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Abstract

The oeuvre of Julije Knifer was marked by meander paintings, an old Greek ornament, that was first recognised in *Compositions* in late 1950s and continuously represented in different mediums: painting, sculpture, relief, collages, wall paintings, journals from 1959s onwards. The antecedence of meander paintings are visible even before, in geometrical experiments from the 1950s when during his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts Knifer was every day drawing self-portrait. Looking at the self-portraits we can see the differences between them since from his early beginnings Knifer was aiming to show his inner psychological state, as later he will show different variations of meander paintings.

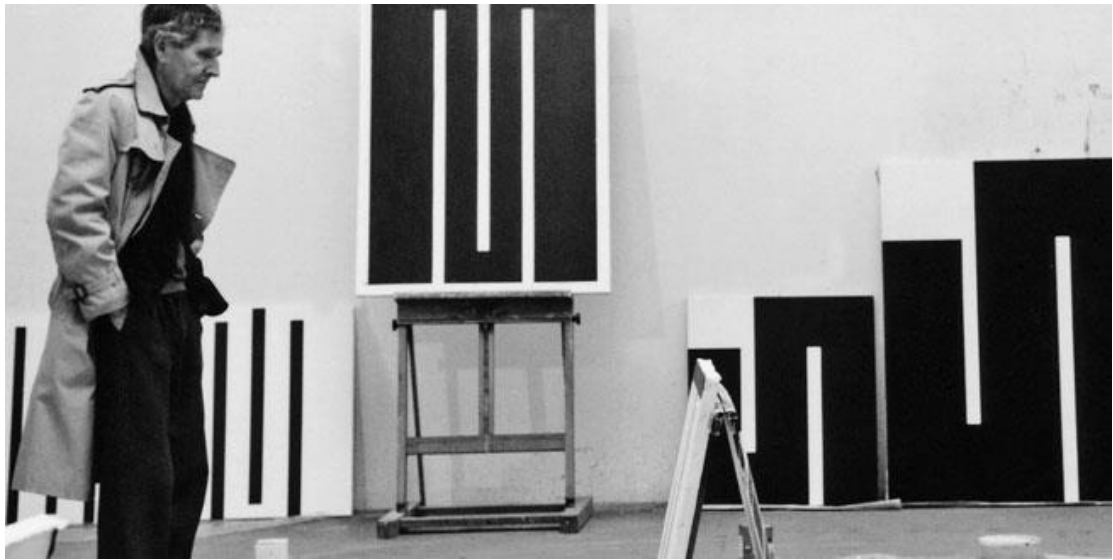
Meander is not an ornament in Knifer's oeuvre but a whole system, as one meander is just a part of the whole meander oeuvre. Meander is a form through which Knifer ultimately marks the facts, borderline situations, a form on which he tries to inscribe his consciousness trying to trespass the material character of art itself as meander tries to escape the form, the borders of frame, the limits of walls. Here we see other influence on Knifer's art that come from Malevich whose ideas were inspiring him since his student days at the Academy of Fine Art. The influence can be seen from the use of geometrical forms, black and white colour contrast and most importantly in the premise that the works of art should present the materialization of feeling.

Knifer started to identify himself with meander in 1959s and he stayed faithful to the idea till the end as himself says in the *Notes*:

The chronology and the sequence of my works are unimportant. I have probably done my last paintings, but not the first ones. In the year fifty-nine I was focused on the idea of creating the anti painting. Using a certain method of reduction I attempted to create a form of anti-painting. Using the method of reducing forms and colours I reached the ultimate borderline forms of simplicity. The physical form of painting at the same time meant the ultimate spiritual state of the initial ide. My current compositions contain the same

spiritual origin and the same spiritual structure from those years – fifty-nine and sixty. In its physical form, my “painting” is exhausted also spiritually.

Meanders in that sense represent the gorgonic spirit of Knifer that came to life when Knifer was part of Gorgona group in the 1960s. In this mix of irony, absurd, existentialism, nihilism Knifer hold on to absurd the strongest as for him it represented freedom which he expressed in his paintings and writings. In that sense we discover Knifer as an absurd hero that as Sisyphus frees himself through constant repetition of one sign meander where its contrasts black and white, vertical and horizontal represent the existentialist worldview of a painter who decided to revolt as Camus would say.



“To me absurdity is a very important component in my actions. Absurdity is form of freedom.” Julije Knifer

1. INTRODUCTION

The thesis focuses on the oeuvre of the Croatian painter Julije Knifer who began his artistic creation in the 1950s, which culminated in the 1960s with the formation of meander, the sign which he later followed in all its variations until his death. Meander is an ancient Greek ornament mostly used on vases and architecture characterized by winding endless flow which appeared first in Knifer's *Compositions* in the late 1950s. Knifer later purified the sign through the process of reduction. Thus, the focus of the thesis will be on the form and theory of anti-painting that is represented through Knifer's meanders. The thesis, among other questions, explores the similarities between painters Knifer and Malevich since this comparison has not yet been fully explored. It was usually just mentioned as a starting point for Knifer's understanding. The similarities between Knifer and Malevich are the basis for the first argument of the thesis, which is the suprematist influence on the development of meander color and form while the second argument deals with the influence of Existentialism and Absurd on the signification of meander.

The artwork of Knifer has been influenced by the suprematist theory of Kazimir Malevich, all the way back when he started his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb. Knifer chose professor Đuro Tiljak as his supervisor just because Tiljak took the classes from Malevich and Kandinsky.¹ Even if we see Malevich's suprematist ideas on pure art through which he tried to capture abstract ideas such as the sublime or infinity, as a starting point of Knifer's artistic explorations, it is important to see which other similarities exist besides the evident geometric minimalist style in painting, the use of color, form and creation of anti-painting. Having in mind the fact that Knifer and Malevich did not live and create in the same time period, the thesis is based on the creation of anti-painting that allows the transcendence in art. Furthermore, the thesis also aims at finding out if meander and square can be seen as geometrical signs that represent the existential and spiritual vision of Knifer and Malevich, since these artists did not separate their private and artistic lives, thus having their work represent their philosophical views on life.

¹ Maković, Z. (2002), *Knifer* (p.54), Zagreb: Meandar

In the thesis, Knifer's artworks will be analyzed and compared with artworks and theories of modern art pioneers such as Kandinsky and Mondrian and especially Malevich in order to define the suprematist influence and to see the evolution of meander. Following, the chronology of Knifer's artworks will be presented with a focus on the variations of meander sign and more detailed analysis of important paintings such as for example *Meander in the Corner*. In that sense colors used in the formation of meander and the different forms of meander will be discussed to understand the evolution of this sign. The analysis will explain the choice of non - colors, black and white mostly used in the formation of meander as well as the monotonous rhythm of the meander flow.

All these analyses have an end goal to better understand the meaning of meander, an occurring theme throughout all Knifer's work. To sustain the second argument, the influence of absurd, the written texts will be analyzed. In Knifer's texts, we can find mentions of notions connected to his artworks as well as of absurd, existentialism, freedom and anti-painting. In that sense, we can see how the same idea of the absurd was present in the artworks and in the written works as Knifer himself transformed into the sign of meander, a sign of his rebellion against the absurd.

The thesis starts with the presentation of the Croatian avant-garde tendencies of the 1920s that influenced the later Croatian neo-avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s. This chapter is important to understand the importance of the Russian avant-garde on the Croatian art scene of the 1920s. These influences were important for the dissemination of suprematist ideas on Knifer in the 1960s. In that sense, August Cesarec's essay *Contemporary Russian Painters* from 1924 will be presented as well as the avant-garde magazine *Zenit No.17-18* from 1922 dedicated to Russian avant-garde.² Analyzing these rare sources we will understand which information was available on Suprematism in the 1920s and why Suprematism gained on the importance with Knifer in the 1960s in Croatia.

² Cesarec, A. (1980) *Suprematizam – Maljevič* in Mijušković S. *Maljevič, Suprematizam – Bespredmetnost* (pp.114-117) Beograd: Studentski izdavački centar UKSSO. (Original work published 1928)

The thesis will continue with the presentation of Knifer's oeuvre, and analysis of the paintings before the conception of the meander. In this early phase, we will see the indications of the future variations of meander as the repetition appears in his artworks even before his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts. Following, the chronological analysis of the meander paintings will be made to see the connecting points between Malevich and Knifer, such as in the choice of color and geometric forms. In this part of the thesis, the question will be if Knifer's meander can be considered another evolution of the same idea that represents Malevich's *Black Square* since they share the same vision in art to create anti-painting. The transcendence character of *Black Square* and meander will also be explained since is one of the reasons why Knifer is perceived to be more of an artist of "spiritual art" such as Malevich, Kandinsky and Mondrian. We will see how Knifer's paintings represent his spiritual state and are not just focused on the mere reduction of form and color.

Having in mind the transcendence character of Knifer's artworks the thesis attempts to connect the paintings of Malevich and Knifer through the concept of "aesthetic of silence" coined by Susan Sontag.³ In this essay, Sontag puts an accent on the silence of artworks that become the tool for transcending their meanings. This concept can be seen in Knifer and Malevich's attempts to present their inner spiritual life, or even worldview, on the canvas, making their art utopian. This utopia can also be seen in Knifer's search for the ultimate freedom that is existent only in the structure of his paintings and not in reality. By looking at their paintings as their personal philosophies, or their inner cosmos, we can notice also the phenomenon of the universality of their ideas, of the transcendence in art, in different time spans of the 1920s and 1960s. In an attempt to present Knifer's philosophy regarding art and life the thesis further examines his thoughts on freedom, which for Knifer was a meaning of living, achieved through absurd.

Another important question this thesis asks is why Knifer is more associated through his oeuvre to Malevich than to Kandinsky or Mondrian? This question is important to answer to justify the influence of Malevich on Knifer. As we know, Kandinsky was

³ Sontag, S., *Aesthetics of Silence*,
<http://opasquet.fr/dl/texts/Sontag_Aesthetics_of_Silence_2006.pdf>

also influenced by the music of Schönberg, just like Knifer was inspired by Stravinsky and Cage.⁴ On the other hand, Knifer also used geometrical planes like Mondrian. Still Malevich was the first modern artist that consciously chose geometrical shapes as the shapes that will make the base of pure non-objective paintings like Knifer did later by choosing meander. As we see the answer to this question lies in the difference between the concepts of abstract art of Kandinsky, a non-objective art of Malevich and the concrete art of Mondrian. In that sense, Knifer, like Malevich, had consciously chosen meander and not abstract nature like Kandinsky and he did not reduce it to a mathematical principle like Mondrian.⁵

The connection that needs to be explained is the difference between the artworks of Knifer and Mondrian since visually their works are most similar. In the concrete art of Mondrian, we find geometrically constructed alphabet with an emphasis on line, form and color, with the spiritual dimension relying on the infinite pattern. This is also evident in Knifer's meander as well. What is problematic with this connection is that Knifer's reference to Malevich in contrast to De Stijl movement comes from the treatment of meander as a sign and not as structure. Knifer put the meander in direct connection to pure feeling and spirituality of Malevich's non-objectivity, as Igor Zidić wrote:

Naked knees of his Meanders are signs, not structures. In fact, their content is made out of a subjective will, not some operative formula or mathematical principle. That is why I can understand searching of his symbolic function in black and white in crosses of Malevich's feelings.⁶

On the other hand what connects all these movements: abstract art, non-objective art and concrete art can be found in the *Manifest of the Concrete Art*, in which Carlsund, Doesbourg, Helion, Tutundjian and Wantz, argue that when means of expression are themselves free of all characteristics, they find a connection with the goal of art to

⁴ Maković Z.(2002), *Knifer* (p.21), Zagreb: Meandar

⁵ Zidić, I (1968), Abstracting of materiality and forms of abstraction in Croatian painting 1951-1968 *Život umjetnosti no.7-8*, pp. 51-91

⁶ Ibidem. pp.51-91 (Gola koljena njegovih Meandara znaci su, ne strukture. U biti, njihov sadržaj čini subjektivna volja, a ne čine nikakve operativne formule, ni jedno matematičko načelo. Zato se i mogu razumjeti opetovana traženja njihove simboličke funkcije: u crnom i bijelome, u slomljenom koraku kao u kirževima Maljevičevih osjećanja) – Translation mine

achieve one universal language, adding that they are opening the period of pure painting constituting the form of pure spirit.⁷ Doesburg writes in the *Manifest of De Stijl* in 1922: “There is an old and a new consciousness of time. The old is connected with the individual. The new is connected with the universal”⁸, and in *Manifesto for Concrete Art in 1930*: “Art is universal.”⁹ These statements justify the idea of universality in art that can be achieved in different time periods as it was the case of Knifer who took over Malevich’s suprematist ideas on form and color that he used in the creation of meander, a sign of endless flow, which he filled with the meaning of absurd.

Throughout the thesis, there is an emphasis on the geometrical forms and spirituality that these geometrical forms reflect. As we can see, Malevich and Knifer’s artworks are based on the use of geometrical forms, to which they both came, as in the case of Malevich, from a passage through art movements of Symbolism, Cubo-Futurism, Alogism, or, in the case of Knifer from pencil auto portrait drawings and colorist vedettes, through experimentation with Cubism to *Meander* in 1960. Artworks based on the geometrical forms in its ideological projections implicate utopian component and at the same time, they indirectly manifest different means of expression.¹⁰

These relations will be seen in the analysis of Knifer’s work, especially in the use of the white borderline, giving the impression of the infinite space behind it. Knifer was following Malevich who began this method with *Black Square* and emphasized it in the last white phase connecting artworks with the surface behind it, and in that sense incorporating the artwork into the objective world. To better understand this approach in presenting artworks without frame Derrida’s essay *Parergon* will serve as a theoretical background.¹¹ In this essay, Derrida explains the function of the frame which will help us to understand why Knifer and Malevich refused to use it in their paintings, as their works represent infinity in the case of Malevich or endless flow in the case of Knifer.

⁷ 100 Artists' Manifestos From the Futurists to the Stuckists, (p.216), (2001) Penguin books

⁸ Ibidem., p.216

⁹ *De Stijl Manifesto* <http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/373/bbm%253A978-1-4614-7052-6%252F1.pdf?auth66=1424202790_bac1574916cfaf94ea75ff47a7d8c8cd&ext=.pdf>

¹⁰ Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.6) Split: LOGOS

¹¹ Derrida, *The Parergon*,

<<http://www.rae.com.pt/caderno%20mestrado/Derrida%20on%20Parergon.pdf>>

The connection through geometry between Malevich and Knifer noticed art historian Ješa Denegri who saw in their geometrical works the expression of the pure feeling of the soul. According to Denegri meander as a sign has its foundation in suprematist elements of square, circle and cross that origin from Malevich's first phase. The difference in expression is that Knifer does not represent the abstraction of the object but the abstraction of the movement. This constant motion of meander is further connected with the existentialist component of Knifer's work, which is the duration and regeneration of "being". In this sense meander does not have a beginning or end it is just a form, a fragment of an open continuity that is in its form connecting time with movement.¹²

When looking at Knifer's complete oeuvre it is important to mention that Knifer was always regarded as an outsider in the context of the Croatian neo-avant-garde art of the 1960s.¹³ Maybe the reason lies in Knifer's quest to form his own artistic, visual language, composed only to represent meander, a system, a cosmos in his paintings. In this explanation, we can find another reason why Knifer can be considered more as a follower of Malevich's theory who, as other avant-garde pioneers, was also creating his cosmos inside of the paintings with his symbolical geometrical elements presenting his philosophy of Suprematism.

In the chronological presentation of Knifer's works, the focus will be on the evolution of his thought and variations of meander sign. We will see how the representation of meander changes through the years and how Knifer's focus changes from anti-painting of the 1960s, meander as a visual sign of the 1970s to painting without the identity of the 1980s. The important thing is to remember that even though Knifer's perspective on meander during years changes he still stays faithful to the original idea of the 1960s: "Today it is purposeless to create an anti-painting and I do not know if my present compositions must suggest an anti-painting formula although they are of the same spiritual origin and the same spiritual and physical structure as in those years – 1959 and 1960. It is important to continue the logic of a course commenced then."¹⁴

¹² Denegri J. (2000), *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat '51 i Nove Tendencije*, (pp.294-295), Zagreb: Horetzky

¹³ Ibidem., pp.294-295

¹⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146), Zagreb: MSU

Even though Knifer did not write theoretical works on art as Malevich did, we can still grasp his way of thinking through his written works: *Banal Diaries, Notes* (1976-77), *A Petitionary Letter to the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb* (1983), *Notes* (1986). These works belong to absurd literature while at the same time they contain information about the logic behind Knifer's meanders and his views on art and life. By analyzing these texts we can find other important influences on Knifer such as Existentialism and Absurd which are present in his paintings through the use of constant repetition and monotony on canvas and in the text.

To understand the importance of absurd on Knifer one chapter will be dedicated to the non-formal art group Gorgona whose member was also Knifer in the time when he started painting meanders. The group was active between the years 1959 and 1965. Even after its dissolution the group members kept the gorgonic spirit alive in their individual works. This gorgonic spirit is what in Knifer's work is seen as the representation of absurd that he keeps alive with his art and way of life.

We can notice that absurd is very important to Knifer in general as he finds his freedom in it: "since for me, absurdity is a very definite form of freedom, in that process I reached for absurdity."¹⁵ Absurd is the key to understand meander, as its elements monotony of the rhythm, reduction, time, being and extreme contrasts, are later also transferred onto paper in the absurd written works. In that sense, Knifer lived absurd, transformed himself into an absurd hero and presented absurd in painting, written works by the endless form of the meander. This component of Absurd and Existentialism is what in fact distinguishes him from Malevich even though Knifer expressed absurd with suprematist elements of form and color.

In that sense the first part of the thesis will be focused on the form of meander and Knifer's beginnings where the accent will be on the comparison with Malevich and the second part will focus more on the absurd note of Knifer's work and the meaning of meander. In the following Chapter two, the historical circumstances that influenced Croatian art of the 1960s and the chronological overview of Knifer's oeuvre before joining the art group Gorgona will be presented. How Knifer reached the form of

¹⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.144), Zagreb: MSU

meander during the time when he was a member of art group Gorgona and developed it after the dissolution of the art group Gorgona, along with the emphasis on the notion of anti-painting will be discussed in Chapter three. In Chapter four, the focus will be on the color, especially black and white, with the reference on Malevich, and in Chapter 5 the emphasis will be more on the theoretical notions and analysis of written works important for the understanding of meander and absurd. Arguments will be discussed in the conclusion to see to which extent Malevich influenced Knifer, what the similarities between two painters that have not yet been fully addressed are, which ideas Knifer appropriated and developed further as a painter of neo-avant-garde, and whether both of them can be considered to have shared the same universal idea in art, which connected them through the aesthetics of silence and creation of *anti-painting*. Also, the thesis will focus on the influence of Absurd seen in the meander paintings and in the written works and try to answer the question if Knifer is, in fact, an absurd hero who is representing the absurd of his life in his artworks?

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

2.1. CROATIAN AVANT-GARDE AND NEO-AVANT-GARDE

To understand Knifer's artworks we have to know the political and historical circumstances that were present at the time of his artistic creation. The reason for this is because his artwork also represents the spirit of the time, the spirit after Second World War and the spirit of the new socialist country of Yugoslavia that was created in 1945. The new socialist system in Yugoslavia had a specific view on art that first had to serve as propaganda for the state in the form of socialist realism, a style developed in the Soviet Union that became also a dominant style in other socialist countries. The socialist realism style was characterized by the glorified depiction of communist values. The period of socialist realism in Yugoslav art was relatively short and the consequences were less drastic than in other countries of the Eastern Bloc, but it still had a large effect because of the ideological dictates on the individual artistic creativity. The creation outside officially accepted ideological framework required a strong artistic self-consciousness due to the possible political consequences.¹⁶

As Yugoslav political leadership in the 1948 distanced from USSR and Stalinism, and consequently the doctrine of socialist realism in visual arts, it opened a space within which it was necessary to formulate new theoretical assumptions that followed the ideological shifts, which enabled the appearance of the neo-avant-garde movements on the art scene in the late 1950s. The political and cultural establishment of that time opted for a model in arts that was combined out of socialist eastern and western capitalist ideas. In this cultural model, that Ješa Denegri calls "socialist modernism", political and cultural institutions were included. In this way, Yugoslavia and its art "represented a third way" on the political and cultural scene of the world. In that sense, we can regard the reception of every artistic phenomenon in Yugoslavia after the 1960s as a part of a very specific type of relationship between art and socialist ideology.¹⁷

¹⁶ Denegri, J., (2006) *Inside or Outside "Socialist Modernism"? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene, 1950-1970*, in: *Impossible Histories*, (pp.401-420) Eds. Đurić and Šuvaković, MIT Press

¹⁷ Ibidem., pp.401-420

Knifer started painting in the period of neo-avant-garde, a period in art history that is defined by reuse and reinterpretation of 1920s avant-garde elements. In the Yugoslav cultures, the avant-gardes of the 1920s, neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s, and post-avant-gardes of the 1970s were invariably somewhere out on the edge, far from the greater public, hidden, censored, suppressed and misunderstood. The reason for this treatment was since, after Second World War, when Yugoslavia became a socialist, multinational state, the avant-gardes, neo-avant-gardes and post-avant-gardes were treated as extreme expressions of western bourgeois or civilian decadence, cosmopolitanism and political subversion.¹⁸

Since neo-avant-garde movements took avant-garde movements as their starting point it is important to see the development of Yugoslav avant-gardes. The development of abstract art in Yugoslavia between two World Wars 1918 to 1935 went into two directions: one was following French modernism and movements: Cubism, Expressionism and Neoclassicism, as an expression of moderate abstraction, and the second one was following more abstract movements such as Dadaism, Constructivism and Surrealism. We could say that by importance Yugoslav avant-garde movements belonged to the small avant-gardes of the Middle European circle.¹⁹

Among all avant-garde movements that appeared in the 1920s and 1930s in Yugoslavia, Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism, avant-garde group Zenit will be discussed, since it later had an influence on the neo-avant-garde art group Gorgona whose member was also Julije Knifer in the 1960s. This influence from the Zenit group is seen in the activities of the group Gorgona, in their approach to art through irony, absurd and negation of all art forms, in striving toward anti-art and publishing anti-review Gorgona, which also will reflect on Knifer's meanders.

Ljubomir Micić, a poet, actor and literary critic, formed the group Zenit in 1921. The group consisted of artists, poets and critics. The central activity of the group was the publication of a journal *Zenit*.²⁰ Group's activities reflected different avant-garde

¹⁸ Šuvaković, M. (2003) *Impossible Histories*, in: *Impossible Histories*, (p.5) Eds. Đurić and Šuvaković, MIT Press

¹⁹ Ibidem., p.20

²⁰ Margolin, Vukić (2009), *Croatian Design Now*, (p.7), Zagreb: UPI-2M

influences such as Expressionism, Dadaism and Constructivism, as the group followed the radical, experimental stream in art trying, as other similar avant-garde movements, to reject everything from the past and create a new society. Ljubomir Micić in the *Manifest of Zenitism* proclaimed:

Zenitism you cannot understand if you do not feel it. Eclecticism of who we do not understand but feel maybe it is the highest manifestation of the spirit; Zenitism is a magical and electrical interval of macrocosms and microcosms of a man and zenitism; man-spirit-metacosmos-sun- phenomena-zenit; zenith = orient aeroplan of spirits; Zenitism is idea of art; Zenitism is artistic affirmation of complete spirit; Zenitism = eternity = totality; Zenitism is absolute supernatural individualization that is the only creative: it has to carry in itself artist + a man = (übermensch), it has to incarnate two polar metacosmos (phenomena); zenitism is not just a spirit, fourth dimension, zenitism is infinity or 10th dimension= eternity.²¹

Through Zenitism Ljubomir Micić wanted to create new Balkan culture by rejecting the old and incorporating the new elements, together with the original cultural influences of the region. As the art historian, Miško Šuvaković concludes, zenitist avant-garde model essentially relied on the principles and methods of an aesthetic ethical reevaluation of the European historical avant-garde from the deconstruction and rejection of the mimetic principle, to the radical approach that usurped all the other previously existing boundaries in the institution of art.²²

The magazine of the international character *Zenit* was published from 1921 to 1924 in Zagreb, and from 1924 to 1926 in Belgrade. 43 issues were published in total. The contributors to the magazine were the following artists: Archipenko, Delaunay,

²¹Micić, Goll, Tokin (1921), *Manifest Zenitizma*, Likovni Salon Tribine Mladih, Zagreb: Biblioteka Zenit <<http://www.msu.hr/rara/avangard.swf?3>> (Zenitizam ne možete razumeti ako ga ne osetite. Elektricitet koga ne rzaumemo nego osećamo, možda je najviša manifestacija duha; Zenitizam = orient aeroplan duhova; zenitizam je ideja umjetnosti. Zenitistička umetnost mora biti idejna – afirmativna. Zenitizam= totalitarnost.Zenitizam je apsolutna natprirodna individualizacija, koja je jedina stvaralačka: mora u sebi nositi umetnika +čoveka. Nadčovek mora inkarnirati dvopolarni metakozmos fenomen. Zenitizam nije samo duh= četvrta dimenzijazenitizam je vandimenzija= ili deseta dimenzija= vječnost) – Translation mine

²² Šuvaković, M. (2006), *Impossible Histories*, in: *Impossible Histories*, (p.5) Eds. Đurić and Šuvaković, MIT Press

Ehrenburg, Kandinsky, Lissitzky, van Doesbourg and Moholy Nagy among others.²³ Through the publishing of *Zenit* magazine came international and especially Russian avant-garde influence in the 1920s, which was abruptly by the Second World War.²⁴

The founder and publisher of the *Zenit* magazine Ljubomir Micić stayed in Germany in the summer of 1922 and spent considerable time in Berlin making many professional and personal contacts around the magazine *Der Sturm*. During his stay in Berlin, Micić also visited the First Exhibition of Russian Art and met Russian avant-garde artists El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg. Micić, Lissitzky and Ehrenburg agreed, among other things, to publish a Russian issue of *Zenit No. 17-18* that will be completely dedicated to the Russian avant-garde. Following the agreement El Lissitzky and Ehrenburg edited the publication, and their constructivist approach can also be seen in the graphic and typographic furnishment of the magazine.

It is important to further analyze the *Zenit No. 17-18* from 1922 that was completely dedicated to the Russian avant-garde. It is necessary to see what was published on the Russian avant-garde, and what information was available in the 1920s and 1930s, because in the 1960s, the neo-avant-garde artists together with Knifer took inspiration and continued these avant-garde art movements in a new form.

In the *Zenit No. 17-18*, poems and texts of the Russian avant-garde poets and artists were published among which it is important to mention: Kruchenykh's prologue to the opera *Victory Over the Sun* in which Malevich participated with his costumes and stage design, images of El Lissitzky for the costumes for the same opera, Khlebnikov's text *About Contemporary Poetry*, Malevich's text *Laws of New Art*, and a text by Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky entitled *New Russian Art*. From the reproductions that were published, it is important to mention: the reproductions of two Malevich's suprematist paintings from 1913, *Black Square* and *Black Circle*, Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, Rodchenko's *Constructivist Form in Space*, and El Lissitzky's *Construction*.²⁵

²³ Vinterhalter, *Zenit, Gorgona, BIT International – prezentacija originalnih i digitalnih časopisa*, <<http://hrcak.srce.hr/111802>>

²⁴ Šuvaković, M. (1998), *Estetika apstraktnog slikarstva*, 8, (p.133) Beograd: Narodna knjiga/Alfa

²⁵ *Zenit* <<http://www.avantgarde-museum.com/hr/museum/kolekcija/4393-ZENIT/>>

We can notice that in *Zenit No.17-18* a lot of space was dedicated to Malevich and Suprematism. Two of Malevich's suprematist paintings were published along with his short theoretical essay *Laws of New Art* written in 1919 where he explains in 14 points his views on art with an emphasis on the fifth dimension – economy as a basis of new art, a new aesthetical standard and a way to “liquidate” all the art of the old world. The editorial article *New Russian Art* written by El Lissitzky and Ehrenburg on the other hand is very informative for grasping the origins of Russian avant-garde as they give a sort of a short three-page overview of the reasons for abstract art appearance in Russia. In the text, a large part is dedicated to Suprematism that they oppose to, to Constructivism of Tatlin and Abstract painting of Kandinsky. Since El Lissitzky was a follower of Suprematism and Malevich's student, it is reasonable to say that he was spreading suprematist ideas in *Zenit*. Also, the poets whose poems were published in the magazine Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov were Kazimir Malevich acquaintances and collaborators that influenced his alogism paintings with the invention of zaum language.²⁶

The influence of *Zenit* magazine in the 1920s will be mostly on the appearance of the constructivist tendencies that can be seen in the collages of Josip Seissel, painter and a member of the Zenitist movement who worked under the pseudonym of Jo Klek. Seissel, also an architect, was a part of Zenit until 1925 when the Zenitist movement gradually began to wane. Seissel made a first abstract painting called Pafama, or Papier-Farben-Malerei in 1922. This first abstract painting in Yugoslavia had strong constructivist and suprematist influences, since Seissel experimented with geometrical forms, creating abstract shapes and super positioning colored planes. Pafama, as the first abstract painting, based on a new concept of art, and carrying new symbolic language, influenced neo-avant-garde movements that will appear in Croatia in the late 1950s: Exat'51, Gorgona, Radical Informel and New Tendencies.²⁷

After mentioning the importance of the avant-garde group Zenit in the transferal of ideas of Russian avant-garde, Constructivism and Suprematism, it is important also to

²⁶ Zenit <<http://www.avantgarde-museum.com/hr/museum/kolekcija/4393-ZENIT/>>

²⁷ Šuvaković, M. (1998) *Estetika apstraktnog slikarstva*, (pp.140-144) Beograd: Narodna knjiga/Alfa

mention August Cesarec, a writer and a revolutionary, who, after his trips to Russia, published an article on Russian avant-garde and on Suprematism in 1924 titled *Contemporary Russian Painters*. These articles were rare information that Croatian artists had on Russian avant-garde that later influenced Knifer's artworks, since Knifer was reading all available literature on Malevich and Suprematism, and because of that reason, it is important to see what was Cesarec's point of view on Suprematism since his critique was one of the only ones existing about this movement in Croatia.



