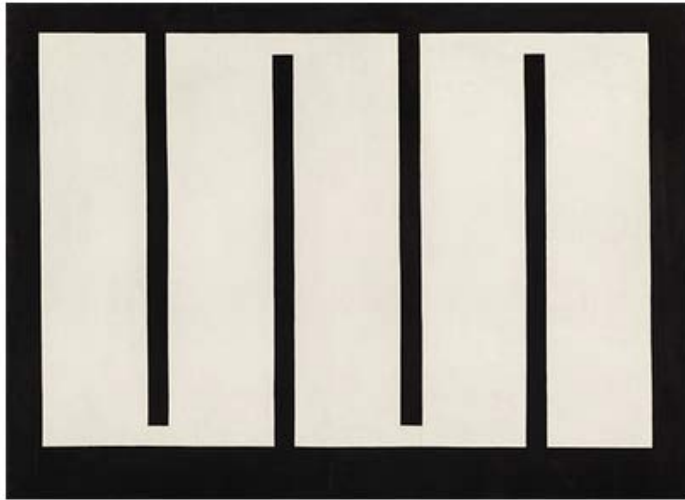


Julije Knifer, *Artforum*, March 2015

# ARTFORUM

## Julije Knifer

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART ZAGREB



Julije Knifer, *Meander 2*, 1960, oil on canvas, 40 x 53 1/2".

The word *meander* derives from the Maiandros River, which twists and turns through what is now Turkey on its way to the Aegean Sea. The water's singularly serpentine path was stylized into a popular pattern, picked up and disseminated throughout classical Greek and Roman art and architecture. The meander eventually wound its way to the forefront of the European avant-garde when, in 1960, Croatian painter Julije Knifer—a member of the Yugoslavian proto-Conceptualist Gorgona Group—declared that from that moment on, his work would consist exclusively of its interlocking right angles. If Malevich had intended his black square as a declaration of finality, Knifer saw his meanders as autonomous elements of a rhythm capable of achieving the monotony he deemed central to his quest for an "anti-painting."

While, as part of Gorgona, Knifer would develop a kind of prototype for performance (which the group referred to, perhaps presciently, as "photo-posing"), the artist's primary output for the rest of his forty-year career would be meanders, created across a broad spectrum of techniques, materials, and scales, but almost always black-and-white. In 1969–70, Knifer indulged in a brief flirtation with color, experimenting with the gold of Orthodox churches alongside a blue intended as a nod to Yves Klein, a hero to Gorgona (who released their own "Gorgona's Black" in 1961), before resolving to stick only to the most extreme contrast: "utterly, fully white and utterly, fully black." The Maiandros River may have been shaped by thousands of years of erosion, but Knifer's meanders were meticulously plotted against the horizontal and vertical axis of each canvas. Though the borders of the canvas effectively dammed the flow intrinsic to the form, Knifer teased out a kind of continuity in later diptychs and triptychs, which usually aligned works of the same size and technique. The only potential for infinity existed within the depth of his surfaces, particularly in the later (post-1970) pencil and graphite works. The artist spent six years layering the strokes of the five-foot-high *Untitled, Meander*, 1993–99, in which the graphite builds up with a shimmering, near sculptural density. The two burly black arms of the meander are edged by a gossamer white line, which glows like hallway light slipping around a door imperfectly aligned in its frame.

"My path is neither progressive nor regressive," Knifer repeatedly boasted. "I might have already done my last paintings, and not have done the first ones." Picking up on this cue, this long overdue retrospective, aptly titled "Uncompromising," juxtaposed one of the last paintings Knifer completed, *AP49*, 2004, with a series of palm-size paper collages, dating from 1960 to 1961. Not surprisingly, the painting offers an amplified echo of the collages. Curator Radmila Iva Jankovi worked closely with Ana Knifer, the artist's daughter, to root out the origins of the artist's interest in seriality. They showed, for instance, eighty-eight of more than two hundred self-portraits the artist produced between 1949 and 1952: The technique varies—pencil, graphite, ink, watercolor—but the format and subject remain the same, give or take a jaunty cap or two. Upstairs, vitrines displayed photo-booth strips (another of the artist's obsessions) alongside pages from Knifer's diary, a maddening exercise in penmanship that forms meanders from mantras of repeated phrases.

To mark the exhibition opening, Knifer's nearly hundred-foot-long banner *Arbeitsprozess* (Working Process), 1975, produced over the yawning surfaces of a quarry outside Tübingen, Germany, was unfurled down the length of the facade of the Museum of Contemporary Art, itself a three-dimensional meander sited on an alley named in honor of the artist, who died in 2004. By striving "to create a . . . painting without identity," Knifer ended up imprinting it with his own. Even the winding Maiandros can be traced to its source.

—Kate Sutton