Figure 1. Josip Seissel, *Pafama*, 1922

Source: <http://www.matica.hr/slike/vijenac/vijenac412/STG07294.gif>

In the article, Cesarec reflects on the Malevich's lecture that he attended in 1923 in Moscow together with eight to ten people in the audience. During the lecture, Malevich talked about other artistic movements, Cubism and Futurism in a negative way, concluding that the world must be understood as nonobjective absolute, and

Suprematism as an absolute phenomenon. In the lecture, Malevich also said that philosophy of skepticism is the basis of Suprematism.²⁸

Cesarec wrote an article in which he gave a negative view on Malevich and Suprematism. First by saying that only eight people attended his lecture, and also by calling Suprematism an ultra abstract movement, and admitting that he had left the lecture before it was over. Cesarec did not appreciate or maybe understood the nonobjective painting. That made no sense to him, and neither did Malevich's theories. In suprematist painting, he does not see any emotion as he sees it with Kandinsky, especially as Malevich just uses geometry in his paintings and not curved lines like Kandinsky. Also, in the article, he gives more credit to Constructivism that he calls "the fighting pole of Suprematism."²⁹ Furthermore, Cesarec continues the article by reflecting on Malevich theoretical book *God is not Cast Down* that, in his opinion, talks about art, church and factory in a negative, critical way, saying that Malevich is using abstract and confusing style, and getting lost in metaphysical terms in the same way as old gnostics who wanted to discover the secrets of the world.³⁰

It is interesting that Cesarec viewed geometry of Suprematism as non-emotional when we know that Malevich advocated the supremacy of pure feeling in art, which was one of the interpretations of the first suprematist painting *Black Square* from 1915. According to Malevich, black square represented feeling and the white field the void beyond this feeling.³¹ Why did Cesarec dislike Suprematism and gave it a bad review? Obviously, Cesarec did not oppose abstract art as he appreciated Kandinsky's artworks for the amount of emotions and constructivist movement, for their revolutionist goal in art. What Cesarec criticized the most, as it seems, is the non-objectivity, the geometry of Suprematism. On the other hand, Kandinsky's art seemed closer to figurative art or to Constructivism, a movement that was in the service of a revolutionary idea. This was important for him since he was a leftist and revolutionary.³²

²⁸ Cesarec, A. (1980) *Suprematizam – Maljevič* in Mijušković S. *Maljevič, Suprematizam – Bespredmetnost* (pp.114-117) Beograd: Studentski izdavački centar UKSSO. (Original work published 1928)

²⁹ *Ibidem.*, pp.114-117

³⁰ *Ibidem.*, pp.114-117

³¹ *Ibidem.*, pp.114-117

³² *Ibidem.*, pp.114-117

Cesarec did not take seriously Malevich's theory or painting, claiming that Suprematism's only use is a decorative one. What can be concluded is that, given the negative critique of Suprematism, Cesarec labeled Suprematism as unimportant to the readers in Croatia. On the other hand, in the article *Contemporary Russian Painters*, some Suprematist ideas regarding the review of the book *The God is not Cast Down* were transmitted, as well ideas about Suprematism in general. That could have been informative to the artists in Croatia that were more prone to following the constructivist movement. In the end, we can say that the lack of information, having here listed just two sources transmitting suprematist ideas and a bad critique, were the reason why Suprematism did not have followers in Croatia and had more influence on Knifer's in the 1960s. Constructivism had more reception in the 1920s. Perhaps because of its inclination towards functionality, practicality and its connection to the revolution. Perhaps this was the reason why it was mostly followed by the architects in Croatia, for example, Josip Seissel, Exat'51 that created constructivist and neo-constructivist paintings, architecture and design.

So, how can we connect these avant-garde activities in Croatia with neo-avant-garde that appeared in the 1960s? In the beginning of the 1960s, Knifer joined a non-formal Neo-Dadaist group Gorgona that was active in Zagreb from 1959 until 1965. The group members were painters Julije Knifer, Josip Vaništa, Đuro Seder, Marijan Ješovar, sculptor Ivan Kožarić, architect Miljenko Horvat and art historians Dimitrije Bašićević, Matko Meštrović and Radoslav Putar. Gorgona as a group was more connected to avant-garde movements than to neo-avant-garde tradition in their refusal to operate in the institutional framework.³³ In that sense did neo-avant-gardes just continue the process that avant-gardes had begun? How can we observe the neo-avant-garde group Gorgona, whose member was also Julije Knifer, in this context?

To answer all these questions we have to see what the notions of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde represent. Peter Bürger, in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, gives a negative critique on avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes claiming that the early avant-gardes were an attempt to surmount and erase the barrier between art and life, to

³³*Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.32), Zagreb: MSU

sublate art and return it to the praxis of life. This attempt failed, and the neo-avant-garde and all other later avant-gardes were but a visible manifestation of the failure of these aims because they allowed art to drift back into the commodified bourgeois universe.³⁴

There are many theories concerning the difference between avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes. Historically the term neo-avant-garde refers to the second wave of the avant-garde, which may be defined in a number of different ways: as a rehashing of the first avant-garde, as maturation, or as something entirely distinct from the earlier movement. Under the term neo-avant-garde, we consider a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised avant-garde tendencies of 1910 s and 1920s.³⁵

Art historian Miško Šuvaković mentioned three positions on how to define neo-avant-garde movements in relation to avant-garde movements. The first position asserts that the avant-garde of the first decades of the twentieth century was the period of pioneering artwork, while the avant-garde after Second World War was secondhand, a reworking of the first. The second interpretation claims that the avant-garde after the Second World War was the coming of age of the utopias and projects of the early avant-gardes, while the third position is that the neo-avant-garde is a specific and relatively autonomous set of movements and individual work between 1950 and 1968, creating with high and late modernism a complex picture of aesthetic, artistic, and ideological forms, solutions, ideas and projects of modernity.³⁶

To position Julie Knifer and Gorgona in a historical context, we have to see when and how neo-avant-garde movements started in Yugoslavia. In that sense, we can say that neo-avant-gardes took place between 1951 and 1973. First, it began as a continuation of the prewar modernistic and avant-garde practice on the margins of the dominant socialist culture in the country or abroad. The authentic neo-avant-garde of the 1950s was born as a gesture of defiance against socialist realism and bourgeois modernism

³⁴Šuvaković M. (2006), *Impossible Histories*, in: *Impossible Histories*, (p.39), Eds. Đurić and Šuvaković, MIT Press

³⁵Foster, (1994) *What's Neo about Neo-Avant-Garde? October*, vol.70, (p.5) The Duchamp Effect, MIT Press

³⁶Šuvaković, M. (2006) *Impossible Histories*, in: *Impossible Histories*, (p.26) Eds. Đurić and Šuvaković MIT Press

by projecting the eventual space of the art experiment and overstepping the media boundaries of art disciplines.³⁷

Aleš Ejavec, in his text *The Three Avant-gardes and their Context*, says that while the avant-garde artists shaped and developed the neo avant-garde and continued with the avant-garde project during and after Second World War, the art of high modernism in the West or of moderate modernism in Yugoslavia, aspired to narrowing art to a strictly professional and media framework of the neo-avant-garde, seeking to expand art into everyday life, urbanism, design, advertising, political conflicts, emancipation of the individual, psychotherapy, spiritual teaching, links with Eastern mysticism and religious and theoretical teachings.³⁸

On the other hand, Ješa Denegri in *Inside or Outside Socialist Modernism*, gives a different opinion of the neo-avant-gardes in the 1950s and 1960s, saying that for historical forerunners in national culture the alternative route directly draws upon or indirectly follows the rare, and at that time neglected and forgotten legacy of the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s, Zenitism and Dadaism that started in Zagreb, as departure points offering more daring possibilities of formation and manifestation than the modernist art, or the art that emerged under its dominant influence.³⁹

Ješa Denegri concludes that the alternative route in Yugoslav art space of the 1950s and 1960s is precisely alternative and different since artists were filling artworks with problems, contents, moods and intonations. Their juxtaposition towards the main artistic currents resulted in the not so broad reception in the environment of their origin, and they were presented as a not good artistic way to follow. For those very reasons, the alternative route consisted of minority and marginalized art groups and individuals of manifestations and positions that found international art languages phenomena, circles, flows, movements, contexts and trends closer to themselves than their local counterparts.⁴⁰

³⁷ Erjavec A, (2006) *The Three Avant-gardes and their context* in: *Impossible Histories*, (p.36) Eds. Đurić and Šuvaković, MIT Press

³⁸ Ibidem.,(p.36)

³⁹ Denegri, J. (2003) *Inside or Outside Socialist Modernism* in: *Impossible Histories*, (pp.177-178) Eds. Đurić and Šuvaković, 2003, MIT Press

⁴⁰ Ibidem., pp.177-178

At this point, it is necessary to understand the term second line that Denegri in the article *Second line as the expression of the spirit of the milieu* introduces and attributes to the neo-avant-garde movements in Yugoslavia: Exat'51, Gorgona, radical Informel and New Tendencies. Exat'51 or Experimental atelier was an art group from Zagreb that was active from 1950 until 1956. Members were architects Bernardo Bernardi, Božidar Rašica, Vjenceslav Richter, Zdravko Bregovac, Zvonimir Radić and painters Vlado Kristl, Ivan Picelj and Aleksandar Srnec. They were considered as a neo-constructivist group as they were advocating the synthesis of all arts.⁴¹

On the other hand New Tendencies were an international movement founded in Zagreb in 1961 that lasted until 1973 whose members were Croatian art critics and artists: B. Bek, B. Kelemen, D. Bašićević, M. Meštrović, R. Putar, I. Picelj, V. Richter and international artists from Italy, Spain, Germany and Russia: V. Vasarely, J. Le Parc, J.R. Soto. They followed the avant-garde ideas of Constructivism, Bauhaus and Neo-plasticism.⁴²

Radical Informel, on the other hand, was a term to describe the artists that reduced and negated the material, destroyed artworks or left them unfinished as we can see in the artworks of some members of Gorgona, Marijan Ješovar or Đuro Seder. Gorgona on the other hand, was a non-formal group that was active between the years 1959 and 1965 and whose members were painters: Josip Vaništa, Julije Knifer, Đuro Seder, Marijan Ješovar, sculptor Ivan Kožarić, architect Miljenko Horvat art historians Dimitrije Bašićević, Matko Meštrović and Radoslav Putar that gathered in the group because of their common spiritual views.⁴³

Movements under “the second line” connected the spirit of the milieu through which their view on the world was shaped. In this context, in Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 1960s, these four movements that appeared, aimed for the radicalization of the notion of art and artist's behavior, but the milieu in which these movements appeared was not ready or did not want to accept these notions. By the word second, Denegri

⁴¹ Enciklopedija Leksikografskog zavoda Miroslav Krleža, Exat'51
<<http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?ID=18740>>

⁴² Enciklopedija Leksikografskog zavoda Miroslav Krleža,
<http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=44260>

⁴³ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.32), Zagreb: MSU

understands differences in relation to the artistic mentalities coming from the same milieu, which can be more precisely seen in the quote by Milan Prelog: “in the macro climate the traditional notions of painting and art prevailed in general.”⁴⁴

The Croatian neo-avant-garde had all the features of the international neo avant-garde. The principal approaches were: the early geometric abstraction of the group Exat’51, the international Post-Informel, Neo-Constructivist New Tendencies movement including the Gestaltist, kinetic, optical, computer, and visual research of the new plastic language and the Gorgona group that working in the spirit of post-Informel and visual poetry. From this overview, we see that two different ways of visual expression are present and opposed: the activities of Exat’51, a neo-constructivist group and Gorgona, a neo-dadaist group. On the other hand, on the First Exhibition of New Tendencies that was held in 1961 in Zagreb both artistic directions, Gorgona and Exat’51 were present, together with the Informel movement, which also aimed towards the dematerialization of artwork as Exat’51 as well as Gorgona. But what were these opposite characteristics of Exat’51 and Gorgona?⁴⁵

In the activities of Exat’51 we see the direct connection to historical avant-gardes. Exat’51 was a group of artists with the same view on art. They published a manifesto explaining their position which later led towards a clash between the art and cultural milieu in Croatia since they showed resistance towards the situation which they were not willing to accept. In their manifesto, the group Exat’51 spoke of the affirmation of the abstract art, experimental research work, erasure of all boundaries between the fine and the applied arts in the form of the art integration into modern life.⁴⁶

Gorgona on the other hand, did not have a manifesto “*it sometimes did nothing, it just existed*”⁴⁷, as Josip Vaništa one of its founders said. Sometimes members behaved as if they did not live in Communism from which they were escaping into the irrational, the incomprehensible. From a society of forced optimism, members of Gorgona promoted a spiritual kinship and togetherness, instead of collectiveness. Denegri

⁴⁴ Denegri, J. (1991) Druga linija kao izraz duha mjesta, *Život umjetnosti, no.50*, (p.56), Zagreb

⁴⁵ Ibidem., (p.56)

⁴⁶ Ibidem., p.56

⁴⁷ Beroš, N., *Eseji*, <<http://bookwire.e-bookshelf.de/products/reading-epub/product-id/2511225/title/Kro%2522enje%2Btame.html>> (Gorgona ponekad nije radila ništa samo je postojala)- Translation mine

characterized Gorgona as the other side of the coin of the spiritual mood of the 1950s and 1960s, and also in relation to Exat'51. Gorgona was a non-formal group that was creating a spiritual art following Fluxus and Dadaist movements, an alternative to Neo-Constructivism represented by Exat'51, as it was aspiring towards to the spirit of anti-art, the absurdity of existence, irony and Zen contemplation with a goal of dematerialization of artwork.⁴⁸

S. A. Mansbach says that the early avant-gardes often vanished as conservative and nationalist regimes which gained ascendance. For progressive artists who sought to construct a new world on the fallen eastern empires, all too often, the only alternative was an exile.⁴⁹ Gorgona members did not exile; instead, they had created their own space of freedom. When we look at the activities of the group Gorgona, such as gatherings, collective works, mail art, we can see that in a way, they reflect this anarchism of the avant-garde groups.

On the other hand, Gorgona as a neo-avant-garde movement can be regarded as an artistic utopist group that was marginally positioned in the Croatian society as a response to the high modernist prevailing culture. This can especially be seen in the way they chose anonymity, their spiritual connectivity and their way of living. The radical approach of Gorgona is seen in their non-conformism to the socialist society, as they chose not to be a part of the collective, but rather a small group of individuals with same spiritual and artistic values, creating in their own space of freedom, away from the social mainstream culture and negating all the artistic expressions. They were, in fact, creating anti-art.

Gorgona transmits the thought that it is definitely over with the belief in the qualities of the avant-garde that are reflected in the representation of *optimal projection into the future*, and instead says that only thing that an artist has is a lonely and hard struggle. He is the one who conquers and realizes the field of

⁴⁸ Šuvaković, M. (2006) *Impossible Histories*, in: *Impossible Histories*, (pp.26-28) Eds. Đurić and Šuvaković, MIT

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*, (p.39)

art which he deals with as the area of total freedom of his own acts, as the last resort of his endangered but still preserved psychological security.⁵⁰

What connects Gorgona to the Dadaist movements is found in the fact that they did not refer themselves towards outside, towards the society, but rather among the group, among themselves. The reason why they chose this solution can also be found in the political circumstances of the country since their art could have been proclaimed the anti- state art. The intellectuals of that time had limited freedom to express themselves. Nevertheless, the group members always proclaimed that their art was not political and that they did not aim to change the society. Still, the component of the criticism of the society was visible, that at that time was possible only in the measure the state allowed it to be. As the avant-garde movements wanted to change the world, we could say that Gorgona as neo-avant-garde movement showed an alternative to the present situation, but did not want to radically change the society. It represented just one possible path that could be taken, as they were moving the borders of freedom they did not have in their everyday life, just in their artistic circle. From these characterizations of the spirit of the time, we can start to look into the oeuvre of Julije Knifer.

⁵⁰ Denegri, J. (1991) Druga linija kao izraz duha mjesta, *Život umjetnosti, no.50*, (p.60), Zagreb (Ona odaje svijest da je tada definitivno završeno s vjerovanjem u osobine avangarde što se očituju u zastupanju *optimalne projekcije u budućnosti*, a umjesto takve vjere umjetniku preostaje jedino teška borba da područje umjetnosti kojim se bavi shvati i osvoji kao područje totalne slobode vlastitih činova, kao posljednje uporište svoje ugrožene a ipak sačuvanje osobne psihološke sigurnosti) – Translation mine

3. JULIJE KNIFER

3.1. BEFORE GORGONA

To know how Knifer arrived at the concept of meander we have to see his artistic explorations that lead to it, meaning before 1960 before he entered the group Gorgona and prior to the purification of the meander into a sign. Still today Julije Knifer is considered to be an extraordinary and unique Croatian painter due to the originality of his ideas and painterly expression. By looking at his evolution as a painter, we can see how he reached his constant in the painting depicting variations and variations of the same symbol meander while his art still remains somewhat mystical and not easily understandable.

Before we present the evolution of Julije Knifer's work, it is important to say that Knifer's artwork during and after his life was associated with different art movements: Neo-Constructivism, Abstract art, Minimal or Conceptual art. On the other hand, meanders were interpreted depending on the context, as a manifestation of the absurd, in the context of the group Gorgona, or as a sign of Constructivism since Knifer was exhibiting at the international exhibitions, dealing with contemporary problematics such as the First Exhibition of New Tendencies in Zagreb in 1961; Art abstrait constructif international in Paris in 1962, Konstruktivisten in Leverkusen in 1963 or After Informel in San Marino in 1963.

In his work Knifer was striving towards brevity, minimal expression and absurd which represented a form of freedom for him. Knifer was doing this by the method of radical reduction of shaping structure, reaching in 1959-60 black and white painting and form of the meander that he never again abandoned. Art historian Vera Horvat Pintarić in 1970 said: "In it he found the most simple way to express the biggest complexity."⁵¹ Repeating the form of meander on the surface Knifer not only transmits his visual order and his spiritual state, but also his own artistic behavior.

Julije Knifer was born in Osijek, Croatia, in 1924 where he finished high school in 1944.⁵² He enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1951 at the age of 27, and in

⁵¹ Horvat Pintarić V. (1970), *Julije Knifer*, Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art

⁵² Maković Z. (2002), *Knifer*, (p.60), Zagreb: Meandar

1953, he chose professor Đuro Tiljak as his professor in the painting department. This was a very important moment because Đuro Tiljak influenced Knifer's visual expression by transferring onto him the ideas of the Russian avant-garde, especially Suprematism.⁵³

Đuro Tiljak began his art studies in Zagreb at the College of Arts and Crafts what later became the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1919 he spent some months in Moscow studying with Wassily Kandinsky, taking some seminars under Malevich, and returning to Zagreb to complete his degree in 1923. This early training with Kandinsky gave him an appreciation for the abstract, which he imparted to his students while he worked mostly in the spirit of magical realism, influenced by Cézanne and with interest toward symbolical expression.⁵⁴

It was the period of opening. Socialist realism had no longer any significant impact. So at the academy, I never worked in a typical academic way. I had full freedom given to me by Professor Tiljak. He studied under Kandinsky and attended workshops of Malevich. It was the time after the revolution in Moscow and Leningrad. I was at the Venice Biennale in 1956, where I saw small retrospectives of Mondrian and Gris. That meant a lot to me.⁵⁵

Studying under Tiljak was significant for Knifer because he received the ideas Malevich had been proclaiming in Russia in the 1920s that were not well known in Croatia, since, as we can see in the Croatian art history, Suprematism was not so present or influential. The mere Russian avant-garde influences came through the *Zenit* magazine or, as it was previously mentioned, through artists or writers that traveled to Russia and later wrote critiques or essays.

⁵³ Maković, Z.(2002), *Knifer*, (p.54) Zagreb: Meandar

⁵⁴ Tiljak, Đuro, (1997) in: *Hrvatski Leksikon* (in Croatian) II, (p.574) Zagreb: Naklada Leksikon d.o.o.

⁵⁵ Radaković, Ž.,(1994) *Knifer: povest o Juliju Kniferu* (pp.52-53) Beograd: Radio B92 (To je bio period otvaranja. Socijalni realizam više nije imao značajnijeg utjecaja. Tako da na Akademiji nikad nisam radio na tipični akademski način. Imao sam potpunu slobodnu od strane prof. Tiljka. On je studirao kod Kadniskog i sudjelovao na radionicama kod Maljeviča. To je bilo nakon revolucije u Moskvi i Lenjingradu. Bio sam na Venecijanskom bijenalu 1956 kada sam video malu retrospektivu Mondrijana i Grisa. To mi je puno značilo) – Translation mine

It was Tiljak that revealed the way from the world of things to a world without them, explaining that he had learned this with Malevich. He actually helped Knifer to realize the full understanding of the absence of things, and to manage to put this state of mind and soul onto the surface of the picture. The preoccupation with Malevich was to have a great importance of Knifer's art and his personality in general.⁵⁶

We can say that at that time before joining the group Gorgona, Knifer had already started to be influenced by Russian avant-garde, especially by Malevich and Suprematism. Besides Russian avant-garde influences, he was interested in Existentialism and Absurd, writers such as Camus and Proust and showed interest in the artworks of Pierro della Fransesca, Hals, Cézanne, Gris and Klein.⁵⁷

Knifer graduated in 1956 and did further specialization during 1956-57, under professor Mezdijć. From 1957-65, he taught art in primary school, after which he decided to dedicate himself fully just to painting. During this time, around 1959, he started to travel to Venice, Paris, Kassel, München, and he attentionally went to Ulm and Amsterdam to see Malevich suprematist paintings that he had known just from the reproductions and discussions with professor Tiljak.

I actually chased Malevich. I came to see his exhibition in Ulm, but it was already packed away. Kandinsky was in the West, however. He was the only one known from the circle of the Russian avant-garde. His art was very different however from Malevich's. In Kandinsky, there was the folklore, but in Malevich, there was the spirit of an old religion such as Orthodoxy. There was metaphysics, the spiritual and mental situation. Suprematism contained the soul, not only the spirit. I came across Malevich much later, in Amsterdam where I studied him very carefully in the Stedelijk Museum. I read the literature about Malevich and was surprised that so much had been written about him between the wars, without it having become known to the wider

⁵⁶ Maković Z. (2002), *Knifer*, (p.60) Zagreb: Meandar

⁵⁷ Ibidem., p.60

public. Even today when one goes deeper into Malevich's work, one can find out how very, very complex it is.⁵⁸

Here we can see the proof that Suprematism was not so known in Yugoslavia before and after the Second World War which could be the reason why the avant-garde movements like Bauhaus and Constructivism were more influential since they had a social component of building a new society connected through politics, which in was socialism in Yugoslavia. To know something about Suprematism, as we can see in Knifer's example meant going outside Yugoslavia and search for it personally.

If we look chronologically, Knifer started to travel in 1959 in search of Malevich's original Suprematist paintings. At the same time, he started to use only geometrical language in his paintings, meaning that the idea of meander had already been articulated in his mind before the first painting of this motif appeared. Also, there are similarities between the visual languages that Knifer and Malevich use, as Knifer started his first geometrical paintings only by using a square, circle and rectangular together with contrasts of color to produce the rhythm. The color is reduced early to black and white, which, as we know, dominated in the first phase of Suprematism around 1915.

Knifer talked about Malevich's influence in the interview published in a book *History about Julije Knifer* written by Žarko Radaković. In the book, Radaković asks Knifer about Malevich and asks him to explain why he devoted his art to Malevich, and Knifer responds:

I do not know, I discovered Malevich somewhere surely before '53 because otherwise I would not have opted to study with Professor Tiljak who studied with him. I do not know. I liked his approach to art and Suprematism as an idea and practice. Of course, Malevich was known then less than now,

⁵⁸ Maković: Intervista a Julije Knifer. *Catalogue Knifer*. La Biennale di Venezia. 49 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Croazia 9 giugno – 4 novembre 2001, (p.84)

although between the wars he had a particular position, especially in Germany.⁵⁹

Furthermore, Radaković asks Knifer if he could tell what was the step forward in his art, having in mind Malevich's work, and he responded that it would have been pretentious to say anything to that question. Next, Knifer connects the art and work of Malevich with meditation and states that this is a result of Russia and the atmosphere that prevailed there. Knifer connects Malevich with orthodox religion, which for him is an old, deeply meditative, philosophical religion. Meanders in this context can also be seen as a way of meditation, so we can presume that Knifer was seeing in Malevich's art what he was employing in his art, as he was also influenced and interested in Eastern religion. In that sense, we can connect the whole process of painting of meander to a ritual or meditation as it was repeated every day in the same way. The process was characterized by the way Knifer was putting the background color to saturate the canvas to reach the exact amount of blackness or whiteness he was aiming for, or in the coloring of the meander to achieve the exact level of darkness or brightness.⁶⁰

In the conversation with Radaković when talking about the creation of meander, Knifer mentions the biography of Stravinsky as a catalyst for its formation. In the process of reading the biography, Knifer came across Stravinsky saying that music is a rhythm, so Knifer himself got an idea of creating a rhythm in a painting, similar to what Kandinsky did with an aim to bring art closer to music which for him represented the most transcendent form of abstract art.⁶¹

Knifer further explains the evolution of his work through radicalization, going from relatively complicated paintings towards simple ones, and reaching the horizontal and vertical, white and black, which was the goal in painting for him. In the continuation of the interview, he says that for him, the beginning of conceptual art had started with

⁵⁹ Radaković, Ž.,(1994) *Knifer: povest o Juliju Kniferu* (pp.131-132).Beograd: Radio B92 (Pa, ne znam, ja sam otkrio tog Maljeviča negdje prije pedeset treće godine jer inače ne bih se opredjelio da studiram kod profesora Tiljka koji je studirao kod njega. Pa, ne znam. Sviđao mi se njegov pristup umjetnosti i suprematizmu kao ideja i praksa. Naravno o Maljeviču se tada znalo manje nego sada, iako je on između dva rata imao svoj određeni položaj, naročito u Njemačkoj) – Translation mine

⁶⁰ Ibidem., p.131

⁶¹ Ibidem., pp.52-53

Malevich and that the thing that connected them both was that they always made their works from the concept, which can be seen from their way of work.⁶² Another significant moment was when in a letter to Radaković, Knifer asks himself the question: “How to approach Malevich? Am I on the right way towards Malevich?”⁶³

We can follow this path towards Malevich that Knifer mentions in the interview with Radaković on the meander paintings, through the sign of meander and its variations in order to achieve the anti-painting, as Knifer would say. Since Knifer took an ornament for his square, in reference to Malevich, he had to renounce meander of its symbolical, decorative purpose, so that it can become the symbol without any previous meaning, a certain tabula rasa into which transcendent meaning can be put into. In doing so, Knifer introduced the element of repetition into his work by which he recreated meander over and over again. In that sense meander gets its full meaning only as a part of the whole oeuvre. This process of repetition began before Knifer started to paint meanders, as we can see in his line of 80 self-portraits done by pencil on the paper during 1949-52, before enrolling at the Academy of Fine Arts.



Figure 2. Julije Knifer, *Self-portraits*, 1949-1952

Source:http://www.alu.unizg.hr/alu/cms/upload/images/vijesti/Julije_Knifer_autoportret_sm.jpg

⁶² Radaković, Ž.,(1994) *Knifer: povest o Juliju Kniferu* (p.131).Beograd: Radio B92

⁶³ Ibidem., p. 159

These series of self-portraits are very important, as art historian Zvonko Maković first noticed, to understand Knifer's development of meanders. Knifer spent three years in front of the mirror every day observing his face and noticing slight changes and depicting his serious face while not trying to create a psychological portrait. According to Maković, Knifer was trying to draw his critical awareness, to portrait the presence of active consciousness as he though this series of self-portraits realized that his drawings were not just self-portraits but an endless series of the same or almost the same rhythmical shifts, as he would say later about his meanders: "an escalation of monotony and the monotone."⁶⁴ In that sense, we can find the connection with his series of meanders through this ritualized everyday repetition of the same sign, through the variations of the same sign, through the same work process close to ritual, depicting something else, not just a sign but sign full of meaning.⁶⁵

When looking at Knifer's self-portraits, it is clear that by the means of repetition the form gets most importance, as in later paintings of meanders, there are no two exact drawings, instead, they just represent the same motif, in this case, the painter or later the sign, meander. The meaning is not in the visual but in the constructive elements, in the shades, in the brightness or darkness, in the different representation of the same face according to the painter's vision. As we can notice, sometimes the eyes are closer, sometimes the forehead is wider, also depending on the use of different numbers of a black pencil allowing thinner or thicker lines and contrasts.

Drawing his face, Knifer attempted to draw something much more complex than its conventional topography. He attempts to get insight into concealed meaning of his contemplative gaze, or more precisely, to outline his critical awareness. The presence of active awareness, but also the discovery of matter from which art emerges, the discovery of that which our eyes think as Cézanne explained it, this is actually the basis content of the series of numerous self-portraits. Can you recognize this identification with one's own work? Of course, Cézanne was the one who said: *I am nothing else, my painting and I are the same.*⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Maković Z. (2002), *Knifer*, (pp.42-44), Zagreb: Meandar

⁶⁵ Ibidem., (pp.42-44)

⁶⁶ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.65) Zagreb: MSU

These versions of self-portraits, as well as later versions of meander, can be seen as a diary written by the means of visual language as Leonida Kovač in the article *Knifer as a sign* concludes.⁶⁷ Another example of a “visual diary” or an “art diary” can be found in Knifer’s drawings made around 1962 when he was trying to connect different geometrical forms into a form of the meander that was just appearing. These drawings were made in a continuous time sequence day in day out, also, a reason why they were considered to be a diary of sorts. In that sense, the notion of a diary is crucial for understanding Knifer’s work because diary implies the notion of time and event, meaning everything that Knifer was trying to portray throughout his oeuvre. Beginning with self-portraits and ending with meanders, the notion of time is ever-present in his work.

Knifer started to keep a diary when he was 32 years old and was keeping them until he died in 2004. He called his diaries *Banal Diaries* or *Anti-Diaries*. Already from the title of the diaries, we can see the Dadaist stream, the irony, absurd and negation of art form that takes its roots in the group Gorgona. The first diaries were composed out of typically written form where Knifer would write his thoughts on art, everyday life, with some notes also referring to his private life and everyday activities. In the diaries, we can notice the same constructive elements used to create the rhythm that Gorgona group used in their textual works: repetition, absurd, irony and nihilism. Later Knifer goes even further in the attempt to bring text closer to painting when he starts applying the pictorial method in his written diaries creating meander shapes out of the text, which textual meaning most of the time was absurd and without context, meaning that the focus was more on the visual form. In these examples of textual meanders in his diaries, most of the time the text was just serving as building geometrical element of meander, and also as a rhythm component depending on the repetition of the text or the length of the flow of the comprehensible meaning.

Knifer applied a similar method of creating “visual diaries” in 1952 during his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, when he made a portrait of Hals by pencil, applying the same principle as he had done with self-portraits. He made drawings with a pencil

⁶⁷ Kovač, L., *Knifer kao znak*, *Vijenac* No.215, Zagreb

always on the same format of the paper, but with different intensities of grey color and texture. The result were little differences between the drawings indicating the iconic aspect, meaning that Knifer was only concerned with the process itself and not with the scene, view, putting more emphasis on the technique, nature of drawing. In this phase, Knifer was also applying light pencil to make the graphite appear dark black, as he will later do with the meander. What can also be noticed is that in the Hals drawings there are no major differences in the image expression of the face, the accent is more on the technique, on the amount of applied pencil and shades like in the drawings of Stenjevec neighborhood in Zagreb where he lived. During this period, Knifer used pencil, pastel, coil, gouache and started painting abstract composition done in tempera.

Franz Hals was important for Knifer, not just as a subject of painting but also as a reference and inspiration for the use of colors. In the interview with an art historian Zvonko Maković, Knifer confessed that what had intrigued him in Hals's paintings had not been the picturesque ambient of the scene but his very reduced register of color and black color itself that had had a particular importance.⁶⁸ From this we can conclude when he had been a student at the Academy Knifer had already been interested in the non-colors, black and white color and their contrast, a positive-negative relation that would affirm itself from the 1960s onwards with meander paintings.

⁶⁸ Maković, Z.(2002), *Knifer*, (pp. 46-57) Zagreb: Meandar



Figure 3. Julije Knifer, *Franz Hals*, 1952

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.69

Before Knifer started painting abstract paintings he had had a short cubist phase, and in 1955 he started to paint post-cubist colorful compositions with muted colors, *Portrait* from 1955, *Dead nature with the clock* from 1955-56. From 1957, Knifer started painting abstract geometrical paintings titled *Composition*. In 1959, he deduced paintings to rhythmized isolated rectangular shapes and black and white color, as in *Composition no.5* and *Composition no.7*, even sometimes adding the geometrical shape of a circle *Composition 14* and *15* and creating the shape of meander by connecting rectangles *Composition 13* from 1959, or in *Drawings* from 1959-60. As we see, before the 1960s, by experimenting with cubism and geometrical shapes, colors and their contrasts, Knifer started to find his way toward meander. These *Compositions* were, in fact, predecessors for meander paintings as the shape of meander appeared in it *Composition 13* from 1959, but it is not yet fully recognized by Knifer and isolated as a sign.

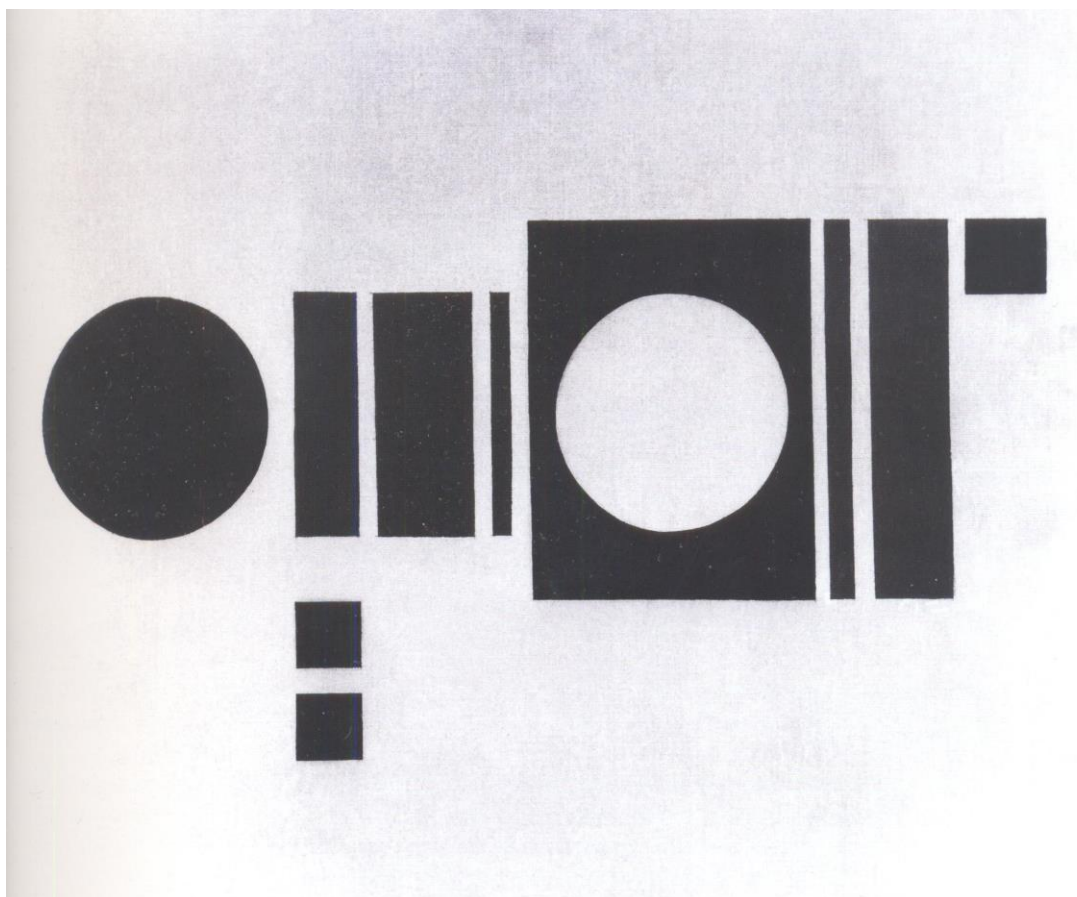


Figure 4. Julije Knifer, *Composition 15*, 1959

Source: Maković, *Knifer*, Meandar, 2001, p.53

In this early phase of Knifer's creation, we can see many indicators of later characteristics of his painting. This phase was not just a time when Knifer was experimenting with form, color, rhythm and styles while he was trying to find his way, being influenced by Malevich and Suprematism, but it was also the phase when Knifer started to employ methods such as the use of repetition, rhythm, variations of the same image, reduction, contrasts in color, that he was later elaborating even further through meander sign in his paintings, sculptures, reliefs, collages, wall paintings and diaries. Another important thing is that, in this early phase, Knifer realizes that he does not want to work on the individual painting, a work of art that would be sufficient by itself. This decision also carried a deeper meaning, because through it, he could transform meander into something more out of the context that he was carrying linguistically and give it a different meaning. From that moment on Knifer wanted an individual painting or a drawing to acquire its full meaning or significance in the series together with all other works.

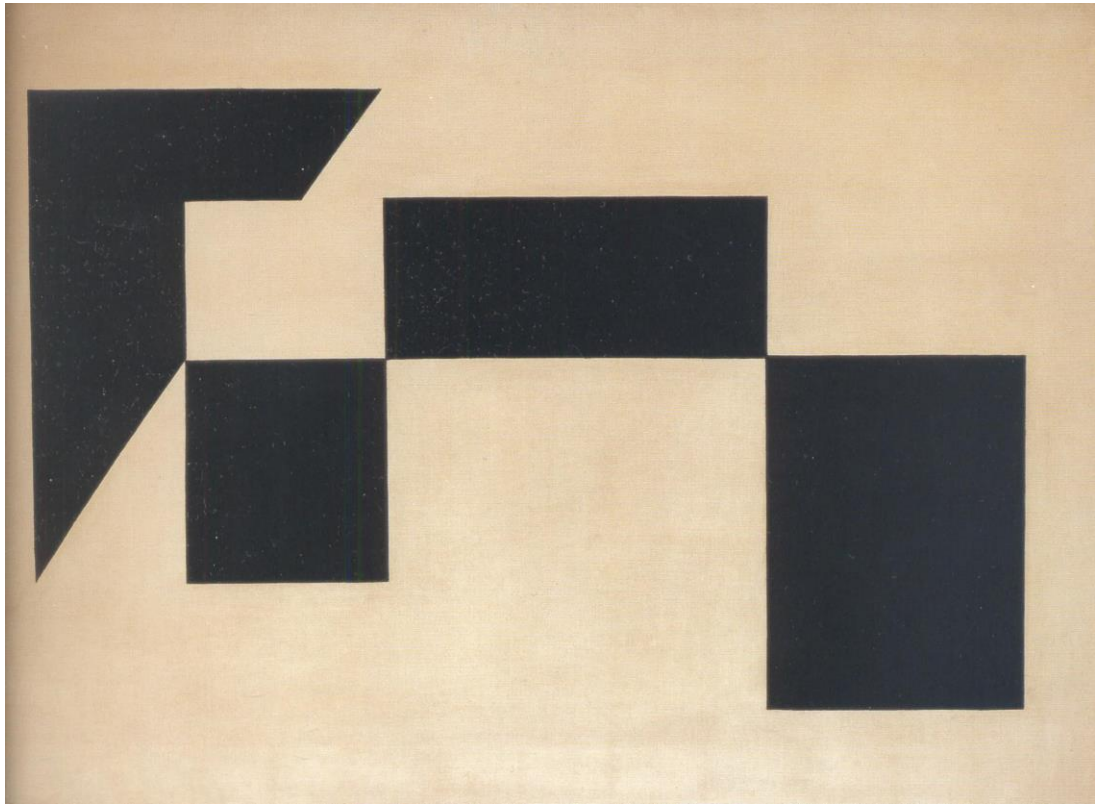


Figure 5. Julije Knifer, *Composition 13*, 1959

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.75

3.2. GORGONA

It is important to mention that Gorgona group was a non-formal art group and not an art group in a traditional sense. Almost all the members created art through different visual languages, but what they had in common was the feeling of the absurdity of existence. This could be seen in the extreme reduction of visual language and in the rejection of aesthetical qualities in painting or sculpture, in moving towards dematerialization of artwork. We could say that Gorgona through their affinity towards nihilism and metaphysical irony recognized absurd, monotony and emptiness as aesthetical categories.⁶⁹

The group Gorgona was active in Zagreb, during the years 1959-65. Its members were painters Knifer, Vaništa, Seder, Ješovar, sculptor Kožarić, architect Horvat and art historians and art critics Bašičević, Meštrović and Putar. Gorgona was not an ordinary art group, it did not act according to some kind of program or manifest, but it gathered artists that shared the same spiritual tendencies. In the artworks of group members, we can see different tendencies, from Knifer's and Vaništa's inclination towards Minimalism to Informal tendencies in the works of Ješovar, Seder and Horvat. Also, we have to bear in mind what Ješa Dengri mentions that individual artworks of Gorgona group members made in the time of Gorgona group, do not belong entirely to the creation of Gorgona group, nor can they be identified and linked with the concept of Gorgona completely since the group was non-formal. As all group members had different styles in painting, it is clear that the members of Gorgona were connected not through the same way of artistic expression, but through mutual understanding of the nature of the artistic behavior. At the same time, what they had in common was that all of them advocated for anti-illusionist plastic speech through their tendency towards anti-aesthetics and anti-metaphoric thinking.⁷⁰

The members of the group perceived the act of giving up as a unique artistic act, so there is not much evidence left of the group's activities today. Since the group members did not try to impose themselves during their artistic activities Denegri points out that it is better to say that the group Gorgona "existed" than that it was

⁶⁹ Denegri, J. (1991) *Druga linija kao izraz duha mjesta, Život umjetnosti, no.50*, (pp.20-27), Zagreb

⁷⁰ Denegri, J (2000) *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat '51 i Nove Tendencije*, (pp.297-303), Zagreb: Horetzky

active, since today Gorgona's way of manifesting is characterized by the formulation "art as a way of existence."⁷¹ Central themes with which Gorgona group members were dealing with and that were connecting them in this non-formal group were: the notions of absurd, irony, nihilism and anxiety that can also be seen as the influence of those days philosophy of Existentialism and literature of Absurd. The members of the group would often say: "Gorgona does not say about anything, it is undefined."⁷²

Knowing that Gorgona did not have a manifesto we can still grasp its philosophy and standing points on art through quotes of two of its main movers and founders; art historian Radoslav Putar and painter Josip Vaništa. In his attempt to define Gorgona Vaništa said:

Gorgona was not a painting group. Several young people occasionally met there and were connected through mutual affection. It was a community made in poverty, preoccupied with the magazine at the margin, in which we put some dark ingredients, absurdity, and emptiness.⁷³

When we look at the quotation we can see that even when Vaništa was trying to explain the group's activities or to define the group. He gave a "Gorgonian answer", an answer that does not define anything exactly, it just gives little hints about what the answer could have been. Sometimes quotes on the group would be non-logical, ironical, absurd, and nihilistic, as the group's "spirit". This will also be noticeable in the work of Knifer in his written texts and diaries, but also in his interviews, in his attitude towards the notion of time, explained in his famous quote: "Probably I have already made my last paintings, but maybe I have not done my first ones."⁷⁴

The irony Gorgona member's used can be seen in another quote of Vaništa explaining once again the meaning of Gorgona: "Gorgona is contradictory. She is defined as the

⁷¹ Denegri, J. (1991) Druga linija kao izraz duha mjesta, *Život umjetnosti, no.50*, (pp.20-27) Zagreb Gorgona, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of the Contemporary Art

⁷³ *Beskrajna linija Gorgone* <http://www.matica.hr/vijenac/450/Beskrajna%20linija%20Gorgone/> (Gorgona nije bila slikarska grupa. Nekoliko mladih ljudi kojih je međusobna naklonjenost bila odlučujući factor povezivanja povremeno se sastajalo. Zajednica u ideologiziranom svijetu šezdesetih godina, zaokupljena časopisom na margini, u koji smo unijeli nešto tamnih sastojaka, apsurd, prazninu). – Translation mine

⁷⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.137), Zagreb: MSU

sum of all her possible definitions. Valuating most of which is dead. Gorgona speaks of nothing. Undefined and undermined.”⁷⁵

If we look at a broader context, we can see that in the same period of Gorgona’s activities there were similar groups forming in Europe as a reaction to Informel, a dominant art movement of that period. In that sense, Gorgona can be connected with New Realism in France, Fluxus in the USA, Asimuth in Italy or Zero in Germany. The connection between Gorgona and the mentioned art groups is through the common interest to reduce the material status of artwork, and in thinking that the area of art is broader than the area of production of isolated aesthetical objects, as well as the inclination toward Minimalism.⁷⁶ These mentioned principles that connect them with international groups in Europe are also visible in Knifer’s artworks, in the repetition and tautological character of the meander.

At the time of Gorgona’s activities, the nature of artistic language started to free itself from additional formal and metaphorical qualities and art reached a state where the existence is identified with artistic action, seen in the activities of the group members of Gorgona as well. The use of non-referential and non-representational visual language can be seen in the paintings of Vaništa, Knifer, Ješovar, Horvat, Seder or the sculptures of Kožarić. At the same time, Gorgona members are executing activities that are a part of their everyday existence such as: “Gorgonic meetings”, walks, talks, “Gorgonic use of post”, which are also a chosen forms of artistic communication.⁷⁷

All these activities, meetings, talks, walks and mail art, fall into the private and spiritual sphere of action of the group, where spiritual dimension of the group is most evident. Denegri in this division into two spheres, private and a public one, sees extreme alternatives of ideological models of avant-gardes in relation to social reality. While one sphere, the public one, represents the positive inclusion of the artist into social events, the second sphere, the private one, represents distancing of the artist from the same events that are the consequence of the realization of the

⁷⁵ Majača A., *Art and Anti Politics Experiments in Collective Autonomy in Yugoslav Art of the 1960s and 1970s* <https://www.academia.edu/9110200/Art_and_Anti-Politics_Experiments_in_Collective_Autonomy_in_the_Yugoslav_Art_of_the_1960s_and_1970s>

⁷⁶ Denegri, J. (1991) *Druga linija kao izraz duha mjesta, Život umjetnosti, no.50*, (p.56) Zagreb

⁷⁷ *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of the Contemporary Art

marginalization of arts in the current socio-political systems of the contemporary world.⁷⁸

Gorgona started to remove their actions outside the private sphere, which produced new forms of artistic expression, documented performances, the use of language in the sphere of art to create artworks as well, mail, anti-magazine, use of the post. On the other hand, what connects them to the avant-garde movements, is the further radicalization of understanding of nature and the role of art. This can be seen especially through inner structure of artistic language found in the artistic private sphere of action that Denegri defines as an expression of artistic negativity.⁷⁹ In that way, and similar to suprematist and other avant-garde movements, they deny the representative nature of artistic work which cannot be used for any purpose, not even for the social purpose. Their works of art can be read just as a fact, idea, thought or gesture that belong to the artist of the same work of art, as it is explained in the Vaništa's quote:

Gorgona's thinking is serious and spare. Gorgona is for the absolute ephemeral in art. Gorgona does not seek results or work in art. It makes judgments in the light of the situation. It defines itself as the sum of all possible interpretations. Gorgona does not speak of anything.⁸⁰

Gorgona as a group became more known to the broader public after its dissolution. In 1977, an exhibition took place dedicated to Gorgona in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. As can be seen, the group got more attention after it stopped existing than during their activities, mainly because of the introverted character of the group. For this exhibition art historian, Nena Dimitrijević wrote the text *Gorgona – The Art as a Way of Existence* in the catalog that contextualized Gorgona group for the first time in the framework of the Croatian art scene and gave it the importance that it deserved after being neglected during the 1960s when the group was active.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Denegri, J. (2000) *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat '51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p. 276-277) Zagreb: Horetzky

⁷⁹ Ibidem., p. 276-277

⁸⁰ Gattin, M.(2002), *Gorgona*, (p.159) Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

⁸¹ *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporanean Art

In the text *Gorgona – Art as a Way of Existence*, Nena Dimitrijević defines the group Gorgona as an introverted group that did not try to impose itself on the time and space, but was rather oriented towards the small group of people connected through “Gorgonic spirit”. In the text Nena Dimitrijević juxtaposes two quotes of Vaništa: “Gorgona does not seek either work nor result in art”, and his answer to the question: “What is Gorgona for you?” where he replied: “The result”.⁸² From these answers, she concludes that “Gorgona” was a process of searching for artistic and intellectual freedom, the achievement which was in itself the aim and purpose.⁸³ This explanation of Gorgona can also be attributed to the understanding of *Project of an Explanation* that Vaništa wrote in 1961:

It should be said immediately that because “Gorgona” isn’t necessary, it is a primeval beginning destined to be without evolution and aim. Very limited to a beginning, which lasts, undefined and undetermined. It is based on the refusal of the processes which are offered, like salvation in its secret plans, and which sees not, but confirms its misfortune. The sparseness of its subjects and the continuous beginning of its existence are conditioned by mutual abolishment. “Gorgona” is born again and tries to be born again. It has nothing to add or say.⁸⁴

The name of the group is also of importance as it can be connected to a couple of meanings that can give us more insight into the character of the group. The first meaning can be derived from the female mythological creature Gorgon, whose name comes from the Ancient Greek word “*gorgos*” meaning dreadful or terrible. This Greek myth refers to three sisters who had a hair made of living venomous snakes, as well as a horrifying visage that turned those who beheld them to stone. Two of Gorgons were immortal Stheno and Euryale while their Sister Medusa was not and was slain by the demigod Perseus.⁸⁵ This myth can also be connected to the existential crisis of the modern man that grasps his solitude and dejectedness, one of the feelings Gorgona group projected in their art that can be put under private sphere of their activities called *Thought for months*, where they would quote different artists, poets,

⁸² *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporanean Art

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ Gattin, M. (2002) , *Gorgona*, (p.159) Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

⁸⁵ *Gorgone* <<http://proleksis.lzmk.hr/23505/>>

writers, philosophers that expressed these same notions of Existentialism, Nihilism, etc.⁸⁶

The second meaning can be that the group was named by one verse of a poem from the preface to the graphics folder *Elualija*, referring to the same monster, Gorgon, that was written by Gorgona's member Dimitrije Bašičević who worked under the pseudonym Mangelos. It will be shown later that this name, as it was selected almost at random, very well befitted an underlying mentality of this small community of artists.⁸⁷

Thirdly, the name of the group could be connected with Gorgona, an island in the Tuscan Archipelago in the Ligurian Sea, from 1868 a prison colony, that Josip Vaništa mentioned in his *Notes* describing his travels through Italy.⁸⁸ As the island was also a prison colony we can just assume the references it adds to the group's name since the group members never specifically said where the name of the group came from. But as we can see, the same name carries something dark and negative inside it, mostly of nihilistic character, or even can be referred to a group feeling of living in Yugoslavia where freedom of expression was sometimes limited. This can also be understood from Vaništa's quote from 1961:

In 1961, when Communism was strong, the Gorgona began a retreat into the irrational, the incomprehensible. Their refusal to act was obvious", and he adds: "The Gorgona focused on a reality that was outside the world of aesthetics. The restraint in thought, passivity and even indifference that group practiced were more than the simple and ironical denial of the world we were living in."⁸⁹

If we connect the name of the group with the third meaning, a prison colony on the Gorgona island, maybe we could find a connection or explanation for the group's inclusion towards the inside and not outside, towards the public. Maybe what made them create the private sphere of action was more connected with socialist regime

⁸⁶ Gattin,M.(2002), *Gorgona*, (p.159) Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

⁸⁷ Ibidem., p.159

⁸⁸ Ibidem., p.159

⁸⁹ Ibidem., p.159

which, in the end, led towards the appearances of new art forms connected to language and communication as letters, posts and notes.

For Gorgona, the opposition to the art establishment meant relinquishing the local moderate modernism that not only acquired full legitimacy in the culture of postwar Yugoslav socialism but also had gradually become the dominant spiritual and artistic climate. To be in an opposition to this climate meant implementing a radicalization of modernist methods in art practices, to the extent that they became unacceptable to the criteria of dominant values. This radicalization was manifested through the abandonment of the pictorial aesthetics of painting and plastic aesthetic sculpture in the name of mental presuppositions of work in the same disciplines.⁹⁰

Hence, the paintings and sculptures of the members of Gorgona are reductionist, concrete, monochromatic or bichromatic, minimalist, non-illusionist, non-referential and tautological. We could say that in their group practice, they had abandoned painting and sculpture for an art that existed only in the form of art behavior. Although highly nonstandard for the setting in which it emerged, since it did not have any stronghold or support in the heritage of its own culture, Gorgona is by no means an extra-temporal or extra-historical art phenomenon. Gorgona is, in fact, a particle of the epochal *Weltanschauung* marked by the mood of skepticism and doubt in the unbroken progressive development of contemporary civilization as a spiritual state that emerged at certain points on the European cultural map in the early and mid-1950s. Gorgona appears more widely as a general critique of the alienation of daily life combined with a mood of increasing discomfort and dissatisfaction with the entire spiritual and social situation in the existing social order, in Yugoslavia, one that was unacceptable to the members of Gorgona.⁹¹

In Gorgona's activities, and in the way that the group was more of the closed character, we see the social dimension of their work as their concepts of freedom stand in contradiction to the proclaimed collectivity of the socialist state of Yugoslavia. Even though the group claimed to be non-political, by creating their own

⁹⁰ Gattin, M. (2002), *Gorgona*, (p.150) Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

⁹¹ Ibidem., p.150

autonomy inside the socialist state, they were in a way showing what they think about collective projects like socialism, where individualism or different kind of opinion was not appreciated if it fell out of the doctrines of the political system. The members of the group kept their individualism in art and life even after the group fell apart, as it can also be seen in the uncompromising character of Knifer's art as well.

This phenomenon of non-participation and strategic excommunication is explained by Boris Groys in his essay *Critical Reflections* where he talks about the same tactics that Gorgona was using, the avant-garde excommunication from the conventional social communication. This process is one of the things that made the avant-garde movements so radical and made it also incomprehensible, by means of another sign of communication breakdown. According to Groys, this strategy is completely legitimate, because visual language can also be used as means of strategic discommunication or even self-excommunication: voluntary departure from the community of the communicating. In his opinion, this is the real autonomy of art, self-excommunication, a way to attain power over differences instead of communicating old differences and producing new ones.⁹²

This kind of Gorgona's different approach to Yugoslavia's social order can also be seen in their avoidance of any kind of hierarchy or authoritarianism inside the group, as they would ridicule it in the letters they would send to each other, what will later be known as mail art. They would address each other as Mister President, as in the letter Putar sent to group members in 1964. The letters would contain other bureaucratic vocabularies such as questionnaires, surveys, inspections, meetings, sessions, documents, Secretariat, Society, branch, administration, and would be signed as President of the Office or Head Clerk. There are other examples such as another letter that Putar sent in 1966 to group members as an invitation for a meeting that was written in the typical style of the bureaucracy in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. All the letters were formal and very politely written, as the group members acted as if the group was managed by a state institution and they were the employees of the state.⁹³

⁹² *The State of Art Criticism* <http://www.tartumuliseb.net/State_of_Art_Criticism.pdf>

⁹³ *Gorgona*, (1997) Zagreb, Gallery of Contemporanean Art

Gorgona group members started early to use institutionalized forms of communication such as mail or press to communicate their art messages. Communication through press was more of a way to include the public into their artworks, as when for example Vaništa had put an add in *Večernji list*, a daily newspaper, searching for the objects to present at his exhibition in Studio G in 1961.⁹⁴ With these types of communication Gorgona will influence art creation in Croatia in the 1970s when new forms of artistic conduct will affirm themselves in the phenomena called New Artistic Praxis by the use of non-artistic materials and means of communication as press, mail and performances.

Official behavior was also visible in their performances, as seen in the act of shaking hands when they would meet at the exhibitions openings or in the informal meetings on the street, which would be documented by photography. In this approach, by mocking the institutions and also making performances represent it, we can notice their anarchistic approach towards life and art. There is also the absurd and irony component as they would compose official letters for unofficial group meetings, or address each other as Presidents, Secretaries or Clerks.

By its continuous, semi-clandestine, and unofficial life that constituted itself through the exchange of letters and instructions, long walks, and actions in nature, Gorgona ridiculed the bureaucratic power apparatus that was supposed to possess the mechanisms for the recognition or rather the production of common “truths”. By this alone, Gorgona was, in a radically different way than any other practice before it in Easter Europe, actualizing a search for what lies outside the state and its bureaucratization of communal life, creating a transient terrain for the formation of a “blank canvas” of imagination, without a predefined program.⁹⁵

All these letters, notes, walks, talks, are a part of the private and purely spiritual sphere of the Gorgona group that on the one hand, can be considered as specific artistic activities. From these activities, we can “read” this spiritual dimension of the

⁹⁴ *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporanean Art Zagreb

⁹⁵ Majača A., *Art and Anti Politics Experiments in Collective Autonomy in Yugoslav Art of the 1960s and 1970s* <https://www.academia.edu/9110200/Art_and_Anti-Politics_Experiments_in_Collective_Autonomy_in_the_Yugoslav_Art_of_the_1960s_and_1970s>

group that we can call the forms of “Gorgona’s existence” also seen in the projects and associations that have never been materialized, just planned, as “*Gorgona’s house*.”⁹⁶ These projects only confirm the importance of the idea in their art and not realization, making their activities more conceptual than esthetical. Also, all these forms of communication must have had an influence on Knifer, which can be seen in his written texts, where he also uses the same concepts of irony, repetition, absurd and nihilism.

Collective action walks, called footing, gatherings and communication by mail were also forms of creative and spiritual cleansing. These actions would be performed in the surroundings of Zagreb, and their ideas could have been simple ones as for example “*Inspection of the Springtime*” done in 1962, after which they would be obliged to write the report about it. It is important to mention these dislocations of the group from the city to its suburbs for collective actions since this suburban environment for Gorgona members represented neutral, ideologically unsaturated space, which was reinvented through their actions and walks. Realization of the “collective work” was often a theme of group projects, as well as surveys done by the group or Gorgona’s meeting that were considered by the group an art form as well.

Maybe through the analysis of collective project called *Collective work* from 1963 we can try to decode this “Gorgonic approach” towards their activities connected to the private sphere. Radoslav Putar started the project “Homework” for Gorgona members, by proposing Gorgona to make a collective work. The task was that all members answer the question: “Is it possible to make a collective work?” The results were the statements of three group members Kožarić, Putar and Seder, which served as their contributions to the realization of this proposal that in the end served as the only form of the “*Collective Work*”. This mix of irony, nihilism and absurd can best be seen in Đuro Seder’s answer:

The collective work is the complete opposite of what we as individuals have been aiming for personal affirmation which is confirmed by and achieved

⁹⁶ Majača A., *Art and Anti Politics Experiments in Collective Autonomy in Yugoslav Art of the 1960s and 1970s* <https://www.academia.edu/9110200/Art_and_Anti-Politics_Experiments_in_Collective_Autonomy_in_the_Yugoslav_Art_of_the_1960s_and_1970s>

through one's own individual work. However, do I really want the "Collective Work"? Yes, I do. Is the "Collective Work" possible? I suppose that a common goal is necessary and the coincidence of thought and will. Kinship of feelings, and some, at least, a certain common program of work is also necessary. "Collective Work" has no face. "Collective Work" cannot speak. "Collective Work" has no beginning, just an end. "Collective Work's" form cannot be predicted, just its aim. The final form of the "Collective Work" is not at all important.⁹⁷

This "Gorgonic approach" that in fact is a mix of irony, absurd and nihilism, and can also be called Gorgona's principle of "non-action" or "outcomelessness" is visible in the second part of Seder's answer where he mocks the rational explanation he gave in the first part of the answer, but at the same time yearns for it, contradicting himself. Furthermore, in the paragraph called "Gorgonic approach" that makes a part of "collective work", Seder proposes four projects which are written as absurd, ironical and nihilistic texts.

In the first project, he personified Collective Work and the Šira (Studio G) where Collective work gets stage fright before the opening of the exhibition, dies and disappears. In the second project, he included Gorgona members into the creation of Collective work where no one knew what the other member was doing, but at the end the exhibition was successful. However, Šira (Studio G) was desperate. In the third project, Collective work was too big to enter Šira, so the exhibition got postponed, and in the fourth and final project, Collective work was finished.⁹⁸

From the following analysis of the *Collective Work*, we can draw some conclusions and characteristics of Gorgona group that are presented here. As we can see in all the propositions that are completely absurd, something goes wrong, collective work proves to be impossible, as it is invisible in the first proposition, in the second it is not done in the collective, in the third it does not fit the space, and in the fourth it is useless. Also, the interesting character of the project is the gallery Šira personified in these short propositions. In each short proposal, we see the different attitude toward

⁹⁷ Gattin, M. (2002), *Gorgona*, (p.159) Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

⁹⁸ Ibidem., (p.159)

Collective Work from Šira's perspective, which also represents art institutions, in the character of Šira, and the utopian idea of the compatibility of Gorgona's projects with the state art institutions during Yugoslavia, meaning that in the end Collective work stays conceptual, non-materialized like most of Gorgona's artworks. In "*Collective Work*" we see another characteristic of the group Gorgona as they embrace irrational, silent and paradoxical, and come closer to the existentialist understanding of the subject. It seems that Gorgona's intention is not abandoning art but becoming art.⁹⁹

The second sphere of Gorgona's activities, purely public one, included managing the exhibition space Studio G and publishing the anti-magazine *Gorgona*. As these were the most public Gorgona's activities, they were also less in line with "Gorgona's spirit". In the gallery Studio G, besides Gorgona members, there were other artists that were connected with the group who exhibited as well, mostly participants of the movement New Tendencies: Eugen Feller, Ivan Rabuzin, Piero Dorazio, Radomir Damjanović, Victor Vasarely, Francois Morellet, etc. The activities in this gallery started in 1961 and stopped in 1963, due to the financial reasons. All together, they made twelve exhibitions including three solo exhibitions of Gorgona members, in 1961 the exhibition of Ješovar's artworks, and in 1962 Seder and Knifer's artworks where Knifer presented meander paintings. The group members also participated in two collective exhibitions in 1961 and 1962. All these activities, the exhibitions in the Studio G, the publishing of the anti-magazine *Gorgona*, gatherings, concepts, performances and projects were forms of joint action, that could also explain the "Gorgona's spirit" that united them through kinship and same affinities toward life and art.¹⁰⁰

Studio G was based in the space called "Šira" in Preradović Street in Zagreb and it was, at the same time, functioning as a workshop for framing paintings and as an exhibition space. The members rented this space to act independently from institutions, and the organization of the exhibitions was covered from Gorgona's treasury that was located with the saleslady in the bookstore *Naprijed* on the Zagreb's

⁹⁹ Bago I, *Dissociative Association Dionysian Socialism Non Action and Delayed Audience Between Action and Exodus in the Art of the 1960s and 1970s*
<https://www.academia.edu/2004050/Dissociative_Association_Dionysian_Socialism_Non-Action_and_Delayed_Audience_Between_Action_and_Exodus_in_the_Art_of_the_1960s_and_1970s_in_the_Socialist_Republic_of_Croatia>

¹⁰⁰ Gattin, M. (2002), *Gorgona*, (p.100), Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

main square. We can see that the way in which group was funded was also a part of Gorgona's conduct, involving irony, absurd and performance.¹⁰¹

This independence from the state-operated museums and galleries gave them freedom to present their works and organize exhibitions that would have otherwise probably been rejected by the state institutions. Through their activities, curating and managing Studio G, as well as the publishing of the anti-magazine *Gorgona*, the members of the group reached certain freedom from the state institutions which allowed them to be present on the art scene, and also it made them closer to their goal in art, reaching the absolute freedom. The freedom that was an important goal as well as a utopia for Gorgona members will be one of the most important factors of Knifer's oeuvre and personal philosophy.

Gorgona, by its inclusion and withdrawal from the institutionalized art scene and regulated social life, became autonomous in the context of politics, culture and art. In this way, Gorgona can be seen as a group of artists that refused to participate, and through non-participation, they reached a certain emancipation of their art that they would not have been able to get through the state institutions, and perhaps were not even interested in getting. This kind of uncompromising behavior will characterize the private and artistic behavior of Knifer, and all other members after the end of their common activities.

Another public form of Gorgona's expression, the anti-magazine *Gorgona*, was not a magazine about art, as each number served as a complete creative solution not in a graphic way, but as an artwork. This was a reason why members of the group called it the anti-magazine. On the other hand, the name anti-magazine came as a part of Dadaist legacy Gorgona, taken over by having in mind the Dadaist negation and nihilist attitude toward art through the prefix anti-. The second connection to Dadaist movement that existed in Croatia happened through the publishing of the anti-magazine *Gorgona*. They were continuing the publishing tradition of the Dadaist international magazines that had been existing since the 1920s in Zagreb: *Zenit*, *Dada Tank*, *Dada Jazz* and the anti-Dadaist magazine *Dada Jok*. The evident difference is

¹⁰¹ Gattin, M. (2002), *Gorgona*, (p.100), Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

that in the anti-magazine *Gorgona* there were no articles, manifests, and proclamations, making this anti-magazine in the tradition of the neo-avant-gardes. As the magazines were originally artistic creations, the notion of the anti-magazine can be seen as the continuation of the avant-garde's idea of a negation of the magazine as a form. The difference from the avant-garde magazines is found in results and expectations through experimentation with the form of the magazine, its deconstruction, and through further dematerialization of the art object, with a new emphasis on the process rather than on spreading ideas.¹⁰²

The anti-magazine *Gorgona* represented at that time, a new form of artistic activities in Croatia. The magazine, as we can see, brought primary information of the artwork and not a secondary one, as it represented conceptual works made especially for the form of the magazine. This anti-magazine was perceived to be what later will be called the artist's book. Here we can also see the link between *Gorgona* and Fluxus that also published artist's books in the same period. In the same sense, we can see the similarity to Knifer's *Banal Diaries* that conceptually contain many ideas, concerning the way he was creating meanders by the means of words, sentences and paragraphs of the text.¹⁰³

The editor of the *Gorgona* anti-magazine was Josip Vaništa, one of the founders of *Gorgona*. An overview of the eleven issues and series of unexecuted proposals reveals *Gorgona* as the kind of magazine that is itself a work of art in which an artist resolves the work within the parameters of given media. Between 65 and 300 numbered copies of *Gorgona* were published consisting of several small formats 21x19 cm during the years 1961 and 1966, when eleven numbers were published and two were prepared but not published due to financial reasons. The publishing of the anti-magazine *Gorgona* was an idea of Josip Vaništa, that after the dissolution of the group *Gorgona*, continued the publishing activities with magazines *Post Gorgona* 1985-86 and *P.S. (Post Scriptum)* 1989-91.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art

¹⁰³ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem.

In the context of this thesis, it is important to mention the anti-magazine *Gorgona* No. 2 which was done by Knifer in 1961. There he presented a meander of black color on the white surface in an infinite stream and uninterrupted rhythm, as an endless sequence from the page 2 to 8, that were connected and could have been seen as one page that made the closed circle of an endless meander. Here we can see another example of putting meander into a different medium, context, this time, a magazine. As Nena Dimitrijević said: “The book was transformed into a sign without any additional information.”¹⁰⁵

In Knifer’s texts and diaries, we find the similarities with the written works of *Gorgona* group, from the style of writing, the use of absurd, irony to the transformation of written text into a work of art. We can notice that Knifer first elaborated his ideas in painting, and then gradually he did the same in the text. The same procedure he uses in painting, monotony, reduction, rhythm and contrast, he employed in text demonstrating the absurd.

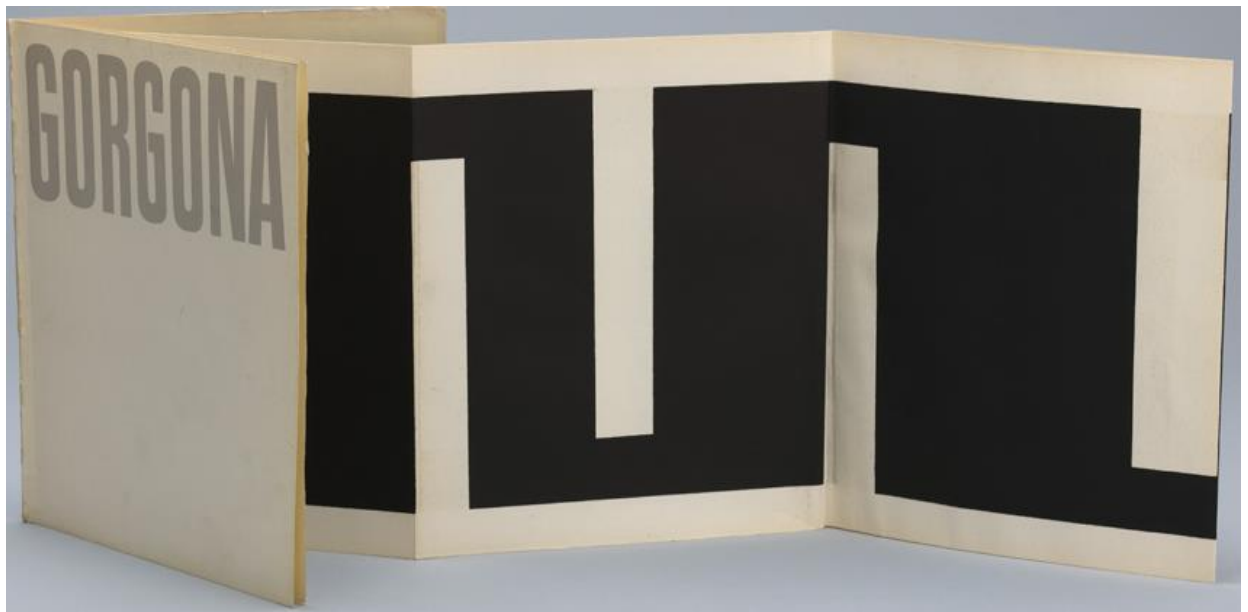


Figure 6. Julije Knifer, *Gorgona anti-magazine No.2*, 1961

Source:<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/ScenesFromZagreb/images/Gorgona/Gorgona2.jpg>

¹⁰⁵ *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art

One further manifestation of Gorgona's public activities important to mention is a documented performance *Adoration* that was performed at the opening of Knifer's exhibition in 1966 in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. Gorgona's members were not known by public performances but private ones. Still, there are four photographs documenting this performance: *Gorgona Criticized Knifer*, *Knifer in the Corner*, *Asking for Forgiveness* and *Knifer's Adoration*. This was one of the rare performances held in public through which we can see how Gorgona's members were, in this specific case, roleplaying the attitude of art critics toward artists, one more critique of the art institutions managed by the state. Maybe these kinds of actions and performances later influenced Knifer to put meander in public spaces outside art institutions and the canvas itself, since Gorgona, by doing performances, was exiting the sphere or mere art production. Denegri in these actions sees the moment when the artistic language frees itself from formal qualities and deducts to the level of identification of existence and artistic work.¹⁰⁶



Figure 7. Gorgona, *Knifer's Adoration*, 1966

Source:http://cameraaustria.at/camera/uploads/2013/03/ca_zeitschrift_121_vanista_ba_lic_adoracija02.jpg

¹⁰⁶ Denegri, J. (1991) Druga linija kao izraz duha mjesta, *Život umjetnosti*, no.50, (pp.20-27), Zagreb

In 1966, the group activities were slowly stopping, as it was also the year when the last number of anti-magazine *Gorgona* was published. The stopping of group's activities did not mean at the same time the end of spiritual kinship or intellectual understanding between the members. After the dissolution of the group in 1966, one of its founders Josip Vaništa kept *Gorgona* alive by publishing the magazines *Postgorgona* and *Post Scriptum*. *Postgorgona* was published between 1985 and 1986 when Vaništa edited 12 numbers representing photographs, notes, and inscriptions directly or non-directly connected to the activities of former group members. In these editions, Vaništa re-contextualized group's activities.¹⁰⁷ Vaništa commented the end of the group's activities with the quote: "Gorgona was seemingly and temporary togetherness. It did not determine our paths. As the years pass, communication among the group members decreased and non-acting was replaced by spiritual numbness."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ *Post scriptum* <<http://digitizing-ideas.hr/hr/zapis/20292>>

¹⁰⁸ Gattin, M.(2002) , *Gorgona*, (p.43) Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

3.2.1. GORGONA'S SPIRIT

Gorgona was primarily a process of searching spiritual freedom for a group of people who gathered because of their spiritual togetherness. It was a place where they could escape their lives. Their collective activities, mail art, performances, gatherings, meetings and walks that entirely belonged to the private sphere of action and reflected the “Gorgonic spirit” the most, served also as means to turn their heads away from a badly constructed society. The meaning and purpose of these kinds of interactions inside of the group were to experiment with everyday life. That way many different everyday activities became artistic events. We can find a similar thought in Vaništa’s quote about Gorgona: “Maybe, except friendship and spiritual kinship, it did not leave anything else.”¹⁰⁹

Gorgona was a space created for the free individual creation, as Radoslav Putar said: “We are not Gorgona, we are just searching for Gorgona in the surrounding world.”¹¹⁰ This was the reason why Gorgona was, in fact, less public, almost a secret group, concentrated on private meetings and socializing, on existing rather than acting. Gorgona’s “way of existence” is manifested through “Gorgonic ideas”, “Gorgonic behavior” and “Gorgonic spirit” which is beyond the artistic material and aesthetic object. The terms “Gorgonic” and “Gorgonian” were explained by Marija Gattin who, in the catalog *Gorgona/Protocol of Submitting Thoughts*, wrote:

Gorgona, Gorgonic, Gorgonian – these words acquired a meaning in the vocabulary of art critics in Croatia. They became terms that implied actual knowledge and location in a certain history of the art context. Today, almost forty years later, after modification and interpretation, these concepts imply something particular, cerebral and non-productive. They also cover experimentation, if it implies the non-existence of receivers (except the circle of people around the group itself), and freedom. A freedom that does not have everyday political connotations. Maximum freedom is only reached in privacy, not by flirting with political or social movements, not by political allegiance.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Gattin, M (2002), *Gorgona*, (p.39) Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene umjetnosti

¹¹⁰ Ibidem., p.39

¹¹¹ Ibidem., p.39

Gattin mentioned that Gorgona became a term for investigating space and inter-space of its members. The meaning of Gorgona was never fully explained or understood. Even its members always gave different explanations in a form of short quotations and postulates. But as we can see today, taken out of the context of Gorgona's time, the term "Gorgonic" is still used to address different problems of aesthetics, art, existence, and action. In fact, we can put the word "Gorgonic" before all the terms we want to attribute to the group. In that sense, Gattin mentions "Gorgonic humor" denoting a mix of absurd, irony and bizarre. This is one of the reasons Gattin considered that Gorgona belonged more to the art theory than to art itself.¹¹² Nena Dimitrijević described and explained the essence of this highly unusual art phenomenon as follows:

Gorgona was the process involved in the search for spiritual and intellectual freedom, a realization that is an end in itself. Apart from the professional obligations of creating an artistic production and the promotion of oneself and one's colleagues in the hierarchy of the local art scene, this group of people gathered together and communicated motivated only by the presuppositions of their spiritual community and affinity. Regardless of the differences that existed between the singular creative conceptions, what united the members of Gorgona was their common dedication to the spirit of the modernism defined by recognition of the absurd, the void and monotony as aesthetic categories a tendency toward nihilism and metaphysical irony. A modern point of view may deem these spiritual coordinates insufficient to determine the space of activity of an art group, but at the time of Gorgona's formation, Yugoslavia was dominated by the criteria of opposing values so the vital energy of the group was sparked by their opposition to the art establishment of the time.¹¹³

We can see all three characteristics of Gorgona nihilism. The irony and absurd are often mixed together in their collective works and projects, such as Vaništa's "*Proposal for an Exhibition*", without an actual goal of creating an exhibition. In this

¹¹² Gattin, M. (2002), *Gorgona*, (p.39) Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene umjetnosti

¹¹³ Ibidem., p.40

project, Vaništa sent an invitation with the text “*You are invited.*”, without any further information. Another example is Mangelos’s issues of the anti-magazine Gorgona that was not meant to be published.¹¹⁴

The tendency towards nihilism, one of Gorgona’s characteristics, can be seen in their ironic attitude towards the socialist society, in their mail art and in the common praxis. The group members used to send the rest of the collections of quotes from philosophical and literary texts entitled *Thoughts for the Month* that reflected the group’s mood, and also served as a way of self-defining the activities of the group. Through *Thoughts for the Month* we can get the greatest insight into “Gorgona’s spirit” and influences.

In *Thoughts for January* dating from 1963, one quote from Samuel Beckett’s novel “*Unnamable*” was taken out. In another case in *Thoughts from February*, there were a couple of quotes, ranging from Yves Klein, who was an important influence for the group. He said: “The abstract painting is the picturesque literature of psychological states. That’s sad. I’m glad I’m not an abstract painter”. There were also Lao-Tse, who was reflecting groups inclination toward eastern philosophies seen in the quote: “Only in emptiness does the essential abide”, the Croatian modernist poet Tin Ujević who was reflecting on art: “Earlier I liked prose for its richness of emotion, profound music and hot colors; weaknesses which surely deserves to be punished; now after a quarter of a century, I am led to the kingdom of pure and esthetic line”, and Heidegger, an existentialist philosopher, with thoughts on silence: “For a man, speech hides, rather than reveals singularity”. When we look at these quotes that Gorgona members were choosing from different authors, we can see that they are affirming their inclination towards Existentialism, eastern spiritualism, Buddhism and absurd literature, nihilism and irony. These are all movements or notions which are reflected in Gorgona’s work or behavior.¹¹⁵

On the other hand, “the Gorgonic nothingness” is present in individual works of Gorgona’s members, especially in the writings and paintings of Vaništa, seen in

¹¹⁴ *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

“*Silver Line*” where he depicts one silver line on the white canvas. For Vaništa the white canvas symbolized purity, clarity, but also certain nihilism connected with the minimalism of expression, the autonomy of the silver line. Nihilism is also noticeable in the sculptures of Ivan Kožarić, in the non-art of Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos involving a negative of negation, in the blackness of black color of Knifer, in the collective works of Gorgona.¹¹⁶

Antonia Majača connects this “*Gorgonic nothingness*” to Malevich’s understanding of nothingness as eternity, as numerous synchronous potentialities, and ultimately as a transient configuration of anti-politics in in the article *Art and Anti - Politics: Experiments in Collective Autonomy in the Yugoslav Art of the 1960s and 1970s*. This nothingness of Gorgona is open to that which resides on the radical outside of the known, outside of the sphere of politics, of state, of a party, of regulated everyday existence.¹¹⁷

All these notions such as nothingness, irony, existence belong to the “Gorgona’s spirit” that was present in individual members’ artworks and that remained present in group member’s art and life, even after the group dissolved. This spiritual dimension of the group members can be seen in the famous sentence by Vaništa: “Gorgona sometimes existed and not acted”¹¹⁸, referring to the introverted dimension of the group, which can be seen in the intimacy, friendship and communication between group members and their mere existence. We can see here that these renunciations of an outside world and society, in fact, meant some kind of a statement, as Sontag says about the artist's silence: “One cannot fail to perceive a highly social gesture.”¹¹⁹

This spiritual climate can be seen in the references toward monochromy, minimalism, in the act of being quiet for the purpose of an artistic intention, anticipation of mental approaches that will later be concretized in the appearance of conceptual art. Another important spiritual dimension was that Gorgona was not a group that was created with

¹¹⁶ *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art

¹¹⁷ Bago, Majača, *Pljuni istini u oči (a zatim brzo zatvori oči pred istinom)*
<<http://www.ipu.hr/uploads/documents/2059.pdf>>

¹¹⁸ Gattin, M (2002), *Gorgona*, (p.45) Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene umjetnosti

¹¹⁹ Sontag S. *Aesthetics of Silence*

<http://opasquet.fr/dl/texts/Sontag_Aesthetics_of_Silence_2006.pdf>

a goal of teamwork, it was more of a spiritual community, spiritual connection between different people of different individual characteristics that shared similar worldviews. They can be described as spiritual, metaphysical, pessimistic or nihilistic in comparison to other art movements in the 1960s such as were Exat'51 or New Tendencies.¹²⁰

Everything that happened in Gorgona was, in relation to the environment, something completely different, separated from the prevailing intellectual climate. "*Gorgonic behavior*" was, a deliberate strategy of silent observation, from the outside it seemed passive, but in essence, it was persistent and defiant resistance conducted on behalf of the individual freedom and its realization was the goal. Outside professional obligations to create art and promote oneself on the local art scene, this group of artists met and communicated motivated solely by spiritual understanding.¹²¹

Susan Sontag in the *Aesthetics of Silence* said that every era has to reinvent the project of spirituality for itself. In the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is "art". Further on, Sontag says that art itself is a form of mystification that endures a succession of crises of demystification. Sontag adds that in the moment in which "art" comes into being, the modern period of art begins. Sontag explains the difference between modern art and figurative art:

In the early, linear version of art's relation to consciousness, as the struggle was held to exist between the spiritual integrity of the creative impulses and the distracting "materiality" of ordinary life, which throws up so many obstacles in the path of authentic sublimation. But the newer version, in which art is part of a dialectical transaction with consciousness, there is a deeper, more frustrating conflict: The "spirit" seeking embodiment in the art, clashes with the "material" character of art itself.¹²²

¹²⁰ Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.38) Split: LOGOS (

¹²¹ *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art

¹²² Sontag S. *Aesthetics of Silence*

<http://opasquet.fr/dl/texts/Sontag_Aesthetics_of_Silence_2006.pdf>

The struggle is visually and theoretically visible in the works of Malevich and Knifer. Malevich approaches this problem in his white phase where the Suprematist form seems to evaporate, disappear on the white background of the canvas, and Knifer in the paintings where meander continues its flow outside the borders of the painting as in *Meander in the Corner*. The process of an embodiment of spirit can be seen in the Suprematist concepts and their solutions on the canvas. Moreover, it can be seen in the process of everyday ritual work on meander which starts with the application of endless layers of white color.

The further difficulty of the modern art understanding Sontag sees in the fact that the world is furnished with the second-hand perceptions and for that reason the activity of the artist is cursed with mediacy. At the end, art becomes the enemy of the artist, because it denies the realization and the transcendence he/she desires. The conclusion is that art becomes something to be overthrown, as the new element enters the artwork, the appeal for its own abolition and for the abolition of art itself.¹²³

Through this process, we can perhaps understand the nihilism that can be found in the paintings of Malevich or Knifer and the desire to make an anti-painting or Malevich's *Black Square*, the new icon of the new time. The anti-painting or the zero point of painting represented by *Black Square*, which was the first non-objective painting, can be understood through the use of geometry that as a form of art is responsible for many revolutions that occurred in modern art. This can be seen in the shaping of art language of Malevich and Knifer, in the theory that explains and considers this language, in the behavior of the artist in the everyday life.¹²⁴ As Denegri further explained:

As we look into the history we can see this evolution of rational (analytical) spirit that started with Cubism, followed by Futurism arriving to early abstraction in the works of Malevich and Mondrian that later developed into the movements such as Constructivism, Neoplasticism, Bauhaus, which later

¹²³ Sontag S. *Aesthetics of Silence*

<http://opasquet.fr/dl/texts/Sontag_Aesthetics_of_Silence_2006.pdf>

¹²⁴ Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.6) Split: LOGOS

continued with geometrical abstraction of the after war period, evolving later into optic, kinetic art, minimalism.¹²⁵

In this way, Malevich can be considered as a pioneer of abstract art who, with his zero point of the painting, opened a new way of expression in art that many artists later followed including Knifer. The zero point of painting was crucial for Malevich, but also for Knifer who, after conceiving meander, just kept on researching the possibilities and variations of it, just as Malevich never exited the Suprematist cosmos.

This wish to create the anti-painting perhaps comes from the commitment to the idea that the power of art is located in its power to negate, as Sontag says: “The ultimate weapon in the artist’s war with the audience is to verge closer to silence.”¹²⁶ But still, Knifer and Malevich were not in war with the audience, rather they tried to transmit their own cosmos through their paintings which were often silent in the sense the viewers could not understand them. As Sontag states: “Art that is silent constitutes one approach to this visionary, ahistorical condition.”¹²⁷ Sontag further says that traditional art invites a look, and art that’s silent invites a stare, one that is as close to eternity, as contemporary art can get.¹²⁸

Identifying “Gorgona’s spirit” we can come closer to the understanding of the spiritual meaning of meander. In this context, we can connect spirituality with geometry. This connection was seen before in the times of avant-garde when artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich or Mondrian gave higher, spiritual or metaphysical meanings to their paintings. It is furthermore important to stress the idea that in spite of very different idiolects and different individual codes, there is a common spiritual

¹²⁵ Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.6) Split: LOGOS (Nama dakako razloga osim u najsažetijim crtama ponavljati dobro znane povijesne činjenice ipak valja podjestiti na duboku ukorjenjenost i postojanost racionalnog (ili možda bolje reći analitičkog) duha u kontinuitetu što ga moderna umjetnost poznaje još od Cezanna i Seuratapreko raznih etapa kubizma, jednog krila futurizmadu prijeloma u ranoj apstrakciji (gdje su vrhovi u golemim opusima Maljeviča i Mondijana i dalje ka cijelim pokretima kao rusk i poljski nekonstruktivizam i nizomeski neoplasticizam, Bauhaus) – Translation mine

¹²⁶ Sontag S. *Aesthetics of Silence*

<http://opasquet.fr/dl/texts/Sontag_Aesthetics_of_Silence_2006.pdf>

¹²⁷ Ibidem.

¹²⁸ Ibidem.

connection that connects all artistic positions based on the principles of geometrical shapes.¹²⁹

Denegri said:

Geometrical forms can be seen as efforts of the artist to express, in the visible structure, their own beliefs that the world is ruled by a certain logo or rational coordination of many axes whose direction is towards unity. By constructing his work and establishing relations inside it, the artist in it summarizes the paradigm of his worldview, things that he demands from the world and which he cannot obtain from the world. The painting becomes the space of his worldview, of his spiritual and physical microcosms.¹³⁰

We can summarize this quote by the phrase that the work based on geometrical shapes is in essence a sign of construction of an active relationship, relating to the participation in reality. Hence, the Kazimir Malevich's whole philosophy of Suprematism is based on the primacy of the pure feeling in art, and Gorgona's philosophy is summarized in Vaništa's quote: "Gorgona sometimes did not act, it just existed."¹³¹ This can be understood as a moral ethical standpoint, essential for the understanding of meander as well.

This spirituality, often connected to geometry, comes from the search for something new, as we can see in Knifer's innovations, for example in the process of creating the painting, how many times he would apply black or white color, or it in the dealing with the form of meander and its variations. As Denegri says: "Art based on geometrical shapes is not just an attribute one cultural environment. It is more the art of its own ambient, its own time."¹³² We can see that Gorgona members address the

¹²⁹ Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (pp.6-7) Split: LOGOS

¹³⁰ Ibidem., pp.6-7 (To je nastojanje umjetnika da u vidljivoj strukturi djela u njegovim konstruktivnim jedinicama uključenim u sustav cjeline izrazi vlastito vjerovanje da svijetom vlada (ili bi trebao da vlada) stanoviti logos razumska koordinacija mnogih silnica kojih je krajnje uvjerenje u idelanom međusobnom jedinstvu. Time što svoje djelo grdi time što ga premjerava što unutar njega precizno utvrđuje odnose umjetnik u njemu sažima paradigmatičnog vlastitog svjetonazora; ono što od svijeta zaziva, a što u svijetu ne može izvršiti, on uvodi u plohu, u proctor) – Translation mine

¹³¹ Gattin, M. (2002), *Gorgona*, (p.40) Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene umjetnosti

¹³² Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (pp. 6-7) Split: LOGOS

same relevant issues, as it is the nihilistic, absurd, ironical, existentialist view of the world that was prevailing in the 1960s.

This relation, that is so important in the works of Knifer, the spiritual dimension connected with geometrical forms in art appeared with the beginning of the abstract art, in the works of Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky, where each one of these artists explored it in their own way, giving the spiritual meaning to the color or connecting art with religion, for example, theosophy as in the case of Kandinsky and Mondrian. Especially through geometrical forms seen in the works of these artists Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, the modern art attained its most contemplative, most metaphysical almost religious dedication. This is evident in the calling for the spiritual saving of a modern world by the means of painting that shows no more than extremely purified geometrical form or its relation with other geometrical forms.¹³³

The abstract modern painting was based on the ideal of perfect geometry, which most prominently can be seen in the representation of the *Black Square* that Malevich called the icon of Suprematism. In this way, *Meander* can be compared to the *Black Square* as Knifer's icon. He explored it throughout his life, through all its variations that can be compared to the variations of the Suprematist forms. Looking at the geometrical forms, we can see more connections between Knifer and Malevich as Knifer used similar shapes as Malevich, such as squares, circles, rectangles, as well in the use of color. Knifer was focused on the black and white, the contrast that Malevich applied mostly in the first phase of Suprematism.

The spiritual dimension of the geometrical shapes, such as Knifer's meander or Malevich's suprematist forms that together with the color have their own significance, and are not related to the objective world, comes from the connection of their expression together with the human feelings, since they have been chosen according to the artistic feeling. Denegri elaborated more on geometrical shapes:

Work based on geometrical shapes is by its nature self-referring work, which talks about itself and not a work that transmits the impressions of the object

¹³³ Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (pp.7-8), Split: LOGOS

world. If comprehended as such, the work that is in question is a type of structure in which units (forms, signs) relate towards each other in the line of different mutual codependences. From the way these interdependent units are shaped comes formal functioning of this work, its essential non-referential constitution, non-referential according to the fact that the signs in the work do not refer to any other object outside them, but they refer one towards another inside their own organization, managed by certain syntactic order.¹³⁴

Geometry was not the main feature when we think of Gorgona's painting, sculpture, mail art, gatherings, the anti-magazine publishing but it was constantly present in the works of its member Julije Knifer while other members would use geometrical shapes occasionally in their paintings or sculptures. We can say that Julije Knifer's artistic expression at that time was different to any other artist, not only in the context of Gorgona, but also in the whole Croatian art scene, as Ljerka Mifka wrote: "One lonely experience, one rarely persistent walk on its own path to reach spirituality by referring to geometry."¹³⁵

It is important to see how Knifer mentally matured in his conception of the creation of meanders, while being the member of Gorgona, while he was influenced by the Gorgona's atmosphere, by the group's way of living and thinking about life and art, and the results are seen in his art. Knifer used geometry as a means to achieve spirituality, which can be seen as a complete different pole opposite to rationality, represented by geometrical shapes. To understand the spirituality of his meanders we have to have an understanding of "Gorgona's spirit" which was shared between the group members and was their connecting bond.

Susan Sontag in *Aesthetics of Silence* mentions that art is more than ever deliverance, an exercise in asceticism which we can also see in Knifer's work. In the essay, silence

¹³⁴ Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.9), Split: LOGOS (Djelo utemeljeno u geometrijskim oblicima jest po svojoj prirodi samooznačavajuće djelo, djelo koje govori sebe, a ne djelo što prenosi, čak ni u najdaljoj transpoziciji, slike i dojmova vanjskog predmetnog svijeta. Ako se takvim shvati, djelo o kojemu je riječ jednim spram drugih u nizu različitih međusobnih zavisnosti. Iz načina oblikovanja tih međuzavisnosti jedinica structure proizlazi oblikovno funkcioniranje takvog djelanjegova bitno ne referencijalna konstitucija, ne referencijalna po tome što se znaci u djelu ne odnose na bilo koji predmet izvan sebe samih, već sudonose jednih spram drugih unutar vlastite cjelovite organizacije rukovodeći pri tome stanovitim sintaktičkim pravilnostima) – Translation mine

¹³⁵ Ibidem., p.9

is denoted as the furthest extension of that reluctance to communicate, artist's ultimate other-worldly gesture as she describes it, where artist frees himself/herself from the servile bondage of the world that appears as a distorter of his work between other things. In this way, we can connect the activities of group Gorgona and Knifer himself with their renunciation of public, of society and this silence in a way also contributes to the forming of "Gorgonic spirit."¹³⁶

Here we can also mention Knifer's spirit and his way of incorporating this spirit in his works. Denegri says that Knifer is not a rational and pragmatic spirit tending to project and subject logic of development. Instead, he is an artist that with the inner dimension of his work is testing the borders of metaphysics, exposes himself to paradoxes and does not run away from the feelings of the absurd. It is clear that through Knifer's choice to paint variations of meander his whole life, we can define his spirit by having characteristics of individualism, absurd, solipsism, and nihilism and also being a part of the spiritual climate of the historical period at the end of the 1950s that projected the same characteristics.¹³⁷

The characteristics of Knifer's spirit are best represented in the motif of a meander that was transformed into something else by giving it essence with character and meaning. There are two ways of depicting meander that Knifer uses. One is meander that ends inside the frames of the painting giving the impression that meander exists solely inside the frame of the painting and the other one is when the flow of meander seems to continue outside the painting, relief, sculpture, it does not stop. In this first type of meander we can perceive meander as a fragment of the whole meander oeuvre, and in the second type, as the representation of the true nature of meander as the endless flow. The spirit of the meander is seen in both types of representation through Knifer's existentialist view on fatality of "borderline situation", as a way of the existentialist situation when the destiny of artistic creation is in close relation to, or even identified with artist's destiny that is taken to an absurd level.

¹³⁶ Sontag S. *Aesthetics of Silence*
<http://opasquet.fr/dl/texts/Sontag_Aesthetics_of_Silence_2006.pdf>

¹³⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.164) Zagreb: MSU

In his text for the exhibition catalog in 1966, Knifer writes about meanders that in a way prove his spiritual surrendering to the obsession with this sign:

In this hardly masterable or entirely unconquerable inconsistencies between action and sense, aims and tendencies consist in the very process of transition from inner intuitive and mental incentives to manual shaping, whose definition is in relation to the spiritual point of departure and the course of reaction of least importance or just a necessary consequence of this Sisyphean task.¹³⁸

It is important to see the connection with the spiritual legacy of Suprematism apart from the same approach toward perception based on non-objectivity in the art following the philosophy of “l’art pour l’art”. The first similarity is the form of a meander that fulfills the non-objective standard as it does not emerge from a reduction or abstraction of figurativeness in art, meaning that meander is an artist’s decision, and as such it can be compared to *Black Square*, a form filled with the spirit of non-objectivity. The second similarity is that Knifer’s meander is non-functional, non-material; it is self-sufficient and cannot be involved with any kind of denotation except its own nature and as a self-denoting sign. These are all the reasons why Knifer is closer to Malevich’s creation in regard to other abstract painters.¹³⁹

Sontag continues that the advocacy of silence expresses a mythic project of total liberation of the artist from himself, of art from the particular work, art from history, spirit from matter, of the mind from its perceptual and intellectual limitations. As we know, both Knifer and Malevich created anti-paintings by the means of geometrical forms filled with meaning, which can be understood just looking beyond painting, where the spiritual dimension of their paintings lies.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.164) Zagreb: MSU

¹³⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.164

¹⁴⁰ Sontag S., *Aesthetics of Silence*

<http://opasquet.fr/dl/texts/Sontag_Aesthetics_of_Silence_2006.pdf>

4. FORM

4.1. ANTI PAINTING

In the text for the catalog *Uncompromising*, the art historian Igor Zidić calls Knifer “the painter of will”, as he considers meanders as a will to start.¹⁴¹ It is true that Knifer was very persistent in his art, working every day from 1960 till his death on the meander anti-paintings, always finding new ways of meander expression and variation. Knifer writes in *Notes*:

My aim was to create some form of anti-painting with minimal means, in utmost contrast to obtain a monotonous rhythm; In 1959 and 1960 motivated by the idea to create an anti-painting, I embraced the method of radical reduction of means, remaining on the traditional surface with extremely minimal means. I used them to achieve extreme contrasts in the process of creating a painting on the way to the anti-painting by the use of black and white and maximum possible rhythms, by verticals and horizontals. Within a couple of months, I have reached the end so to say, i.e. black and white painting (which I called anti-painting) and the meander that cannot be simplified any further.¹⁴²

In *Notes*, we can notice that Knifer is distinguishing paintings and anti-paintings, excluding abstract and figurative paintings from his line of interest. Knifer was interested in the process of painting since painting as an object did not interest him as such. This kind of behavior was advocated by the curator H. Szeemann, who in the 1960s promoted artworks where “inner attitude” was elevating artistic process over final product.¹⁴³ This “inner attitude” we can find in meander paintings or in Suprematism, where the pure feeling is more important than the visual appearance.

The reduction is a process of transforming the complex structure into a simple one. This process can be seen in Knifer’s oeuvre on a formalist level, when we compare his more complex early geometrical exploration seen in *Compositions*, with later meander’s structure of the 1960s. The goal of Knifer’s formalist reduction was to get

¹⁴¹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.81) Zagreb: MSU

¹⁴² *Ibidem.*, p.146

¹⁴³ Maković Z. (2014), *Tabula rasa*, Zagreb: HAZU, Gliptoteka

to the pure aesthetical and basic pictural composition. Knifer uses the reduction to fill the form with meaning, with Gorgona's spirit, without which his meanders wouldn't be so connected with Suprematism which was advocating the pure feeling in art. It would be more in line with Mondrian's Concrete art or Neo-Constructivism of Exat '51 movement directed more towards the utilitarian of art in society.

This entire process of reduction was leading to the appearance of the anti-painting. It started with the abandonment of the color in favor of the black and white contrast, while on the other hand, the composition was reduced to the repetitive rhythm of the meander. Following these reductions, Knifer arrived at the form of anti-painting, which he described as the painting that only had a visual signification. Thus, meander does not represent anything else but a sequence of facts, as Knifer says in *Notes* that witness the thought that articulates only the visual.¹⁴⁴ In the construction of anti-painting facts are devoid of importance. According to Knifer, the anti-painting is achieved by the reduction of forms and colors to achieve the form of extreme simplicity. Knifer was probably influenced by Gorgona's spirit and its Neo-Dadaist stream when he decided to do anti-paintings. In Gorgona group, the negation of artistic form was present in the notions of anti-magazine, anti-diary, anti-sculpture and anti-creation. By the use of prefix anti-, group members were showing their detachment from the traditional ideas of art since their art was contrary to the academic idea of what the artwork should be.¹⁴⁵

Filiberto Menna in *La linea analitica dell'arte moderna* mentions that in the avant-garde art, production goes hand in hand with theoretical reflection for the first time since artists themselves start to comment on the ontological status of their works. For Menna *Black Square* is the most radical approach to ask basic questions about the ontology of art by the means of anti-painting. After the creation of *Black Square*, the anti-painting is considered to be a genre inside the styles of abstraction, and not just a final point of evolution of radical avant-garde movements. In that way, Menna considered the anti-painting or non-painting, a painting that cannot be experienced as a painting but as a part of the continuity of out of picture reality.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp.137-144) Zagreb: MSU, Zagreb

¹⁴⁵ Gattin, M., (2002) *Gorgona*, (p.54) Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene umjetnosti

¹⁴⁶ Menna, F., (2001) *La linea analitica dell'arte moderna*, (p.87) Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi

Krešimir Purgar develops the idea further by claiming that Knifer's paintings can be considered as anti-paintings only in art historical hermeneutical sense since they are abstract. Otherwise, they should be seen as absolute paintings since Knifer's surfaces are still making something visible even if the motif is abstract. For Purgar Knifer's meanders are absolute pictures and absolute signs because they are referring to themselves, they exist for themselves and have no other function.¹⁴⁷ We can consider Purgar's critique as an attempt to differentiate different types of anti-paintings from Malevich, Rodchenko, Reinhardt or Rothko, and to make a difference from anti-paintings that according to Menna symbolize monochromes, as in the case of Reinhardt, and other anti-paintings that Purgar calls absolute, since we can still distinguish something visual in them.

If we consider the notion of anti-painting as another term for defining anti-art, we can see that George Dickie in the article *What is Anti-Art* distinguishes four different kinds of anti-art: art in which chance plays a part, art which has strikingly unusual content, ready-made and actions by artists which do not result in any object-product. Dickie says that sometimes paintings that were very different from conventional paintings in what they depict were called anti-art, and this notion was related to the content of the anti-painting.¹⁴⁸

Knifer's anti-paintings are more of a project that he is striving to accomplish in art. The prefix anti- in this case, stands for the uncompromising rejection of all values commonly associated with art that we can also connect with Gorgona's nihilism that many of the members wanted to express in their art. Vaništa, Kožarić and Knifer followed the tradition of abstract painting pioneers using reduction as the main tool to achieve anti-painting.¹⁴⁹ Knifer in *Notes* wrote:

In 1959 and 1960 when I approximately sensed what I wanted, motivated by the idea of anti-painting, I started with the method of radical reduction of

¹⁴⁷ Purgar, K. (2007), *Anti slika ili apsolutna slika, Kontura, br.127*, (pp.14-25)

¹⁴⁸ Dickie, G., (1975) *What is Anti-Art?*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.33, no.4, (p.419-421) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/429654>>

¹⁴⁹ Denegri, J. (1985) *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.42) Split: LOGOS

meanders, and in the process of appearing in the painting on the way towards the anti-painting, I tried to cause extreme contrasts with the help of white and black color and extreme rhythms, with the help of vertical and horizontal lines. Shapes formed in the process of work suggested a flow in the shape of meander whose function was not philosophical, pictorial, decorative, just visual. Black and white and at the same time maximum and minimum.¹⁵⁰

Knifer, as a member of Gorgona group, was influenced by the group members whose painting style belonged to the Informel movement. In 1977 exhibition “*Informel 1956-62*” that was held at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, where Gorgona members Ješovar and Seder exhibited their works among other artists. Paintings in this exhibition were characterized by the radical texture of accented materiality of the canvas together with the monochrome, everything that can be attributed to the radical Informel.¹⁵¹ Ješovar explained his style of painting as: “We see an artwork as destruction, but not an ironic spectacular one of the Dadaists, but a silent process of surface destruction, programmed attack on the problem of pictorial structure.”¹⁵² Knifer does not follow the Informel movement in his paintings, but there are some similarities in the process of creation of meander concerning the applying of white color. This first step in meander creation can also be considered as a process of the treating the canvas as an Informel artist would. The difference is that Knifer uses this process for spiritual discharge and not for the physical destruction of the canvas.

The problem of the end of the painting, of the last painting, anti-painting was common to all the members of Gorgona group but everybody expressed it in a different way and had their own way in approaching the creation of anti-painting. Members that were inclined towards Informel movement were more concerned with a physical characteristic of the canvas. Knifer was going in a more of a spiritual conceptual direction while Mangelos was creating “anti-peinture” where he was following Neo-Dadaist stream of the negation of the painting, as well as Vaništa who

¹⁵⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.151) Zagreb: MSU

¹⁵¹ Denegri, J. (1991) *Druga linija kao izraz duha mjesta, Život umjetnosti*, no.50, (pp. 20-27) Zagreb

¹⁵² *Ibidem.*, pp.20-27

in “*Painting*” from 1964, negates the painting by writing instructions on how to create a painting on it.¹⁵³

The term anti- was used in the 1920s by Dadaists, but also by Malevich, who used the prefix anti- for *Black Square*, which he called the anti-icon, referring to the non-objective world represented on the canvas by square and white background.¹⁵⁴ The new modern icon *Black Square* is based on the idea of perfect geometry, as it represents just a square and at the same time the icon of reductivism that later many artists, including Knifer, followed in their attempt to create their own artistic system. Malevich uses the prefix anti- also to distinguish *Black Square* as the icon of the new time, from old Orthodox icons. In that sense, he is reconfiguring the traditional iconography, presenting forms congruent with infinity, as *Black Square* was the true conception of eternity.¹⁵⁵

Knifer achieved anti-painting, with the help of minimal means by which he tried to create the maximum of contrasts, using of black and white, and maximum possible rhythms using the verticals and horizontals. *Black Square* probably served as a role model to Knifer in his process towards anti-painting as it has the same black and white color contrast as meander does. This contrast was taken over from the minimal character of *Black Square* achieved by the reduction, as we can see that *Black Square* represents just black rectangular and white space behind it.

Malevich creates plane solutions and uses colors on monochrome background making the painting seem two-dimensional, which is also the case with Knifer’s paintings. In Suprematism, geometrical forms or planes are presented as visual abstract phenomena, like Knifer’s meander. In paintings such as *Black Square*, *Black Circle* and *Black Cross*, Malevich reduces symbols to signs that create an optical effect, the same process that Knifer conducts with a meander. Malevich and Knifer dealt with the surface to efficiently create an optical effect through sign system or just with one sign as in Knifer’s case. The other process that influenced Knifer in the creation of anti-painting comes from Malevich’s white phase represented by paintings *White on*

¹⁵³ Maković, Z. (2002) *Monokromi*, Zagreb: Umjetnički paviljon

¹⁵⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp. 163-169) Zagreb: MSU

¹⁵⁵ Denegri J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.8) Split: LOGOS

White from 1918, or *White Cross on White* from 1920 when the sign is maximally reduced visually, which also happens with meander in the 1970s.

The use of the term icon for *Black Square* is relevant, as the painting itself is sometimes referred as anti-icon. According to Julija Kristeva, this view of freedom that recognizes the integral super individual and communal character of a person is epitomized in Byzantine iconography, which cannot be approached through the Western theory of mimesis. The icon is neither spectacle nor a representation, it is instead an inscription of a sensible trace that cannot be experienced directly and can only be deciphered. The Byzantine icon needs to be understood as the economy of passage, the process of a trans-corporation between the visible and the invisible, since it does not appeal to the gaze alone but engages our entire affectivity. On the other hand, Marie José Mondzain is saying that the new sense of mimesis does not refer to or represent empirical reality, rather the icon attempts to present the grace of an absence within the system of the graphic inscription. In that sense, the icon is already something mystical, trying to represent absence that exists within the system of the graphic inscription.¹⁵⁶

Malevich takes things further by proclaiming icon as a painting that is non-representational instead of using the symbols or mimesis. Perhaps this oscillation between visible and invisible interested Malevich in using sometimes religious references in his work or to denominate *Black Square* as a new icon, that should have replaced the traditional Russian icon, since the *Black Square* is the embodiment of the absolute.

In the *Language: The Unknown* Kristeva uses Ferdinand de Saussure's definitions of the icon, index and symbol. An icon has a direct relationship to the object it represents, index suggests or indicates the object, while the symbol refers to an object that it designates by a convention.¹⁵⁷ Malevich's *Black Square* and Knifer's meanders according to this division can be seen as symbols since both artists have put a different meaning inside of the paintings. In the *Black Square*, the square refers the

¹⁵⁶ Ed. Oliver K, (2010) *Psychoanalysis, Aesthetics and Politics in the Work of Julija Kristeva*, (p.116) State University of New York Press

¹⁵⁷ Kristeva, (1991) *Language: The Unknown*, (p.101) Columbia University Press

feeling and white field to the void, creating the feeling which resulted in the feeling of non-objectivity and void to which Malevich refers as nothingness.¹⁵⁸

We can now understand why Malevich appropriates the signification of the traditional icon for *Black Square*, which is now the icon of modernism, because it also represents the passage into the spiritual world where all the objectivity has dissolved into the feeling of void filled with energy and dynamic rhythm. In that sense, *Black Square* is the representation of the next world in this world.

Moreover, Knifer takes old Greek ornament meander that first appeared in the *Composition no.13* and fills it with metaphysical character and meaning, similar to what Malevich did with *Black Square*. Meander is not originally a sign but it eventually becomes one. In this process of transformation meander into a sign, Knifer removes the philosophical function of the sign and accents its visual one. Denegri calls this process a point where the miracle of artistic transformation happens, as meander becomes Knifer's representation.¹⁵⁹

If we look at meander as a sign, it refers to the time and duration of the existence in the past and extension in the future. In meander, being has space and acquires the space through the flow representing infinite repetition that symbolizes eternity. This characteristic of meander can be seen as one more reason why it constantly appears in the art of Knifer, because of the need for total identification of the artist's destiny with the destiny of its own existentialist choice: "The function of meander is not philosophical nor pictorial, even less decorative one, because it is only visual. Black and white are at the same time maximum and minimum."¹⁶⁰

Can we say that anti-painting for Knifer has the same purpose, which Malevich stated in the *Suprematist Mirror*, of the supremacy of pure feeling in art that corresponds to the mystical insight and contemplation since it does not represent the world and does

¹⁵⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp.163-169) Zagreb: MSU

¹⁵⁹ Denegri, J. (2000) *Julije Knifer* in: *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.298) Zagreb: Horetzky

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*, p.298

not have any decorative purpose anymore?¹⁶¹ If we follow this conclusion we can say that Knifer uses anti-painting to define his goal in painting and to distinguish a different kind of perception in relation to the traditional paintings that represent objects while meander represents a feeling.

Denegri calls meander an icon of some kind, a form filled by the spirit of non-representational feeling comparing it to *Black Square* because the form of the meander is self-sufficient, non-material, anti-functional, as is the form of *Black Square*. In all these similarities we could say that Knifer appropriated Malevich's message that: "Art can become the real crown of human action only if it creates shapes of its own ideology without any influences."¹⁶² In this process of creating anti-painting, it is important to mention the process of self-transformation of Knifer who identified himself with meander as a part of his existentialist choice, which can be compared to Malevich who: "transformed himself into the zero of form and emerged from nothing to creation."¹⁶³

If we compare *Black Square* and the meander, we can see that Malevich and Knifer derived all other forms of Suprematism or all other meander variations out of one painting. In this way, *Black Square* and meander are the beginning and the end of Malevich's and Knifer's oeuvre. Malevich made *Black Square* as a beginning of Suprematism and *White Square* as the end, where the square was equated with non-representational feeling. In addition, Knifer's meander is in constant transformation and the cycle never ends, as it is in the nature of the meander. In both cases, there is the sense of rhythm, as Malevich says: "Square and the suprematist forms proceeding out of it can be linked to primitive marks of aboriginal man which represented in their combination not an ornament, but a feeling of rhythm."¹⁶⁴ For meander rhythm is a

¹⁶¹ *Escritos, Kazimir Malevich*, (1996) (p.300) Editorial Sintesis

¹⁶² Denegri J. (2000), *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.302) Zagreb: Horetzky

¹⁶³ Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism, The New Pictorial Realism*

<http://monoskop.org/images/b/bc/Malevich_Kazimir_1915_1976_From_Cubism_and_Futurism_to_Suprematism.pdf>

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

crucial element of the building of its composition and in the determining the flow of the line.¹⁶⁵

What connects Knifer and Malevich was not only the artistic style since Knifer would always say that he had nothing to do with any artistic movements, it was the fact that they both just followed an idea. This is one reason more why Knifer does not belong to any definite art movement, and he is always connected with many of neo-modernist movements, but not a specific one.

In the letters to Žarko Radaković, Knifer talks about Malevich and asks himself: "How to approach Malevich? Am I on the right way towards Malevich?"¹⁶⁶ This can be one more sign that Knifer in his creation of anti-painting was following Malevich's ideas or spiritual guidance on the supremacy of feeling in art through reduction and geometry. This influence is seen in Knifer's subjective expression in the creation of meander and in his rejection of objective constructivist form without meaning. Moreover, if we look upon other formal elements of the painting, we can see Malevich's influence on Knifer's creation of anti-painting not only in the black and white contrast, the use of geometrical shapes, but in the way Knifer created the space by planes.

Even though Knifer started under the influence of the visual language of Suprematism with the use of a circle, square and cross, in the process of creating anti-painting, his visual language changes and comes closer to the visual abstraction of the 1960s. Knifer was more interested in representing the movement in time and putting the focus on rhythm and not on the dynamism of forms, making the work less dialectical and more tautological. Malevich's reduction of painting to the pure, elementary forms by negation of all kinds of metaphors or symbols is still relevant to Knifer, but he moves forward trying to examine basic features of the art language, trying to find new language possibilities as we can see in the use of the monotony and repetition as construction elements in the painting. In that sense, Knifer is closer to conceptual and

¹⁶⁵ Ellis, *Man The Magic Square*

<<http://apps.acsaarch.org/resources/proceedings/indexsearch.aspx?txtKeyword1=%22Ellis%2C+Eugenia+victoria%22&ddField1=1>>

¹⁶⁶ Radaković, Ž. (1994) *Knifer: povest o Juliju Kniferu* (p.131).Beograd: Radio B92 (Kako pristupiti Maljeviču? Da li sam na pravom putu prema Maljeviču) – Translation mine

language problems of painting that connects him to Malevich because he does not deal with formal aspects of artwork like Informel painters did.

When we look how meander is formed in relation to different suprematist forms, we can see that both are made out of geometrical forms and that they form different geometrical systems. These geometrical systems in modern art started with Cézanne and Seurat and continued through different stages of Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, early International Post-War Abstraction, Minimalism and still apply today. Geometrical systems in the case of Malevich and Knifer need to also be considered also as a symbolic expression of artist's worldview and his participation in this world regardless of the period in time when they appeared.¹⁶⁷

G.C. Argan understands this participation under the general term of the project, opposed to social passivity, as he sees art as a domain of sociality, the social struggle for human liberation and genuine emancipation.¹⁶⁸ Argan advocated these anti-forms together with art that went beyond borders of artistic disciplines, typical for neo-avant-garde as a way of social emancipation of art and conception of political change. In that way, art that has exploratory character initiates the passage from work into performing practices that can later provoke or even change forms of modern art. In that sense, in the avant-garde period, we can notice the existence of the "project". In Suprematism, for example, Malevich tried to create a new world to realize his utopian project that was largely theorized in his books and in neo-avant-garde Knifer was determined to submit all his life to the idea represented in his meanders. The focus on the project can also be seen in the group Gorgona when they were expressing themselves with non-action and passive behavior as a way of social critique.

When we look at the geometrical systems of Knifer, represented by meanders, or Malevich's suprematist forms we can notice that even though there are different individual codes in every geometrical system there is a spiritual connection that includes all artistic positions based on the principles of geometrical shapes. In that way, in the visible structure of the artwork and in its constitutive units, the artist

¹⁶⁷ Denegri J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (pp.6-7) Split: Logos

¹⁶⁸ Šuvaković, M, *Theories of Modernism. Politics of Space and Time*
<<http://filozofskivestnikonline.com/index.php/journal/article/viewFile/160/146>>

expresses his own belief that the world is ruled by certain logos led by logical coordination of many forces whose end direction is ideal mutual unity. Since the artist is constructing his work with precisely determined relations he is trying to summarize a paradigm of his own worldview, of his demands toward the world, which cannot be performed in the world and he is introducing them into the surface and space where he can act on it by himself. This surface of the canvas becomes the space of his spiritual and physical microcosms.¹⁶⁹

Naum Gabo in the text *The Constructive Idea of Art* from 1937 discusses that content can be revealed in the form:

It has revealed the universal law that the elements of a visual art, such as lines, colors, shapes, possess their own forces of expression independent of any association with the external aspects of the worlds; that their life and their action are self-contained psychological phenomena rooted in human nature; that those elements are not chosen by convection for any utilitarian reason as words and figures are, they are not merely abstract signs, buy they are immediately and organically bound up with human emotions. The revelation of this fundamental law has opened up a vast new field in art giving the possibility of expression to those human impulses and emotions which have been neglected.¹⁷⁰

According to Gabo, an artwork becomes a sign of advocacy, a sign of defense of one's rational principle, of the conduct in the world that in many of its proclamations recalls rationalism, but also rejects it as in Knifer or Malevich's case in favor of the feeling or intuition. In all those aspects artwork, based on the principles of geometrical shapes, is the sign of construction of active relationship for the active participation in society, as the artists themselves project the world toward which they strive.

So far we could see how Knifer was influenced by Gorgona and Malevich toward the conception of anti-painting, but to further understand Knifer's notion of anti-painting

¹⁶⁹ Denegri J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (pp.6-7) Split: Logos

¹⁷⁰ Ed. Herbert, (1999) *Modern Artists on Art: Second Enlarged Edition*, (p.147) Dover Publications

we have to analyze Knifer's text *Notes* that was written in August of 1976 and published in 1983. In the *Notes* Knifer explains his view on painting and defines anti-painting.

There are two ways of reading the *Notes*. The first is to analyze the literary structure of the text since *Notes* are written as a poetic text full of Gorgona's characteristics such as repetition, monotony, rhythm, absurd, through which Knifer is also trying to recreate meander in his text. If we undertake this kind of analysis, we can see different parts that need to be analyzed. The first part is the analysis of the language Knifer uses in the text that is more direct and stronger at the beginning of the *Notes*. He seems as he is giving orders that become softer and more revealing over the end of the text when he reveals more personal information about himself. The second part of text analysis is focused on Knifer's self-analysis, his relationship towards painting, his biographical moments. The third part is focused on the irony, where we can find the characteristics of the absurd. The fourth part is focused on reduction, where he stresses the simplicity and minimalism in his work.¹⁷¹

When analyzing *Notes* we must highlight two aspects, repetition and contradiction. Repetition brings monotony, which was one of Knifer's aims and components of his style. Repetition is a common and spread literary procedure that Knifer does not use in the text just to accentuate certain words and sentences, but also to show hidden possibilities of language, as we can see in the cases when he changes or adds words to repeated word segments. We could say that repetitiveness is one of the main features of this text: "I would like to have some monotonous rhythm in the same text."¹⁷² Another stylistic characteristic of the text is the principle of contradiction as the absurd again comes into the front plane, together with relativization and insertion of paradoxes creating permanent instability of messages and meaning through which text gets a humorous note and loses seriousness. Perhaps all of this comes from the feeling of forward loss and futility.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Zidić, I. (2013) *Julije Knifer*, (p.8) Galerija Adris

¹⁷² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp.163-169) Zagreb: MSU

¹⁷³ Zidić, I. (2013) *Julije Knifer*, (p.8) Galerija Adris

The second type of analysis of *Notes* comes from the perspective of an art historian. Here the focus is on Knifer's views on painting, form and color. The text is approached as if it was Knifer's theoretical work on painting, where he defines the anti-painting and explains his views on art. At the beginning of *Notes* Knifer mentions that the purpose of this text is to do the simplest and most direct analysis of his work since he does not want to make a big and complicated philosophy. His wish is to do an analysis of monotony and uniformity from which meanders are made of from 1959-1960s. Knifer claims that he does not have a certain theory by which he could determine his painting. Further on, we can read instructions on how the text should be written, but it is clear that this is also implied for the paintings since the method is the same. He comments that a text or a painting needs to be neutral, clear, simple and direct, and adds: "Of course, it must have content, but the content must not be described."¹⁷⁴ From this sentence, we can easily see that Knifer is also talking about meanders not just about written text, since meanders have content in their essence, in their repetition, monotony, simplicity, clarity and directness. Further on, he adds: "A text must consist of facts"¹⁷⁵ which we can easily connect to meanders since they are just sequences facts, events of the whole oeuvre.

The sentence: "Perhaps this text should not have a traditional beginning. One should literally start from the end right away"¹⁷⁶ can be compared to the sentence "Probably I have already made my last paintings, but maybe not the first ones"¹⁷⁷, which Knifer writes later on in the text. From both of them, we can understand his relation towards time, which as the notion of order, does not have much significance in his work since meanders are tautological.

As we read further, it is clear that he has the same demands for the text and painting: "A text should have certain flow and rhythm, even though monotonous. Facts should be embedded into it very simply."¹⁷⁸ It is clear that he is building up his text like

¹⁷⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp.163-169) Zagreb: MSU

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem*. pp.163-169

¹⁷⁶ *Ibidem*. pp.163-169

¹⁷⁷ *Ibidem*. pp.163-169

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem*. pp.163-169

meanders: “The entire text will be just listing of facts. Therefore, I first have to single out the facts and arrange them in a definite order.”¹⁷⁹

Knifer is rigorous with the text and its meaning, as well as with the creation of his paintings. We can see that in *Notes* it seems like he is giving instructions or definitions for a manual on how to read his anti-paintings. In this way, *Notes* can be considered as instructions on the reading or looking, and the definitions of anti-paintings.

From the quote: “After the year fifty-nine everything was simple, patient and directed”¹⁸⁰, we can conclude that after he had reached meander, he reached his goal in art: “My aim was to create a form of anti-painting, with minimal means, in ultimate contrasts to obtain a monotonous rhythm.”¹⁸¹ Knifer continues by giving a definition of his anti-painting: “Minimal means in ultimate contrast achieving monotonous rhythm”.¹⁸² Further on in the text, he mentions full spiritual freedom and absurdity as the most important element in his work. The absurd and freedom have importance also in the work of Gorgona and are notions which Knifer preserved and incorporated into his works after the group fell apart.

In the continuation of the text, Knifer starts to define the formal parts of his meanders, surfaces, planes and rhythm by saying: “All these painted surfaces are actually the simplest definitions or definitiveness. Each plane for me is definitiveness. My opinion is that this series of planes is just a continuous flow from then until now. This is only a spiritual continuity for which I have been preparing for several years. I did not have a program then, but deliberately progressed to some definitions.”¹⁸³ Here, Knifer confirms that there are no two identical meanders and, as we can conclude from the last sentence, he came upon meander accidentally and later developed a system from it. In the meander painting, the main goal for Knifer was a rhythm which he obtained through reduction of all elements that resulted in the anti-visual effect of anti-painting. Furthermore, Knifer states that chronology and continuity are not important

¹⁷⁹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp.163-169) Zagreb: MSU

¹⁸⁰ *Ibidem.* pp.163-169

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem.*, pp. 163- 169

¹⁸² *Ibidem.*, pp. 163-169

¹⁸³ *Ibidem.*, pp. 163-169

for him and that his way is neither progressive nor regressive.¹⁸⁴ Another reason for this statement is that his work is tautological. The form of meander changes the form, but at the same time stays the same in essence. Knifer himself says in that sense for him there is no difference in creation after he reached meander sign in the 1960s: “Continuity lasts from painting to painting or in and out of a painting. Continuity exists but the order is unimportant. The sequence has no importance. Times and circumstances change people and only in this aspect my paintings change.”¹⁸⁵

Finally, Knifer mentions planes that he sees as the final product of one continuous process that results in painting. In this sense, he defines the end result as important, but also the process. The planes are a sub-process and the whole process is represented by the flow of meander. Next, he explains the importance of the whole oeuvre, not just one meander: “That which I am doing is not a decoration or aesthetics. For me, this is series of meanders which are in the end only just one meander.”¹⁸⁶ In the following sentence he gives his definition of anti-painting: “Within a couple of months, I have reached the end so to say, i.e. a black and white painting (which I called anti-painting) and the meander cannot be simplified further. This was the beginning of the process that lasts still today, without oscillations.”¹⁸⁷ Here we can also notice the similarity between the process of creation and visual representation of meander since they both never end. In that way, meander is a conscious affirmation of existence in time, an intentional and freely chosen way to show the duration of time.

In *Notes* Knifer said that text also needs to have a certain flow and rhythm: even a monotonous one. We can see that the text itself is formed as a meander painting, through the use of minimal expressions, repetition of meaning and sentences. All these methods are used to create the rhythm in the text according to the rhythm in the anti-paintings, now resulting in the creation of anti-text. In that sense, *Notes* contains an explanation of the idea, evolution and process to achieve anti-paintings.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp.163-169) Zagreb: MSU

¹⁸⁵ *Ibidem.*, pp. 163-169

¹⁸⁶ *Ibidem.*, pp. 163-169

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem.*, pp. 163-169

¹⁸⁸ Radaković, Ž. (1994) *Knifer: povest o Juliju Kniferu* (p.131).Beograd: Radio B92

Knifer explained the process of achieving anti-paintings in the interview he gave to Žarko Radaković in 1994. In the conversation Knifer was describing formative elements of his anti-paintings:

In my work surfaces assume the final product of a continuous process, and are considered as images and have the meaning of a definitive document. But the way and the process of realization of that so-called document is also important; I moved from complicated to simple. The color is increasingly losing the layers. The colors were more or less equalizing in the grey spectrum until finally the only one left was black. Within few months, I came to the end, that is, from black-and-white painting (which I have called the anti-painting) and the meander from which it cannot get simpler. This is the beginning of a process that is still going on. The process without oscillations. There were more stoppings and new beginnings rather than adventure; Monotony and repetition are the rhythms that are actually a form of external content. Everything I wanted and what I have achieved is documented in the surfaces that I have called anti-paintings. I went towards the goal (according to a certain order) during the process.¹⁸⁹

In the explanation of his painting method, Knifer is putting the emphasis on rhythm, reduction, facts, process, black and white contrast and monotony, which are all the elements that are a part of anti-painting. For Knifer meander is the simplest, the most reduced form of anti-painting. This is one of the reasons why he decided to spend his life working on the variations of meander instead of producing other forms because he already reached the most reduced form according to his standards in art. Further on Knifer talks about the importance of black and white non-colors, their reduction and meaning in the creation of anti-painting, as they form meander:

¹⁸⁹ Radaković, Ž. (1994) *Knifer: povest o Juliju Kniferu* (p.53). Beograd: Radio B92 (U mojem radu plohe koje pretpostavljaju finalni product jednog kontinuiranog procesa, a koje se smatraju slikama, imaju značenja definitivnog dokumenta. Ali važan je i put i process do realizacije tog takozvanog dokumenta. Kretao sam se od kompliciranog do jednostavnog. U boji sve se više gubilo na obojenim slojevima. Boje su se manje više izjednačavale u sivilu, dok na kraju nije ostala samo crna. U roku od nekoliko mjeseca došao sam takoreći do kraja, to jest od crno-bijele slike (koji sam nazvao anti-slikom) i do meandra od kojeg se dalje jednostavnije ne može. To je početak procesa koji još i danas traje. Proces bez oscilacija. Više je bilo zaustavljanja i novih početaka nego li avantura.) – Translation mine

Even on the finished white canvas from a store, I inflict another white coat of paint and only then intervene from white to black. The mediator from white to black is a meander. In my paintings, there is a process that takes place and it creates a visual event or visually organized events from black and white. I try to do the process with most minimal funds; White is never a surface for me. White for me, is an active paint, which participates in the division of a surface. I always say that white is a symbol of nihilism. In addition, I called my first paintings of this type, from 1960, the anti-paintings because I was simply destroying the classic anti-painting by the fact that I was applying black and white.¹⁹⁰

We can notice the Informel influence when Knifer is talking about anti-painting in the sense of the reduction of the painting. Nevertheless, the spiritual component is still important, and can be seen in the rhythm that creates almost a meditative character of the meander and which on the other hand is one of the reduction elements Knifer was going in the direction of complete disappearance of the painting. In the interview, he mentions nihilism in connection to a white color that is one of two constructive elements of anti-painting next to the black color. This kind of nihilism is also present in the notion of anti-painting as a mean to negate the world he lives in. Nihilism is sometimes also connected to Malevich's zero point of the painting, reached by the *Black Square*, also regarded as a nihilistic symbol representing the "death of painting".

As Thomas Aiello explained:

Malevich's zero of form is not a zero without content or origins; the essentially invisible synthesis of the primitive and the spirituality of the zero is based on the belief that in the fourth dimension everything meets and becomes

¹⁹⁰ Radaković, Ž. (1994) *Knifer: povest o Juliju Kniferu* (p.131). Beograd: Radio B92 (Čak i na gotovom bijelom platnu, iz trgovine, ja nanosim još jedanbjeli sloj boje i tek tada interveniram na bijelom do krajnje crne. Posrednik od bijele do crne je meander. Između crnog i bijelog i obratno na mojim slikama događa se jedan process koji od crnog i bijelog stvara vizualni događaj ili organizirano vizualno zbivanje. Nastojim da se to odvija u okviru najminimalnijih sredstava. Bijela je za mene aktivna boja, koja sudjeluje u podjeli površine. Ja uvijek kažem da je bijela symbol nihilizma. Osim toga nazvao sam prve slike topga tipa, od 1960 godine anti slike jer sam jednostavno uništavao klasično slikarstvo nanošenjem crna i bijele boje.) – Translation mine

its opposite. However, his phrase “creation as an end in itself” is intriguing. Is he referring to artistic creation as something, which should be valued as a purely creative act without any reference to the real world? Or is he referring to creation as a more spiritual act, something which art can lead to only by becoming less materialistic and less representational?¹⁹¹

Knifer’s wish to achieve anti-painting was inspired by Gorgona’s inclination towards the negation of all art and Malevich’s supremacy of the pure feeling in art. The process towards anti-painting was marked by the reduction in the formation of meander. Into this most reduced anti-painting form, Knifer introduced the rhythm of infinity and freedom of any meaning except the spiritual dimension of painting. By reaching his own zero point in the painting, Knifer identifies with the meander sign, and he continues to create its variations until the rest of his life. Knifer wrote in *Notes*:

Today the idea of anti-painting (probably) does not matter to me and I do not know whether my present compositions must suggest an anti-painting formula although they carry the same spiritual origin and the same spiritual structure as in those years of 1959 and 1960. Therefore, today it is important for me to continue the logic of a course begun. That, above all, represents an objective logic in which I have not sought imaginary shapes, but rather recorded extreme rhythms of events on the surface.¹⁹²

Knifer’s attempt to create anti-painting can be seen as an attempt to achieve something that he could not achieve in reality, and that is freedom. This was achieved by meander that he filled with the feeling of the absurd and through its flow he was trying to achieve the same contemplative state of zen philosophy he was also admiring. Knifer indicates that anti-painting through time transformed into the idea of the painting without identity, a type of an open work that is open to different explanations. Spirituality still remains an important component of his work as it was in the beginning of the creation of meander. By mentioning objectivity and spirituality

¹⁹¹ Aiello, T. *Head-First Through the Hole in the Zero: Malevich’s Suprematism, Khlebnikov’s Futurism, and the Development of a Destructive Aesthetics, 1908-1919*
<<https://emajartjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/thomasaiello.pdf>>

¹⁹² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.147) Zagreb: MSU

in the same paragraph, we can conclude that this geometrical objectivity is what many artists strive for, and it ultimately ends with the expression of subjective identity that in Knifer's case was meander.

4.2. MEANDER

The origin of the word meander comes from the river *Μαίανδρος* that is situated east from the antique city Miletus in Asia Minor. Meander is characterized by its curved stream and usually is used to signify antique decoration or an ornament. In architecture or on vases, meander is represented as an endless line shaped into a repeated motif.¹⁹³ As a symbol in Greece, meander represented infinity or the eternal flow of things. Knifer later used these characteristics in the transformation of this symbol into a sign to represent rhythm.

Knifer's geometrical paintings from the late 1950s were first entitled *Compositions*. The idea to rename them at the beginning of the 1960s into meanders came from art historian Igor Zidić, as he thought that the name meander would better reflect what was happening on the canvas with the form. Zidić did not think that the historical meaning of meander symbol would be something negative for the future title of the painting as he was aware that the painting would obtain different meanings and not just be defined by meander. On the other hand, Knifer was also not concerned with the meaning that meander has carried throughout history and liked the proposition since it reflected the reduced character of the painting. Knifer was more focused on the vitality of the symbol, and the fact that by its structure meander is a visual sign, which later helped him in forming the rhythm with the black and white contrast and vertical and horizontal lines.¹⁹⁴

The title *Composition* was used by many artists in the avant-garde period starting with Kandinsky who used it in reference to the music, but also by the members of Neo-Constructivist group Exat'51, Srnc, Rašica, Picelj and Kristl in the 1960s. A title *Composition* can bear many meanings since it is more general and abstract in comparison to the title *meander* that gives the painting specific significance. In that sense Knifer's meander is independent of the historical, ornamental meander as it acquired specific meaning that Knifer will provide during 50 years of his creation that will lead to the identification of Knifer as a person with the meander sign.

¹⁹³ Sales Meyer, (1920) *Handbook of Ornament*, (p.128) New York: Architectural Book Pub. Co.

¹⁹⁴ Zidić, I. (2013) *Julije Knifer*, (p.4) Galerija Adris

When we look further into the signification of meander as an ornament and the way it functions as an abstract sign we can understand this transformation that Knifer made when he transformed meander into his sign. We can also understand how meander adapts to the universal spiritual idea. In the avant-garde period, an ornament in this function was mostly rejected by the painters, who did not want to associate their abstract artwork with it. They focused more on the form and color which later, along with metaphysical meaning, Knifer unites in his art.

As we can see, in the beginning of abstract painting there was a fear that visual language would be seen as the continuation of the ornament tradition since it was, in fact, non-representational. Consequently, there were two streams; one in favor of the ornament in abstract art, and the other one rejecting the ornament. The first stream is represented by the architect Adolf Loos who in his essay *Ornament and Crime* from 1908, called for the rejection of ornament in favor of clean surfaces in architecture and applied arts since they were unfitting for the modern age.¹⁹⁵

One of the painters that had this fear of the ornament was Wassily Kandinsky, and in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* from 1912, he regarded the function of ornament as it was governed by external motives since it was used for decoration or narration of the story. This characteristic of the ornament, in his opinion, does not allow the harmony to be determined within the painting and fails to serve as the basis for an abstract art of pure harmony. Kandinsky, in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, was recalling Persian ancient art when referring to geometrical shapes being subordinated to the composition. He noticed that Persian ancient art was without a spiritual element that only started to appear in the avant-garde. In that sense, we can see that Kandinsky was against the use of ornament in art since it did not have the spiritual component.¹⁹⁶

Kandinsky continues to explain how the ornaments emerged from nature as did meander from the form of the river. Ornaments have been shaped more as symbols that were used mostly hieroglyphically, which made it difficult to understand them and made us incapable of revealing their inner value. He does not elaborate further on

¹⁹⁵ Conrads, (1975), *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture*, (p.19) MIT Press

¹⁹⁶ Kandinsky W. (1999), *Duh apstrakcije*, (p.202) Zagreb: IPU

the spiritual geometry that is just starting to appear in the avant-garde. Kandinsky thought that people were at that time incapable of grasping from the inside of their being the freed composition of color and form since the vibrations coming from the painting were too weak to generate the excitement of the soul. He relayed on the positive science to produce the spiritual turn to allow us to feel the pure composition. In that way, Kandinsky distanced abstract expression from the ornament and rejected it in favor of inner necessity.¹⁹⁷

On the other hand, an art historian Wilhelm Worringer saw an abstract urge to form and a correlative yearning for transcendent in an ornament. In *Abstraction and Empathy*, he wrote about positive aspects of an ornament in relation to abstract art. He examined the linear ornament and architecture claiming that he found artistic sensibility in them, which employed abstract linear forms for the purpose of transcending nature. Also, he mentions meander as an example of mature geometrical style where a miraculous equation takes place between the elements of abstraction and empathy when artistic creation inclines towards an organic lively form that brings the line into life with intensity and quiet balance.¹⁹⁸

Knifer accidentally follows Worringer's thought in the use of ornament. The form of meander appeared to him through his geometrical experiments, but he went beyond abstraction giving meander new meaning and achieving the transfigured ornament that Kandinsky was reluctant to believe it could be achieved.¹⁹⁹ Knifer avoids the avant-garde's danger of representing the ornament by turning it into something else, by taking away its decorative character and accentuating the rhythm. He achieves that by the contrast of black and white and makes variations out of a mutable form of meander which is now transformed into a flow presenting facts, as well as into his existentialist philosophy of life.

This process of freeing the ornament from its inferior status as a decoration and establishing it as an independent formal category started with Immanuel Kant and was

¹⁹⁷ Kandinsky, W. (1999) *Duh apstrakcije*, (pp.204 -205), Zagreb: IPU

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem., (p.69)

¹⁹⁹ Morgan, *The Idea of Abstraction in German Theories of the Ornament from Kant to Kandinsky*, (p.238) < <http://philpapers.org/rec/MORTIO-4>>

continued by Alois Riegl who constructed an independent history of the ornament and called for its recognition of the purely artistic essence, independent of function, technique and material. In the 1960s, with the appearance of neo-avant-gardes, we can see new attempts to re-accord the ornament place in paintings. It can be claimed that the whole post Second World War abstraction represents a kind of ornamentalization of the formal language of earlier non-figurative art. This is mostly because the ornament characteristics had philosophical and symbolic significance as a means to represent notions of cosmos, infinity, universal relationships, principles of natural laws, etc. In that sense, we could say that if we remove the utopian aspect of the avant-garde from abstract works, we would get an ornament, as Kandinsky qualified it, without any inner motive.²⁰⁰

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky said that for the composition, a painter has two means: color and shape. These two components were all that Knifer used in the creation of meander paintings to produce rhythm. This connection between music and ornaments that appeared in Knifer's painting had already started to appear throughout the late 19th century and continued on the 20th. Kant in the *Critique of the Judgment* compared the free beauty of ornament with the improvisatory genre of the instrumental fantasia. Many artists, as did Kandinsky, made "musical paintings" where art was composed according to principles of music. In England, with the Arts and Crafts movement, artists were trying to bring decorative art and musical composition in close alignment. In that sense, John Ruskin and Ralph Nicholson Wornum equated the process of ornamentation in the visual arts with the composition of an abstract musical work.²⁰¹

Wornum in the *Analysis of Ornament: Characteristics of Style* developed explicit parallels between the ornament and music. We can see the some of these constructive elements that Knifer uses in his work, such as the first principle of ornament which is repetition, or the simplest character that is measured by succession in series of one detail, that can be seen in the repetition of the meander. Ornament corresponds to the melody in music, which is measured by the succession of diatonic sounds, the system

²⁰⁰ *Ornament and Abstraction: the dialogue between non-Western, modern and contemporary art*, (2001) (p.18-19), Fondation Beyeler

²⁰¹ Kandinsky, W. (1999) *Duh apstrakcije*, (p.67) Zagreb: IPU

arising from the same source which is rhythm, and is referred to the time in music, in ornament to the proportion or symmetry.²⁰²

Rhythm is of the essential importance of meander construction since it dictates the flow, composition, form and its repetitive structure. In trying to produce monotony and uniformity and to create anti-painting, Knifer got inspired by reading the biography of Stravinsky where he came across Stravinsky's thoughts: "The main problem in playing new music is rhythm"; "The main question is tempo"; "Ostinato is static against progression and sometimes we need something contrary to development", and "Music is nothing else but the rhythm"²⁰³. That influenced him to try to apply the same on canvas. Knifer, in the interview with Zvonko Maković said that Igor Stravinsky's idea about music being rhythm made him explore vertical and horizontal lines, and black and white color as rhythms. For him, that also symbolized expressions of extreme form. By using rhythm in painting, Knifer tried to achieve anti-painting by radicalization, diminishing, minimalizing, going from relatively complicated paintings towards simple ones, saying: "I got to the horizontal and vertical, white and black and that was it."²⁰⁴

Meander is a recurring and sole element in Knifer's painting after its conception in 1960. It is a recognizable sign of Knifer's art that differentiates him from other artists creating with geometrical forms before and even nowadays. As Denegri said, meander is Knifer's *Black Square*, the quintessence of his thinking about painting and thinking about the existence through painting.²⁰⁵ It is possible to regard Knifer's meander, a form that he was exploring from 1960 till his death as an equivalent to Malevich's notion of a square, the source of Suprematism, as: "The beginning of Suprematism is the surface in the shape of the square."²⁰⁶ Also both forms, meander and square represent the philosophical and existential standpoints of the two artists: "When

²⁰² Bhogal, G.K. (2013) *Details of Consequence: Ornament, Music and Art in Paris*, (p.71) Oxford University Press

²⁰³ Pierre, A. (2001), *Julije Knifer*, (p.44) Paris: A.Biro (Le principal problem dans la musique est le rythme; La principale question est tempo; Ostinato est statique contre la progression et parfois nous avons besoin de quelque chose au contraire de developpement; La musique est rien d'autre que le rythme)

²⁰⁴ Ibidem. p.44 (Je suis arrive a l'horizontale et vertical, blanc et noir et c'etait ca) – Translation mine

²⁰⁵ Denegri, J. (1985), *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.40) Split: LOGOS

²⁰⁶ Lamač, Padrta,(1980) *Ideja Supramtizma* Ed. Mijušković *Maljevič, Supreamtizam –bespredmetnost*, (p.131) Beograd: SIC (Početak suprematizma je ploha u obliku kvadrata) – Translation mine

eighteen, seventeen, and sixteen years ago I realized that traditional education and experience did not interest me I moved towards the end. However the end has not come yet perhaps because I am perpetually at some sort of beginning.”²⁰⁷

Knifer says in *Notes* that meanders do not have decorative, philosophical or any other function. In that sense, Knifer is following the string of thought saying that if they are without signification they are without meaning. From his statement, we can see why Knifer says that he is representing facts and not symbols in the search of new meaning that will not be separated from the object. If we want to interpret meander as a sign, we can notice that in the interview in 1991 Knifer said that if sometimes some of his paintings suggested a sign or meaning, it was accidental and outside of his power. He did not control that. A sign could have appeared eventually but just in a sequence.²⁰⁸ In fact, he wanted to say that there was no concept behind the meander but something else, similar to Malevich’s “feeling”. This interpretation is close to Denegri’s interpretation of meander as an expression of spirit.²⁰⁹ Meander as Malevich’s square is not based on an object and from that point of view it does not have attributes of iconic sign. Both signs, meander and *Black Square* are filled by non-objective feeling, as they can both be only interpreted through their characterization of self-referring signs. In that way, Knifer is following Malevich’s claim that art has to follow its own ideology without any influences.

As a basis for this interpretation of meander, we can follow the thought of Ernst Cassirer, a philosopher that was a contemporanean to Malevich. Cassirer was among the first to consider art as a language, taking the premise of an implicit meaning in the work of art, where he also, as Malevich, considered art as language of forms of feelings and not of concepts. This is in the line of thought of Susanne Langer who also proposed the concept of presentational symbol that presents a total meaning, which is not divisible into its parts or translatable. In that way when we are moving art further from language we reaffirm its nonconceptual quality and deny the quality

²⁰⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.149) Zagreb: MSU

²⁰⁸ *Ibidem.*,p.230

²⁰⁹ Denegri, J (2003) Julije Knifer in: *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.302) Zagreb: Horetzky

of meaning of visual arts. In that sense, this significance is detached from its semantic value, which takes away any precise referential element.²¹⁰

In *Notes* Knifer says: “I have never tried to analyze my stream of consciousness in the years when I was creating the fundamentals of my previous and especially of my present painting. The process of work and thought strived and was directed towards borderline situations.”²¹¹ To get closer to the meaning of meander, we can consider Gillo Dorfles’ theory that insists on linguistic and non-linguistic approaches to art. This type of communication is fixed upon unconscious or subconscious level, instead on a clearly conscious one, which Dorfles compared to Carl Gustav Jung’s collective unconscious. Impulses, sentiments, intuitions never become rationalized, but they act upon our egos and form ethical and aesthetic bases for our inner personalities, whether we want it or not. Art with this kind of communication skips barriers of rationality meaning that through art, we can recognize communication at an unconscious level as it acts on a deeper level.²¹²

In that sense meander is open for free interpretation, and Denegri qualifies meander as an interpreter of the extreme sublime state of soul, close to Malevich’s supremacy of pure nonobjective feeling.²¹³ In meander, a person can find answers to existentialist questions. Knifer himself read Sartre’s existentialism philosophy and Camus’s absurd works and was exploring the borderline situations in paintings seen in the extremes of black and white color, vertical and horizontal line. In that way, meander incorporates the spirit of the 1960s with its existentialist and absurd components. The meaning behind meander, whether existentialist or absurd, does not aim to change the world, as Knifer just observes and notes the facts on canvas. Its meaning is more resigning, more nihilistic, like the Gorgona’s spirit, since there is no beginning or end and the flow never stops.²¹⁴

If we consider that single meander representations are portions arbitrary removed from one infinite meander, we can say that Knifer’s paintings represent details of a

²¹⁰ Dorfles, G., *Communication and Symbol in the Work of Art*, <<http://philpapers.org/rec/DORCAS>>

²¹¹ Uncompromising, (2014) (p.230) Zagreb: MSU

²¹² Dorfles, G. *Communication and Symbol in the Work of Art*, <<http://philpapers.org/rec/DORCAS>>

²¹³ Ibidem.

²¹⁴ Uncompromising, (2014) (pp.163-169) Zagreb: MSU

detail. According to Arnauld Pierre, Knifer transformed meander into a mute sign indifferent and monotone, making it absurd which was, in fact, one conception of existence.²¹⁵ On the other hand, Anđelko Mrkonjić mentions that Knifer filled meander with metaphysical character and meaning since Knifer removed its philosophical and accented its visual function.²¹⁶

Meander is a visible fact of Knifer's ethical conscious choice, his identity and his spirit. Knifer chooses meander by a conscious choice and does not give up on it until the end of his life by creating variations and variations of the same sign. Knifer further explains his paintings:

The material shape of a painting also meant the utmost spiritual state of the primary idea; I think what I am doing represents subjective objects of course, with all their character. I don't want them to have subjective character, but maybe, firstly objective character. Because of that, the forms have not been imagined and are not random; There is a phase of the concept of a painting which is maybe the spiritual conception of the idea, then comes the physical conception of the painting by whose definition a painting assumes its complete spiritual character and physical form. Is in my painting the spiritual identical with the physical? With its physical form, my paintings are also spiritually exhausted.²¹⁷

Knifer considers meander as his signature, his philosophy, as he is reproducing it on different surfaces, outside art institutions, leaving his trail on the wall paintings in city centers, in metros, or in schools. Meander does not impose itself in that way, perhaps it just wants to be present like Gorgona did, to stay in the same intimate inner spectrum of the society, for individuals who would appreciate it. At the same time, meander as well as Malevich's square has a utopian component that will never be achieved in reality, as it will just stay represented in a painting. As Knifer said:

²¹⁵ Pierre, A. (2001), *Julije Knifer*, (p.83) Paris: A.Biro

²¹⁶ Rem G., *Knifer bijela buka, oslike*, Vijenac 477

<http://www.matica.hr/vijenac/477/Knifer,%20bijela%20buka,%20oslike%20/>

²¹⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.229) Zagreb: MSU

My painting is a mode of my behavior. I do not want to change the world, culture, civilization and especially the relation to art. I believe that my paintings exist somewhat aside from the classical understanding of painting, but this is the consequence of my freedom of thinking and understanding or generally, my freedom as a person. Painting helped me to liberate myself in moral and spiritual respect; for that reason, my painting cannot be considered as middle-class painting. Visual arts went towards their liberation and the liberation of people and creators. I do not know if I have liberated something in the painting, but I know I have liberated myself with the help of painting.²¹⁸

Knifer never thought that he will be painting meanders whole his career. It happened day by day, as he tried to abandon the meanders but ended going back to them. He claimed that what made him stay with meanders was more an ethical attitude since he wanted to be free to do what he wanted, and what made this freedom possible was his work.²¹⁹ Leonida Kovač in the article *Knifer as a sign* defined the form of meander as a sign that structures the collective consciousness and exists as an entry of its own identity.²²⁰ This ethic attitude can be seen in the repetition and variations of the meander, as through it Knifer identifies himself with the sign. When we look at meander, we can see that by form, the sign is closed inside itself, similar to Knifer who always stayed closed inside the same representation of meander: “I have never conceived my works in advance; everything went spontaneously and in the work process. My work process emerged from proceeding.”²²¹

The transition from compositions to meander happened when Knifer connected isolated forms of the *Composition no.13* into one continuous flow. In that way, Knifer arrived at the form of meander but did not immediately start from it, like in the case of Malevich with the appearance of *Black Square*. In the moment when he reached meander, he started to firmly believe in it and identified himself with it. Meander, in this case, is the consequence of one decision. Upon its formation, Knifer accepted it and further developed it as a sign. What followed was the transformation of this geometrical element into not only plastically articulated, but a symbolical form that

²¹⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.229) Zagreb: MSU

²¹⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.229

²²⁰ Kovač L, *Knifer kao znak*, <<http://www.matica.hr/vijenac/215/Knifer%20kao%20znak/>>

²²¹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.152) Zagreb: MSU

can transmit metaphysical meaning. In that way, meander became a form which shows the imminent passing of time and space. Through time, its form it will become visually purer, and its meaning will be more and more complex.²²²

Throughout Knifer's work, meander is a constant, something that does not change. Meander forms that we see on the canvas are always presented in a different variant. The form depends on a change of black and white background, as well as its proportions, the space between the rectangles, or the dimension of the canvas, etc. All these meander variations came from most basic elements of painting, color, form, that are now reduced to extremes. Knifer achieves the effect of something new on each new painting during whole his career, even though it is always with the representation of the same sign. This can also be the reason why Knifer perhaps had chosen meander, because of its possibility to constantly transform but keep its essence, as it could be a metaphor for life that is always changing but also stays the same in its essence.

Meander was first exhibited in Studio G in Zagreb in 1962. From that moment, the identification of Knifer and the meander sign started. We can follow the evolution of meander from 1959 until 1966 by its morphological structure and divide it into four stages. The first stage is composed out of meanders that have been made around 1961, the second stage is after the modification of meanders that happened around 1962, the third stage is after new modification of meanders from 1963-65, and the fourth stage is after structuralization of meanders around 1966.²²³

²²² Denegri, J. (1985) *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj 2*, (p.41) Split: LOGOS

²²³ Denegri, J. (2000) *Bilješke o meandrima Julija Knifera in: Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.290) Zagreb: Horetzky

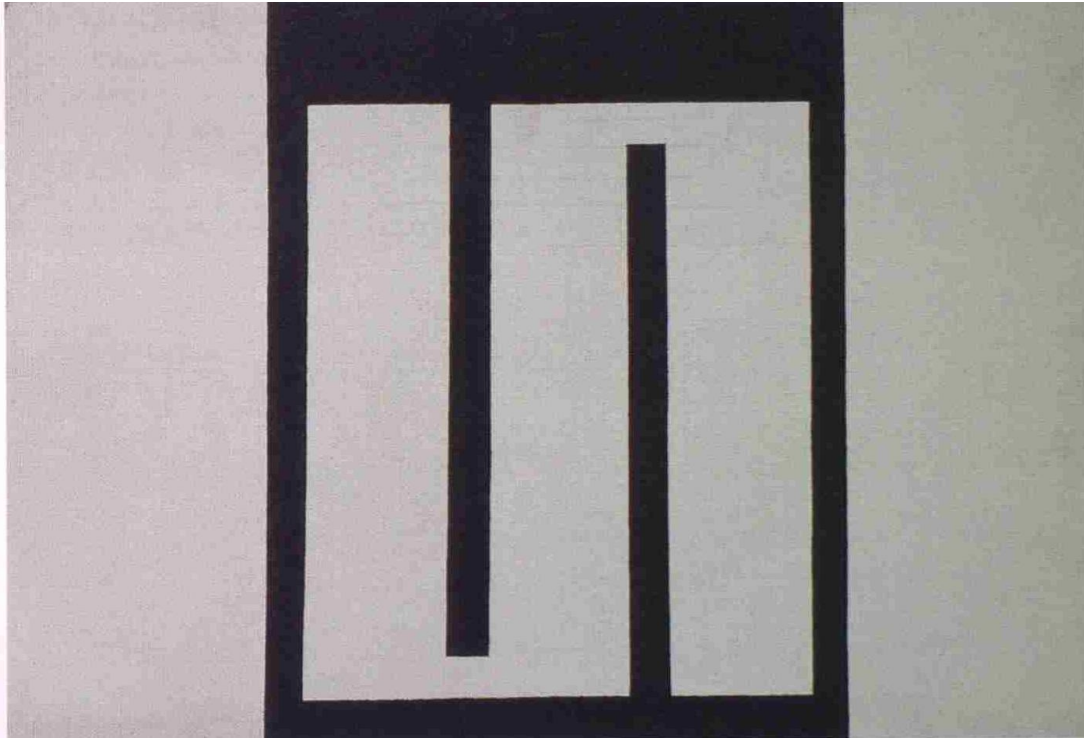


Figure 8. Julije Knifer, *Anti composition*, 1960

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.103

Looking at Knifer's meander morphologically from the first phase when it was formed as a sign around 1960 onwards, we can notice that the most simple expression was when it was represented by two lines connecting three rectangles as in *Anti composition*, from 1960. The meander colors through years always interchanged, lines and background were either white or black, with the rhythmical contrast of vertical and horizontal lines. This simple meander, *Anti composition* from 1960, can be defined as the basic constructive unit of any variation of meander from 1960 onwards. As it can be seen, meander is usually mostly shaped with 4 lines and 5 rectangles, as in *Meander 2* from 1960.

In meander paintings, the width of rectangles can be different as its ending and beginning can start at a different level of the canvas. That can be in completely black or white background while the meander will then be in the opposite color. The second most common meander form is meander with 5 lines connecting 6 rectangles as in *Meander 6*, from 1961, which, according to its construction, can also be read rhythmically as me-an-der, as its form can be divided as well into three most basic meanders.

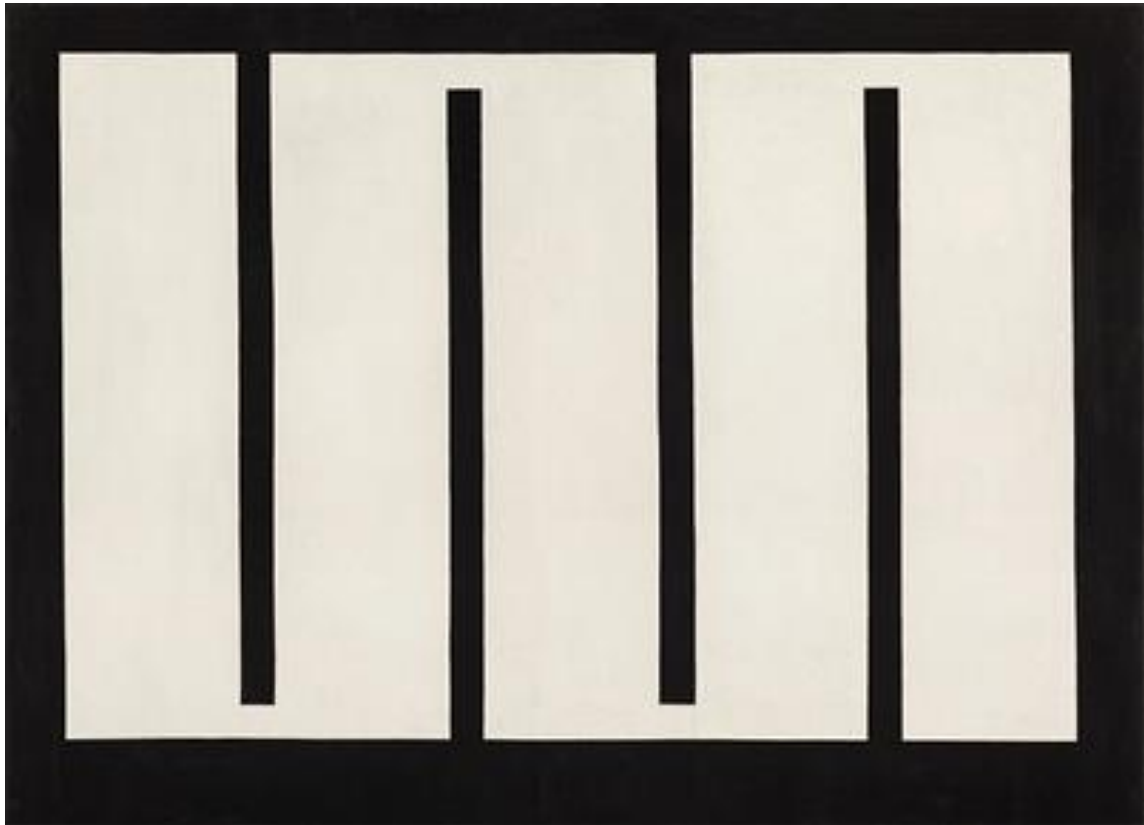


Figure 9. Julije Knifer, *Meander 2*, 1960

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.84

Still, one more distinction has to be made since in 1960 there are a couple of canvases where meander's flow is horizontal and not vertical, as in *Meander 20*, from 1965. Now meander is defined not by vertical lines that connect the rectangles and define the rhythm, but by the line that is the same color as the background of the canvas. In this case, through the two surfaces of opposite color, black or white, the line of the same color as the background forms meander horizontally, making the rhythm not so ridged and fast, but more as the representation of the meandering river, longer and slower. These paintings are not so visually striking as the vertical compositions earlier mentioned. This was probably the reason why Knifer did not create so many meanders in this way. These horizontal compositions from the 1960s in the 1970s resemble more to his reliefs, as for example *White relief* from 1971, where Knifer used the same horizontal painting concept in the shaping of meander and rhythm. As it can be seen, the rhythm is present in all the meander compositions as Knifer uses it to create linear flow.

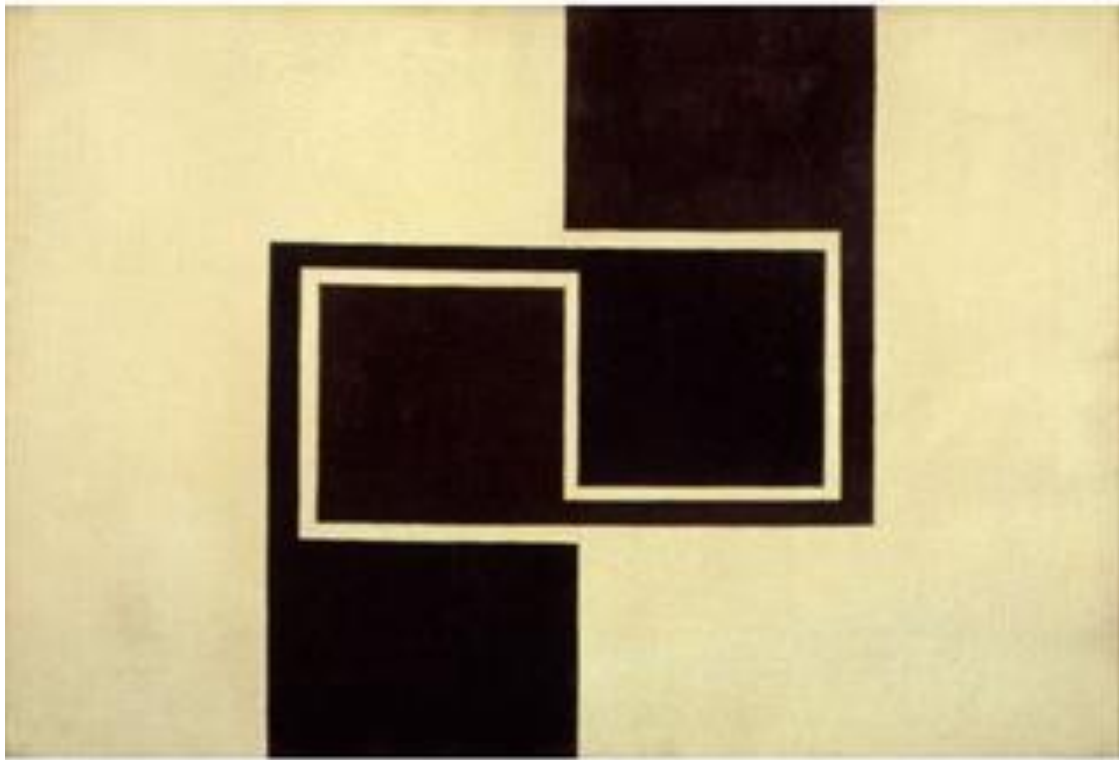


Figure 10. Julije Knifer, *Meander 20*, 1965

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.115

From 1968 till 1970, meanders are colored as Knifer is trying to surpass the monochrome phase. The colored phase also represents a way to put more visual emphasis on meander. The colors that Knifer uses are moving the attention away from the previously more present rhythm of black and white contrast. Now the color is what grabs the attention of the viewer, more than the contemplative rhythm of the meander. In a way, by using color, meander becomes visually more effective, but not functional as when done monochromatically. Now meander is more treated as a design element, or a visual sign. From the 1970s onward, we can fully see how Knifer further negates the boundaries of paintings by producing different variants of meander, always reinventing it, now in bigger formats as he had always wanted.

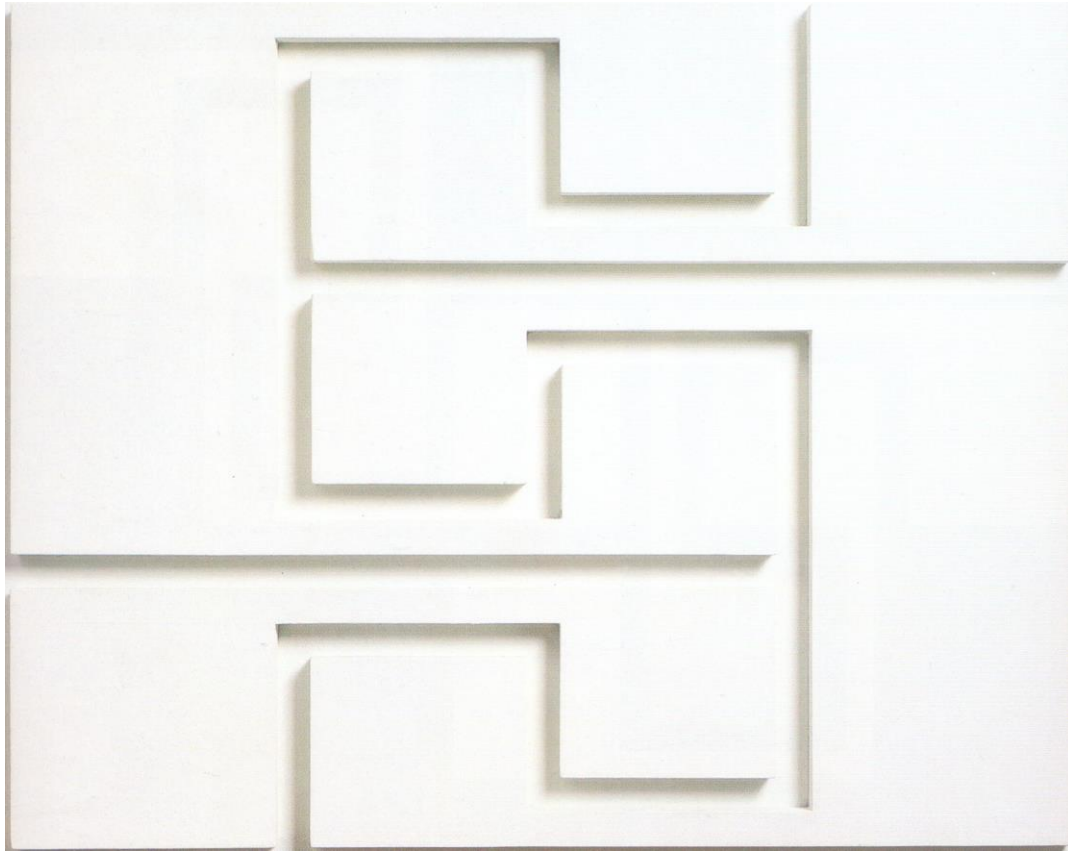


Figure 11. Julije Knifer, *White Relief*, 1971

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.171

4.2.1. TOWARDS MEANDER

In the *Notes*, Knifer explains why he chose a painting career after enrolling in the Faculty of Law, which he later abandoned for the Academy of Fines Arts. His existentialist preoccupation with human freedom in art is noticeable from the start: “My attitude towards art was the attitude of the human towards art and not an artist towards art. By this, I have achieved one total feeling of freedom. Towards art, I did not have any obligations.”²²⁴ In the same paragraph, Knifer writes about his personal feelings towards life. We can notice existentialist feelings of angst that suddenly disappeared with the change of career from lawyer to artist:

When I definitely decided for this calling, I stopped thinking about the future. I thought only about today, and I lived only in this specific moments. Maybe it is absurd, but since I have gained something concrete, I haven't thought about the future anymore and the past started to fade. Past turned into a bad dream and future became unimportant.²²⁵

Knifer did not force himself in creating art. He worked every day and his progress was slow. At the same time, his theoretical interests were getting stronger. In this process, contacts with other art historians had an important role, which later led him to join the group Gorgona.

Even during the time of the war, I think somewhere around 1943, especially 1944, I thought a lot about painting as my commitment. 1948 and 1949 it was growing in me. 1950 I definitely decided and everything else became unimportant. From 1950 till 1958, it could be said that it was a period of non-systematical search, even though I knew that I would never be a classic academic painter. My interests were broader, outside the borders of the academic-civil society.²²⁶

What led him towards painting were also the moral and physical consequences of war and the after-war period. For him, painting was an escape from reality. In that sense,

²²⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp. 137-144) Zagreb: MSU

²²⁵ *Ibidem.*, pp.137-144

²²⁶ *Ibidem.*,p.150

he was painting for himself and not for anybody else. This was also one of the reasons why there is no logical opus in the terms of the development of meander. Knifer believed in the possibility that art can liberate itself as well as other people and artists in the process. Although he liberated himself, he was not sure if he liberated something or someone else since there was no theory or a program in his art:

My painting is on one hand way of my behavior. I do not want to change the world, culture, civilization or the attitude towards art. I believe that my paintings are something different from the classical comprehension of painting, but this is the consequence of my freedom of thinking and comprehension or my freedom as a human. Painting helped me to free myself spiritually and because of that reason, it cannot be trapped civil painting.²²⁷

Knifer started painting Compositions around the 1950s after painting veduttes of Zagreb's neighborhood Stenjevec, where he was living at that time. In these early paintings, and especially in veduttes, we can see the influence of Cézanne. This is seen in the way he was creating the composition, using the geometrical forms and in the use of color to determine the flat surface. Later Knifer also uses color tones on portraits from 1952 trying to depict the psychological state of subjects. This figuration disappears more and more and leads him to further explore the forms that are now in dynamic movement.²²⁸

Between 1957 and 1958, Knifer entered into a short cubist phase that was important for the evolution of his personal formative principles which later helped him to comprehend the full meaning of reduction. This phase resembled more to the period of analytic cubism of Picasso, seen in the paintings *Mask* from 1956, *Spring* 1956. While in the *Mask* painting figuration is still present, *Spring* is already a completely abstract painting.²²⁹

Knifer did not spend a lot of time on figurative painting, as it can be seen. Knifer moves quickly in the experiments with abstract expression, trying to find his way to

²²⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.150) Zagreb: MSU

²²⁸ Maković Z. (2001), *Knifer*, (p.42) Zagreb: Meandar

²²⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.42

meanders, slowly reducing space and elements, as this sense of reduction becomes more and more radicalized by time.²³⁰ Zvonko Maković in the monograph *Knifer* writes about the reduction of space onto surfaces which now is seen in all possible combinations, whether he paints compositions that are free from all mimetic references or they still rely on some concrete motif:

Knifer shows here an outstanding feel for composition and which is exceptionally important, a sense of reduction. A reduction that comes out, not only in the way certain elements are picked out and put together but of space itself. In fact, it would be most accurate to say that artist turns volumes into planes, then arranging the planes without being led by any intentions, shaping the scene as it exists in reality. Actually, Knifer's attention is quite opposite. From fragments of visible reality, he creates a new reality one that is not quite congruent with the primary.²³¹

The first *Composition* appears in 1952 while he still had not renounced figuration. This painting is very interesting since in it, we can see his first explorations of form and color, which are very much different from explorations with meander. In this composition, Knifer is using yellow, white, grey and blue color that are separated with thick black line, as later white color will be separated from the black. Knifer makes another *Composition* in 1955 but in a figurative style. From 1957, the paintings are still titled *Composition*, but now are abstract. In this phase, Knifer uses colors, mostly red, yellow, blue, white and black that allows him to create a dynamic surface. Maković thinks that these colors must be seen as if they belonged to the same chromatic base and can be understood just as mere echoes of the main tone in the building of his first compositions.²³² On the other hand, forms are still not clear, as they will be when he moves into geometrical abstraction. Forms are still following the Cubist expression, as they are broken in many different colored planes which can be seen in the *Composition* from 1957.

²³⁰ Maković Z. (2002), *Knifer*, (p.42) Zagreb: Meandar

²³¹ Ibidem.,p.42

²³² Ibidem., pp.42-43



Figure 12. Julije Knifer, *Composition II*, 1957

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.73

The painting title *Composition*, the influence of the music, rhythm and spirituality, connect Knifer with Kandinsky who said that *Compositions* are the products of the inner necessity. According to Kandinsky, *Composition* paintings transmit the essential and unavoidable inseparable combination of an internal and external element, that is a content and a form. In Kandinsky's *Compositions* paintings, the reason predominates, even though he admits that he always gave an advantage to sentiments than to calculations. Kandinsky considered that pure artists wanted to give in their work only the inner-important by which the renunciation of external accidents occurred by itself, as it happened in the process of reduction with Knifer. This process of renunciation or reduction is connected with the soul that is awakening after a long materialistic period, but it is still under the influence of a materialistic philosophy which has turned the universe into an aimless game.²³³ Knifer, on the other hand, experiments with

²³³ Kandinsky W. (1999), *O duhovnom u umjetnosti*, in (Ed.) Bačić, M. *Duh apstrakcije* (p.140) Zagreb: Institut za povijest umjetnosti.

geometrical forms in *Compositions*, where the rhythm is used as means of reduction and not as a way of art synthesis.

In the Knifer's painting *Composition* from 1957, the clear geometrical planes appear and the color tones became darker, announcing the appearance of black and white contrast. In this period, Knifer was still using black, blue, dark yellow, brown and white color. The color contrast is now achieved in the dynamics between black surfaces versus surfaces filled with other colors, which is close to the rhythm of the meander. In the compositions, black color is dominating in lesser range than in meanders, as there is an equal division between colored and black fields that is providing more optical dynamism but not a psychological one. In the period, from 1957-58, we can see the reduction of colors and the beginning of the orthogonal system of the painting field division which will be characteristic for meanders.

In this early phase of Knifer's creation, we can see the indications of the meander. We can notice elements that will appear in Knifer's later articulation of anti-painting through the geometrical language that he will later transform, connect or purify. Based on the analysis of Knifer paintings between the years 1952-1962, we can divide paintings into different categories, according to the changes in geometrical forms and reduction. In the first phase from 1952, there was still a presence of figuration, as after 1957, in the second phase, *Compositions* were characterized by colored broken geometrical forms which by 1959 became more purer in the aspect of geometrical form, rectangular, square, lines, circle, as well as color, black, white and grey. From 1959, in the third phase, paintings that can be seen as the predecessors of meander appear. In these paintings Knifer uses non-connected vertical and horizontal lines of different thickness, creating the dynamics similar to contraposition of surfaces of different tones present in the earlier second phase.

All these phases show how Knifer was slowly reducing elements in the painting to reach meander. To better understand the concept of meander, it is best to see the evolution of the geometrical motives in the oeuvre of Knifer. Between 1958 and 1959,

Knifer started drawing rectangles and circles on white paper as sketches for paintings, which later became self-contained.²³⁴ As art historian Maković said:

These filling elements generate a rather free rhythm while space is condensed, two-dimensional and frequently almost fluid. Hackled and pretty far apart from each other, the rectangles slowly begin to group into clusters that make a stretched scheme of a vertical-horizontal raster. In this way, the filling is better aligned to the frame and steady metrics becomes the basic rhythmic rule. Thus, the meander is born gradually through the elimination of all surpluses within the format. In addition, superfluous are those elements that disturb the steadiness of rhythm, that introduce confusion into the vertical-horizontal order and that make space ambiguous.²³⁵

From 1959, the forms became scarce as he paints circles, squares, rectangles on flat space of the canvas where they oppose black and white color producing reversed effects from positive to negative and vice versa. In this process, we can see a formula of abstraction close to Suprematism. In contrast with the earlier phase, forms became more geometrical and the surface appeared as an important part of the composition.²³⁶

The color also got reduced and became purer, consisting mostly of black, white and grey tones. The rhythm appears to be based between the surface and geometrical forms, square, lines, geometrical fragments, as well as between the shapes themselves. These geometrical systems now appear to be like positive and negative photographs, since the contrast is only based on the black and white color contrast. In the *Composition 7*, some geometrical forms resemble “empty”, since the shape of a square is done in white color, which leads to the notion of a void in the painting. The same method can be seen in the *K-16* from 1960 when there is a void in the shape of a white square. The same effect is accentuated in the painting *K-18a*, where the contrast between black and white square creates the appearance of the positive and negative representation of same geometrical form.

²³⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.64), Zagreb: MSU

²³⁵ *Ibidem.*, p.64

²³⁶ Pierre, A. (2001) , *Julije Knifer: Meandres*, (pp.26-27) Paris: Adam Biro

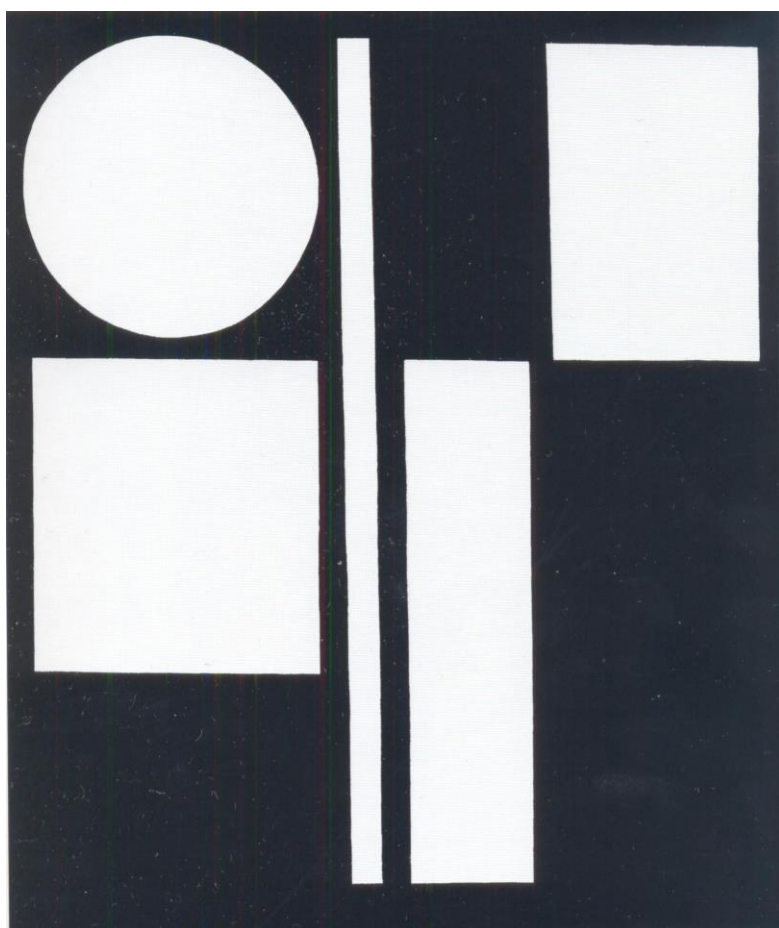


Figure 13. Julije Knifer, *K-18a*, 1960

Source: Maković, *Knifer*, Meandar, 2001, p.61

In 1959, Knifer was using different geometrical forms thus creating systems inside the painting and between elements of the painting, perhaps under the influence of Malevich's *Four Squares* and *Black and White Suprematist Composition* from 1915. As we can see, the forms and colors in Malevich paintings are already pure as he at that stage had already reached the Suprematism and thus purified his style, while Knifer was still searching for his expression in *Compositions*. Nevertheless, paintings and drawings from 1959 as *Composition 5*, *Composition 13*, *Composition 7*, *Composition 14* or *K-18a* or *K-16* have similarities and could be regarded as Suprematist compositions, having in mind the Suprematist elements represented as geometrical forms, square, line and circle. The difference is that the composition in Knifer's *Compositions* is more static, as there is no dynamism as in the colorful Suprematist phase of Malevich. These more static iconic compositions remind us of Suprematist paintings from the first phase *Black and White*, *Four Squares*, but still far

from the reach of the symbolic force of the *Black Square* which Knifer attains with meander in 1960.

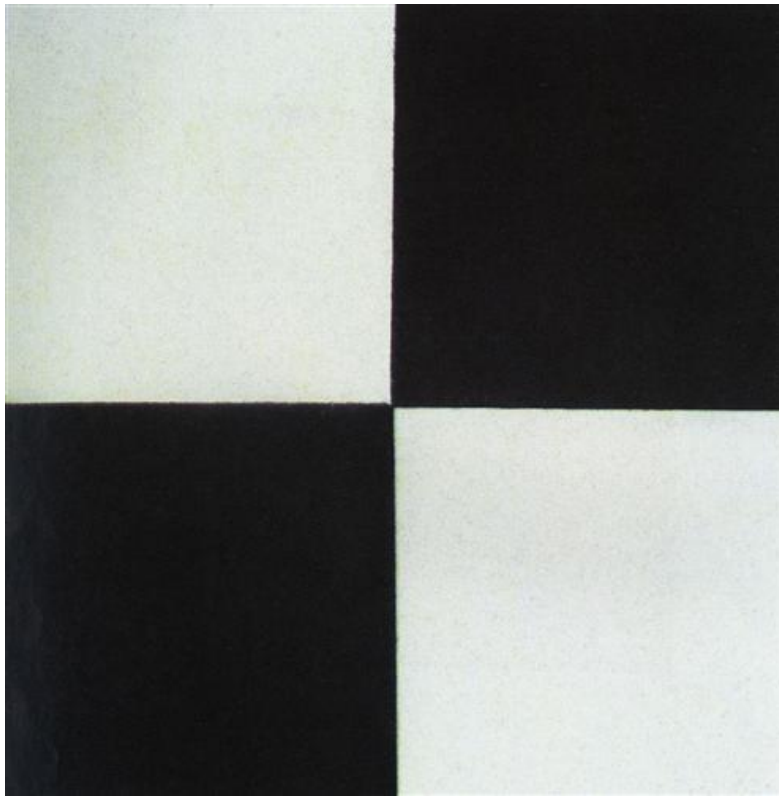


Figure 14. Kazimir Malevich, *Four Squares*, 1915

Source: <http://uploads3.wikiart.org/images/kazimir-malevich/four-square-1915.jpg>

While painting geometrical abstraction, Knifer was moving away from complicated towards the simple, towards as he said, anti-painting trying to present the presence of absence through non-objective painting. In this process of purification of color and form, we can see the biggest influence of Suprematism. In *Notes* Knifer described this process of reduction: “I moved from the complicated to simple. The painted layers were increasingly reduced. Colors were more or less homogenized in the grey, until finally the only black remained.”²³⁷

Suprematist painting is based on a relatively simple composition structure on the monochrome basis. By opposing colored geometrical surfaces on the canvas the relation between the surface and elements on the canvas is accented. Through

²³⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146) Zagreb: MSU

illusionistic relations, these surfaces created out of the geometrical elements give the impression as if they are floating on the canvas or they are exiting it. The geometrical elements seem as visually and abstract phenomena. Moreover, Malevich in the first phase of Suprematism often used geometrical shapes of cross, square and circle. In that sense, visual structures are deducted to visual signs and the sign system offers the visual effect.²³⁸ Characteristics similar to the second colored phase of Suprematism can be found in the work of Knifer when meander affirms itself as a sign, and when Knifer, in the 1970s, uses color and not monochromy.

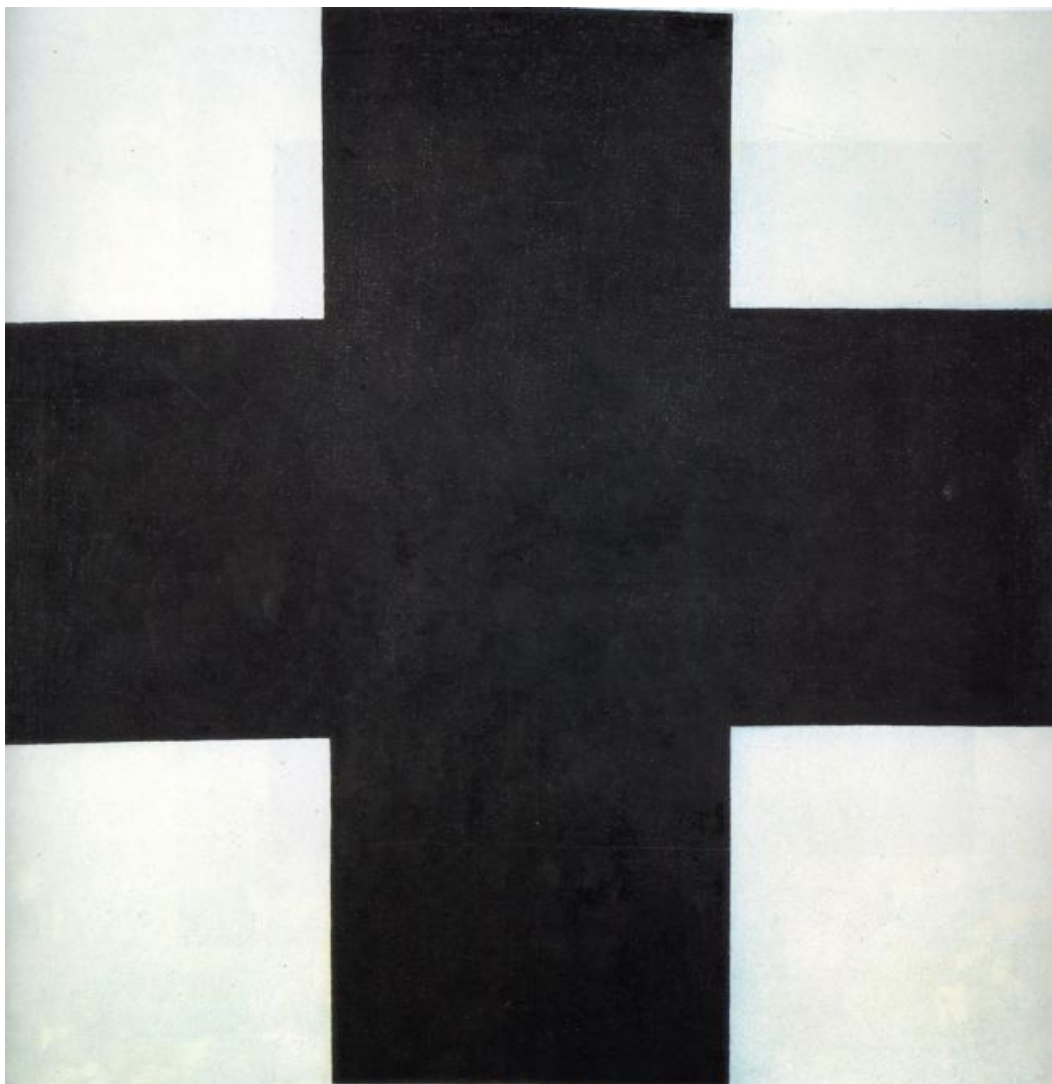


Figure 15. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Cross*, 1920

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cd/Black_Cross.jpg

²³⁸ Šuvaković M. (1998), *Estetika apstraktnog slikarstva*, (p.88) Beograd: Narodna knjiga Alfa

Already in this Knifer's first phase, we can notice two-dimensionality on the canvas and the similar Suprematist geometrical language on the paintings. Suprematist influence on Knifer is accented in the paintings *Composition 5, 13, 14* or 7 from 1959. Here Knifer created communication between geometrical elements on the painting by creating small universes or systems. In this phase, there was still no appearance of a form of meander and Knifer was more focused on the planes or surfaces superposing one onto another or creating black and white contrast similar to the first phase of Suprematism. These visual elements can be seen in *Composition 14* from 1959, where the impression of the void is created while the same geometrical shape of the same dimensions in black and white are repeated one next to each other. Planes or colored surfaces will become more important when Knifer achieves meander as they will represent the flow, rhythm of the meander and, as Knifer says in *Notes*: "Final product of one continuous process that is considered to be paintings and has the meaning of the definite document."²³⁹ Knifer, as we can see, referred to the elements of his paintings as planes, which represents the definition of anti-painting, composed out of extreme rhythm, extreme contrast created a form of the meander.

What brought Knifer close to Malevich was the search for reduced formal pure visual language to create anti-painting. In this search, Knifer goes towards the spiritualization of plastic theme like as Malevich did as well. In that sense, the plastic speech of pure geometric shapes in Knifer's paintings will not be based on the objective constructivist basis, but will strive toward subjectivity and spirituality.²⁴⁰

In the year 1959 Knifer started making anti-paintings: "In 1959, I considered I have to make one form of anti-painting."²⁴¹ Knifer reached his "zero state of painting" like Malevich, after which he continued creating different variations and applications of meander, but always referring to its spiritual meaning that was reached in 1959:

After 1959, everything is very simple but patient and directed. With me, the most important element in work is complete concentration, but also ultimate

²³⁹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp.137-144) Zagreb: MSU

²⁴⁰ Denegri, J (1969) Jedan prilog tumačenju slikarstva Julija Knifera, *Život umjentosti 1969*, no.9, (p.22), Zagreb

²⁴¹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p. 146) Zagreb: MSU

spiritual freedom; 1959. Then the facts started or followed with me. I think that from then on, I could start. And the facts were then minimum of means and minimum of shapes. The tendency toward minimum and according to form and content; the process of my work was taking place without oscillations and the evolution was going in the direction of complete disappearance of the painting. That was in 1959; in the year 1959, motivated by the idea of creating anti-painting I went by the method of radical reduction of means; According to the character of my work, to me, it is important to continue the logic of one flow that I started in 1959.”²⁴²

²⁴² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p. 146) Zagreb: MSU

4.2.2. MEANDER IN THE 1960s

In the early 1960s, Knifer had already found his expression in painting through geometrical abstraction. However, meander as a sign was still not fully affirmed. The geometric forms were not connected into a form of a meander. During the years 1959 and 1960, Knifer was still searching for an adequate geometrical form as can be seen in the collage *Untitled* from 1960/61 or *Compositions, K-16* from 1960. In these paintings, he created meander form with circles, squares and rectangles.²⁴³

Knifer started to paint first proto meanders in 1960, titled, at that time, *Composition*. Soon after, in 1961 that was no longer the case, as he started to title paintings *Meander*, which is one more sign of further affirmation of meander. According to Knifer, the first meander was formed on one drawing, but it was hidden by other “extras”. In that way the form of meander started to appear inside the drawings, combining the new symbol of meander together with other geometrical shapes, such as square and circle or geometrical symbols, as can be seen in *Composition 15, K-16, K-18a, K-16*. In these paintings, we can see the rhythm that will later be the most important feature in determining the meander flow and its form. In these early proto meander paintings, it is still hard to recognize meander. It is still hiding between the geometrical shapes, circle, square, lines, creating certain dynamics between them, giving the eye of the viewer the direction how to follow and to see the painting. At the same time, proto meander is separating the elements of the painting which was also being accented by the contrast between the surface of the painting and color of the forms.²⁴⁴ Maković described Knifer’s early paintings as:

These filling elements generate a rather free rhythm while space is considered, two-dimensional and frequently almost fluid. Hackled and pretty far from each other, the rectangles slowly begin to group into clusters that make a stretched scheme of a vertical horizontal raster. In this way, the filling is better aligned to the frame and steady metrics becomes the basic rhythm rule. Thus, meander is born gradually through the elimination of all surpluses within the format. And superfluous are those elements that disturb the steadiness of rhythm, that

²⁴³ Maković, Z. (2001) *Knifer* (pp.42-42) Zagreb: Meandar

²⁴⁴ Ibidem., pp.42-43

introduce the confusion into the vertical-horizontal order and that make space ambiguous.²⁴⁵

Around 1960, geometrical shapes like square or circle were less and less present in the painting, and they completely disappear by 1964.²⁴⁶ Around that time Knifer started to use only vertical and horizontal lines of different width in black and white color that were forming a certain balance, unbalance with a certain kind of rhythm on a painting. As we can see, now paintings are not as static as before. In this phase, paintings are still titled *Compositions* and he still has not purified the sign of meander.

Paintings *Compositions 17, III* and *2* from 1960-62 were still not titled meander, even though the paintings clearly represented linear meander. Perhaps the notion of calling paintings meanders still had not been clear in Knifer's mind. To understand how and why he started to title his compositions meanders; we have to see what Igor Zidić wrote in his text for Knifer's exhibition in Rovinj in 2013. In this text; Zidić recalls his conversation with Knifer suggesting him that the title *Composition* is no longer working to represent his paintings since the verbal language of his painting is now different since he started to paint what will later be called meander. Zidić directly says that in fact he suggested Knifer in 1961 to title his paintings meanders, as composition was not precise enough for the new appearing form. Zidić stated that the title meander was more appropriate since it better represented the geometricity of the angularity of form. Furthermore, Zidić mentions the division of the words meander and composition onto syllables as me-an-dar and kom-po-zi-ci-ja. Here Zidić stresses the importance of the ending meander syllable -dar because it suggests something closed, hard and specific in opposition to kom-po-zi-ci-ja that sounded more open in structure. Knifer took Zidić's suggestion since the form was reduced, so the title should be also reduced of generality, reduced to the pure naming. From this, we can see that meander in its pure form appeared before Knifer decided to title his paintings as a meander.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.64) Zagreb: MSU

²⁴⁶ Zidić, I. (2013) *Julije Knifer*, (p.4) Galerija Adris

²⁴⁷ *Ibidem*. p.4

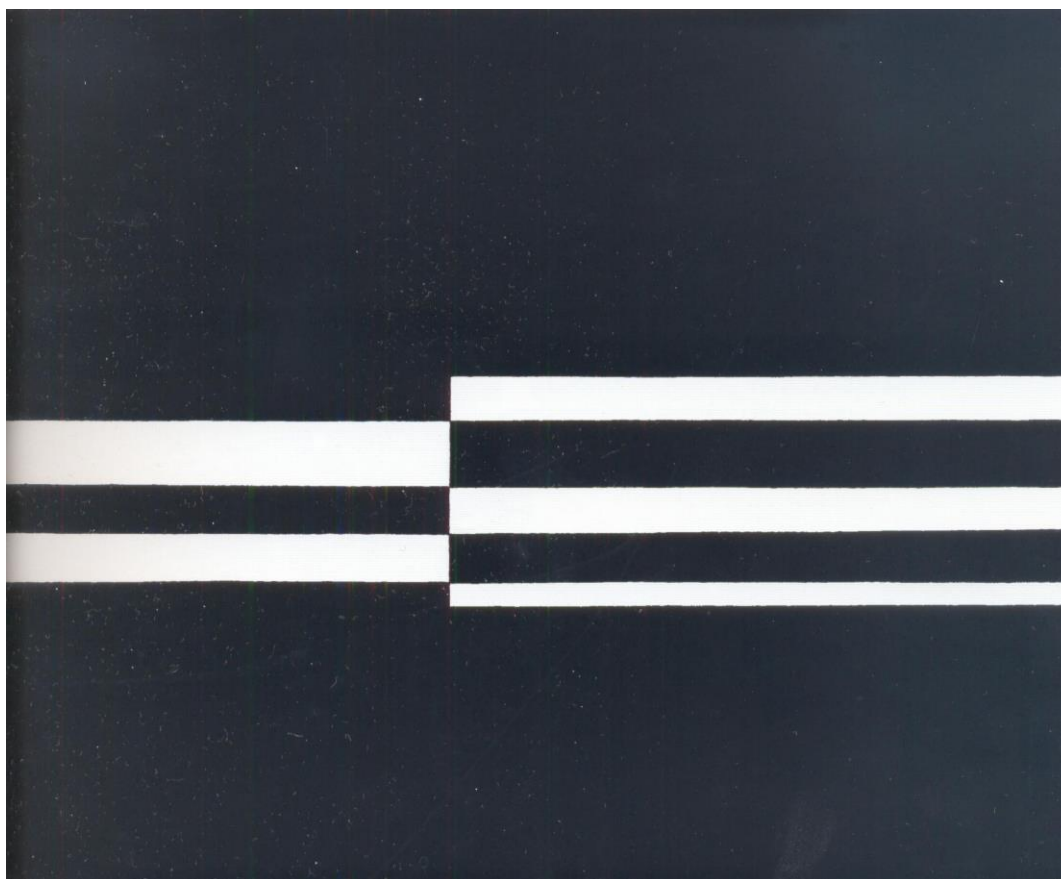


Figure 16. Julije Knifer, *Composition 17*, 1960

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.125

In 1962, Knifer made numerous drawings on the same format of the paper. Each format contained eight horizontally laid rectangles with black, white and grey fields. Observing each sheet separately, it is almost possible to read a real art story: white, black and grey interchangeably serve as filling material, changing their place within the frame, thus, they acquire different sculptural, psychological, and emotional meaning. The black color is not always equally heavy and white color equally light. In other words, through careful variations of almost the same filling elements, a different context emerges and the meaning of its each part depends primarily on the whole. These and many other drawings have been created in a continuous time sequence day in day out, so we can perceive them as a painting diary of sorts.²⁴⁸ In that sense, the color starts to be important as its darker or brighter spectrums signify different states, different facts, that make a part of the whole meander opus. They do

²⁴⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.64), Zagreb: MSU

not relate just to one painting, and it is these small differences in the color rhythm or structure that will make variations of meander and create the opus of meanders.

Having in mind the titles of his first geometrical abstract works *Composition* and the dynamics of the elements and colors in the paintings, it is logical to suggest that Malevich's influence on Knifer started before the creation of the first meanders. Probably this had already happened in the phase when Knifer was playing with the elements of color, form and rhythm, just like musicians with tones in music trying to find his true expression, the expression of his spirit. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that even though the color was drastically reduced in comparison to from the first *Compositions*, still the used geometrical shapes were mostly square, triangle and circle, just as in the suprematist language of Malevich.

Arnaud Pierre sees the morphology of meander similar to the grid of another abstract artist Mondrian, since it is structured by verticals and horizontals, and the whole canvas is dedicated only to one motif. The difference Pierre sees in the system of opposition that in Knifer's meander symbolizes movement while Mondrian's grid is static. Intuition is the next thing that connects Knifer and Mondrian since it decides almost everything in the painting, the lengths and stretch of meander, the density of segments, the way they end, etc. Pierre defines meander as a line that in its bending goes through its random maximums and minimums, which create, peaks of different heights more or less loose or narrow. In his book *Julije Knifer: les images du temps* Pierre states that Knifer was trying to place his personal conscience through meander. Pierre sees Knifer's oeuvre as a period of long rediscovery that was necessary so that he can appropriate this universal form and make it individual. In his opinion, Knifer really succeeded this really rare thing that is a total identification of one form with the personality of its creator.²⁴⁹

When in the spring of 1960 Knifer removed the "extras", *Meander No. 1* appeared whereby the means of reduction the flow of time and one monotonous rhythm was attained. That same year Knifer made eight meanders. By the use of the minimal resources and ultimate contrasts, black and white, vertical and horizontal, Knifer

²⁴⁹ Pierre, A. (2001), *Julije Knifer: Meandres*, (p.45) Paris:Adam Biro

reached the monotonous rhythm and proclaimed that he will paint only meanders from now on. From that time on, it appeared as if in his opus there was no development, just changes in the variations of meander, that can be justified by the quote: “Probably I have already made my last paintings and maybe I haven’t done my first ones.”²⁵⁰

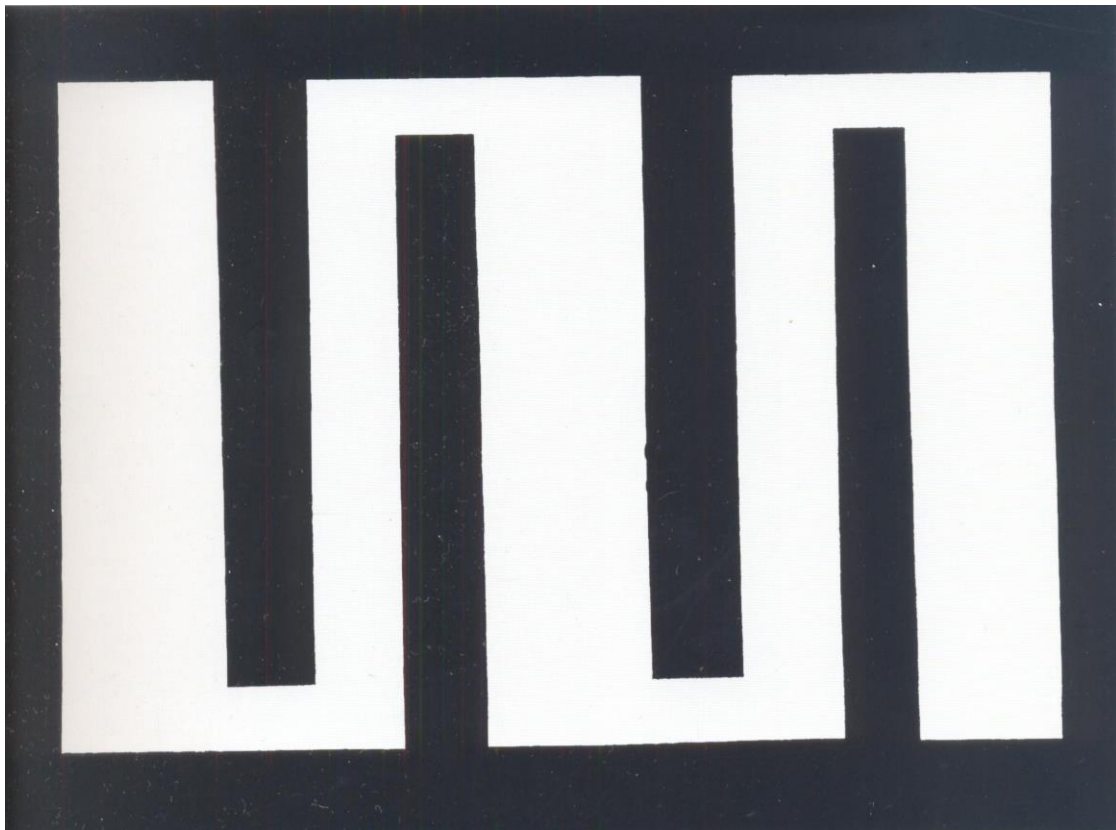


Figure 17. Julije Knifer, *Meander No.1*, 1960

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.80

The importance of rhythm in meander is also seen in the studies from 1961 called *Rhythm*, made by ink on paper depicting meander. Zidić says that Stravinsky’s idea of repetition and reduction just affirmed Knifer’s thought, but it did not initiate Knifer’s idea of creating a rhythm in a painting.²⁵¹ Krešimir Purgar argues that rhythm is used in the anti-painting in Knifer’s context to draw the attention away from the dimension of meaning to the dimension of duration which is also one of the characteristics of meander, as its form is infinite. Besides the influence of Stravinsky that draws Knifer

²⁵⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146) Zagreb: MSU

²⁵¹ Zidić, I. (2013) *Julije Knifer*, (p.16) Galerija Adris

toward minimalism and reduction, Purgar mentions the existentialist influence of Camus and Sartre since they both wrote with monotonous slow rhythm, which is present in meander paintings and in the Knifer's texts as for example *Notes*, *Banal diaries*, etc.²⁵² Furthermore, Igor Zidić explained the use of rhythm in meander:

The meander is as static as any random cross-section of a movement but what surpasses stagnancy is the suspicion that it will not be possible to speak about just one Knifer's painting, but about many at the same time: the meander is not repeated, it is continued in a logical progression of the rhythm that is the inner, load-bearing essence of this entire existence. Where the decoratively directed geometrics have created an artificial rhythm, a rhythm out of their hand, Knifer had been a captured, unfree creator: let us say that the rhythm in him that had determined him as a person painted his pictures. Thus by partly showing proof of his non-freedom, he could lift the weight of liberation through creation.²⁵³

Inclination towards the rhythm and monotony in the painting would be the most important composition elements of meander paintings that have been achieved through the reduction seen from the very beginning of his artistic creation. Before enrolling in The Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, Knifer drew his face on paper every morning for three years. In this exercise, we can discover the same characteristics we find in the meander painting, monotony and repetition. By drawing self-portraits every day, Knifer discovered he did not want to create a single painting, but the opus that is self-sufficient. An art critic Maković concludes what is the most important about meanders is repetition, the variations of the same formula.²⁵⁴ Knifer explained his motivation:

My primary goal was to make an anti-painting in a process of reduction of form and content. Because absurdity is a very specific form of freedom for me, in this process towards a certain form of anti-painting I went to absurdity.

²⁵² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.230) Zagreb: MSU

²⁵³ *Ibidem*, p.89

²⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p.89

My whole work process is actually a stream without oscillations, with the aim to achieve monotony, which is the simplest and most expressive rhythm.²⁵⁵

What brought Knifer to meander was the process of reduction wherein the continuous sequence on the rectangular paper, he recorded endless variants of meander symbol. From this exploration of geometrical forms, meander crystallized itself as the final shaping solution that represented a system without beginning or end with constant movement, perpetual motion, constant change and impermanence. Meander was depicted in black-white or white-black, offered endless possibilities of application through its rhythmic series that will later be seen in collages, sculpture, wall paintings, murals, etc.²⁵⁶ Zvonko Maković described Knifer's work process:

Every day he has noted endless variants of meander symbols into rectangular fields. We could understand these notations as projects for paintings as well as independent works. However, their true meaning lies in the whole, in their independence. Perceived in that way, they highlight minimal differences more clearly and substantially; the highest value of Knifer's work is in minimal important differences in one and the same state of things, within which the individual and the finished is by no means convincing. What outlines the extension of such a state is the awareness, which is able to spot tiny differences in the transformation and vanishing of reality.²⁵⁷

The reduction can also be seen in the renunciation of all allusions to the representational world as well as illusionistic elements of the painterly language. It is also a reason why the choice of colors is reduced to two colors black and white, to express the extreme contrast. Knifer said that the colors more or less blended into greyness until he came to the end, referring to meander's black and white contrast. In the second half of the 1950s, Knifer made hundreds of drawings that by the means of reduction lead to the form and shape of a meander. The reduction was referred to everything that was redundant, "extras", everything that would disturb the regularity of the rhythm that would introduce inference and confusion into the vertical and

²⁵⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146), Zagreb: MSU

²⁵⁶ *Ibidem* p.29

²⁵⁷ *Ibidem*. p.64

horizontal order, making the space ambiguous. In that sense Knifer wrote about the absence:

Đuro Tiljak was telling me how he learned from Malevich to go from figurative to abstract. Malevich was explaining to his students that they had to stare for a long time at what was in front of them if it was a window, pot, vase or whichever object. It was necessary to look until all objects disappeared, dissolved. After that, it was needed to transfer this state of mind on the surface. Which meant to paint the absence of things.²⁵⁸

The important influences for Knifer during the 1960s were musical manifestations such as the contemporary festival of *Musical biennale* first organized in 1961 in Zagreb. This festival attracted artists such as Cage, Ligeti, Non and Kagle, and featured the atonal music of Schonberg and Stockhausen. The rhythm appearing in the music of Cage, Schonberg and especially Stravinsky inspired Knifer for the creation of his anti-paintings.²⁵⁹

At the same time in 1960, series of exhibitions called New Tendencies, part of the same *New Tendencies* movement, took place in Zagreb. These manifestations were of an international character and besides exhibitions, they included publications and symposiums that are nowadays famous for their representation of mathematically programmed and kinetic art. During this time, from 1961-1973, a total of five exhibitions were organized by the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb.²⁶⁰

The idea of New Tendencies was to synthesize artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s and to present all different but similar artistic expressions that came from the same spiritual climate and historical circumstances. This movement was more in sync with the program of the neo-constructivist group Exat'51 than with Gorgona, since it

²⁵⁸ Pierre, A.(2001), *Julije Knifer: Meandres*, (p.25) Paris: Adam Biro (Đuro Tiljak m'a raconté comment il a appris auprès de Malevitch ce cheminement du figurative au non-figuratif. Malevitch expliquait aux étudiants qu'ils devaient regarder très longtemps ce qui se trouvait devant eux. Il s'agissait d'une fenêtre, d'un pot, d'un vase, d'un objet quelconque. On devait regarder le tour jusqu'à ce que les objets disparaissent, se dissolvent. Et puis il fallait transposer cet état d'esprit sur la surface, sur l'image. Donc peindre l'absence des choses) – Translation mine

²⁵⁹ Maković Z. (2001), *Knifer*, (p.22) Zagreb: Meandar

²⁶⁰ Denegri, J (2000) *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.300) Zagreb: Horetzky

presented art that was more constructivist and kinetic. Nevertheless, in the organization of these exhibitions, art historians that were members of Gorgona, Radoslav Putar, Matko Meštrović and Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos collaborated, while Julije Knifer exhibited one of his meander paintings.²⁶¹ Knifer later exhibited meander paintings at other international exhibitions that were representing more Neo-Constructivist movements such as were New Tendencies, which was the reason why sometimes his paintings would also be characterized as Neo-Constructivist which clearly was not the case.

This first exhibition of New Tendencies was held in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1961. It is important to mention that this exposition was nontypical for the New Tendencies movement, which was also the reason why Knifer was there exhibiting his meander painting. The idea behind the first exhibition was to overcome the Informel movement and to present the artists that saw Russian Constructivists as their predecessors. The second idea was to present kinetic art and art that was aiming to erase the boundaries between art and everyday life, which can easily be attributed to the creation of the group Gorgona. The Croatian representatives at the first exhibition were Knifer and Ivan Picelj, a member of the neo-constructivist group Exat'51, whose group members were also the organizers of these manifestations.²⁶²

This first exhibition was of a different character than the later ones since the works that were presented were more spiritual and meditative, combining reduction and metaphysics, which were the characteristics of Knifer's oeuvre as well. Denegri mentions that: "The works emitted the mood of artistic solipsism and artistic negativity as a way of understanding and behaving" which as well perfectly describes the art of meanders. International groups Zero and Asimuth that are similar in their approach to Gorgona also participated in the first exhibition. In that sense, the first exhibition of New Tendencies was somewhat non-typical, since it did not have typical kinetic, optical, constructivist approach towards art.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Denegri, J (2000) *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.300) Zagreb: Horetzky

²⁶² Ibidem., p.300

²⁶³ Ibidem., p.300

Around 1960 Knifer joined the non-formal group Gorgona which was going to influence him more spiritually than visually. This period is more important for the spiritual development, for the affirmation of his “Gorgonic spirit”. Gorgona’s influence will be later seen in Knifer’s work in an expression of nihilism, absurd, emptiness, monotony and existentialism. This influence will be seen in meander paintings, *Banal Diaries*, collective action *Tübingen Meander*, in the affirmation of the meander as a sign through the radicalization of an idea through inner structure of artistic language, in the negation of the painting approach, etc.

Gorgona was not a typical group, as each member had its own way of artistic expression, but what united them in the group was the “Gorgonic spirit”. While Knifer was part of the group Gorgona, the form of meander had already appeared in his paintings, and from 1961, he started to title his paintings *Meander*, as previously they were called *Compositions*. When we compare Knifer’s work to other Gorgona group members, we can see that he was the only one that was creating by the means of geometry. In the visual sense perhaps at first, Knifer seems closer to the neo-constructivist group Exat’51 that used geometrical shapes and also titled their painting *Compositions*. On the other hand, this is as far as the comparison goes since the meaning and significance of Knifer’s work carry spiritual dimension unlike the artworks of the group Exat’51 that was neo-constructivist in approach. During the 1960s Knifer continued to evolve the idea of meander as anti-painting, creating more complex or simple versions of the meander that can be defined as a more regular type or more rhythmically open meander painting.

Since its conception, meander had remained a constant in Knifer’s painting system, a synonym of his artistic identity by which Knifer gained two historical advantages. One was coming from the non-representational, illusion-free character of his paintings, and the second from conceptualization of his method, reached by limiting himself to black-white meander, by reducing the painting to the infinite repetition of a symbol, to the sublimation of the radical will. This method of semantically identifying a painting with a chosen sign was not a single pictorial solution, but as a part of an a priori adopted the system or the whole meander oeuvre.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ *Gorgona*, (1977) Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art

When we look at the early meander paintings, we can notice that the form of meander during the existence of group Gorgona is more dynamic and more complex than it was after the group dissolved in 1968 when Knifer started to use color, or in 1971 when he started to paint meanders on large formats. In the meander paintings from 1961 until 1967, during the Gorgona period, we can distinguish more complex compositions of meander, where the flow of meander is more difficult to follow. At the same time, there are a few paintings where meander is clearly formed, as it will be the case from 1967 onwards.

In early 1960, we can still notice geometrical elements, rectangles and circles on meander paintings, that in contrast with white or black background play an optical trick since they are made out of opposite color being white or black. There are two types of meanders in this phase: meanders that are more rectangular and closed and meanders that are more rhythmically open. There are even examples when Knifer would build a whole meander form leaving the right angled members of meander unconnected as they would give an impression of being sequences of right angles brought close to each other rather than meander units of the disconnected meander. Here we can also notice two ways of meander creation; one is when meander is a line that moves through the contrasted background and other when meander is shaped as a visual form out of connected rectangles contrasting with the background.²⁶⁵

In the early meander paintings, meander has more angles, meaning that the rhythm is faster. The rhythm can be broken up into ten or more angles as in *Meander 9* from 1962, while in later phases the form of meander breaks mostly two times, meaning that the rhythm is slower. Another difference is that in the early phase, meander is mostly formed by the use of space between the rectangles or by the white/black line going through the opposite color meaning white/black background. This in the later phases will not be the case since meander will dominate the canvas and not the background color. In the later phases, meander will be divided with mostly two-three lines and the background of the canvas will totally disappear by then, leading to a bigger affirmation of meander as a sign.

²⁶⁵ Maković, Z., (2001), *Knifer*, (p.66) Zagreb: Meandar

While being a member of Gorgona, Knifer created endless combinations by varying meander as in series *Meander 1-24* from 1960-65. In 1961, he made anthological painting *Meander in the Corner* where painting steps out from the surface into space, as Knifer stopped building composition and started conceiving it. This painting is important for the understanding of later events in the 1970s when Knifer made murals with meander sign, and when this conceptual attempt became real. Also, *Meander in the Corner* is a way to define the difference between the painting and anti-painting as well as to dominate the space where the painting is situated. In this way, *Meander in the Corner* is not a painting in a traditional sense of the word because the actual space between two portions of the meander is a constituent part of the painting.²⁶⁶

At the place where this linear flow breaks and where it goes from one surface to another, jumping an angle of ninety degrees, Knifer puts a white caesura, a kind of dilatation that puts an irregularity into the rhythmical structure of the meander. This increased white gap is supposed to stress the transition from one wall to another. In this way, *Meander in the Corner* is not just a painting but a work that implies a real space, and it can be freely said that with this, Knifer set out from the plane surface into the setting.²⁶⁷

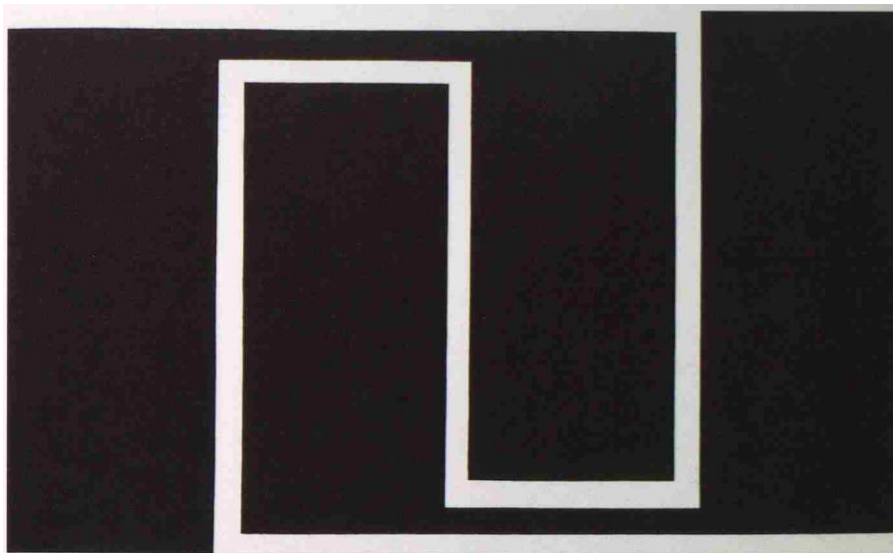


Figure 18. Julije Knifer, *Meander 15*, 1964

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.127

²⁶⁶ Makovič, Z (2001) *Knifer* (p.70) Zagreb: Meandar

²⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.76

We can notice that for Maković, Knifer's understanding of notions of painting and anti-painting is more formal than semiotic. Knifer seems to apply the concept of painting for the canvas or any other traditional medium while the concept of anti-painting is applied only when this classical medium is used in an unconventional sense as in *Meander in the Corner*. In this painting, the canvas is situated on two different parts of the wall connected in the middle, in the corner, where the conventional painting is breaking into two parts. This corner point is smoothed by a white caesura, a kind of dilatation that puts an irregularity into the rhythmical structure of the meander, and stresses the transition from one wall to another. It is also significant that the white corner line is not the same width as the lines dictating the rhythm or the flow of meander, which highlights this division between two walls even more. *Meander in the Corner* is not just a painting, but also a work that implies real space, a way that Knifer uses to set out from the plane into the setting.²⁶⁸

The painting *Meander in the Corner* is composed out of 4 vertical white lines coming from the top, and 4 white lines coming from the bottom that separates 9 connected black rectangles into a constant flow representing meander. On the right side of the corner there are 5 rectangles and 5 white lines including the one in the corner connecting the canvases, and on the left, 4 rectangles and 3 lines. We can see that the balance of the painting is more on the right side concerning the length of the canvas and the number of geometrical elements. The meander on the left side starts positioned towards down and on the right side finishes facing up. The level of the meander is the same through the whole painting, and there is the same amount of white background from on the top and lower part of the canvas. The painting appears to be more like a mural because the flow continues in spite of the corner, also the white background and frame mend with the white wall onto which the painting is positioned.

Meander in the Corner is an iconic painting and cannot be compared to any meander painting in Knifer's oeuvre. If we compared it to the mural Knifer painted in the University library in Dijon in 1990, we could see that meander is also placed on two

²⁶⁸ Maković, Z. (2001) *Knifer*, (p.76) Zagreb: Meandar

sides of the wall. The difference is that the corner of the wall is painted completely in white representing a rectangular since the lines are black and rectangles white. By neglecting the corner in Dijon's mural and not marking it like he did in the *Meander in the Corner*, the white rectangular is illusionistic appropriating the corner like it is flat, and there is not a marker of a corner in a role of connecting two canvases.



Figure 19. Julije Knifer, *Meander in the Corner*, 1961

Source: <http://studentski.hr/cdn/uploads/2014/06/80c8bd7u9jl168kp2cvxx8rr.jpg>

Meander in the Corner is one of the most important paintings of meander oeuvre. This painting represents meander coming out of the borders of the canvas stepping into space from one side, and on the other side, the title reminds us of the *Black Square* that was strategically positioned in the corner, as well at the first Suprematist exhibition 0.10 in 1915 in order to represent the icon of a new time.²⁶⁹ Was *Meander is the Corner* a new icon that Knifer wanted to represent with the same analogy? Since the painting was made in 1961, this is possible because it was the time when

²⁶⁹ Ellis, *Man: The Magic Square*
<<http://apps.acsaarch.org/resources/proceedings/indexsearch.aspx?txtKeyword1=%22Ellis%2C+Eugenia+victoria%22&ddField1=1>>

Knifer affirmed the meander sign in his paintings that from then on became the constant in his painting system, the synonym of his identity. In that sense, while being a member of Gorgona, Knifer presented his icon which will continue even after the group Gorgona falls apart.

In that way, *Meander in the Corner* can be seen as a statement as it was Malevich's *Black Square*. When we take in the account the year 1961 when *Meander in the Corner* was made and we know that proto meander started appearing during 1959, it is clear that in two years, meander crystallized as a formula. In that sense, connected rectangles divided by vertical or horizontal, black or white lines reached its manifesto in the painting *Meander in the Corner* which would predict meander's future as a flow that goes through all the obstacles from one wall to another, from one material to another. We could say that what was *Black Square* for Suprematism, a source from where other Suprematist elements came, *Meander in the Corner* was the same for all future applications, representations or variations of a meander. This painting announces the future representation of meander in sculpture, in relief, on the wall, since it appears to be pushing the limits and approaching to a wall painting. It represents an action of meander's breaking free from the canvas limits and spreading into space and other materials. Meander from the 1970s starts to appear everywhere in private spaces and exteriors, in school, on the street, university library, and metro. Meander, after breaking free in the *Meander in the Corner*, begins to be a part of everyday life.

If we look at this painting from the existentialist point of view, we could say that this painting is a representation of meander's freedom, its emancipation. Freedom was a very important element in Knifer's life and work, and with this painting he gave meander its freedom, as later meander will conquer the space with large dimensions on the walls, will spread in the space as a sculpture, its flow will be continued on the paper as in the anti-magazine *Gorgona No.2*, *Banal diaries*, etc. In that sense, *Meander in the Corner* represents the true nature of meander, as an independent whole that is also a part of a larger meander system.

If we regard paintings *Meander in the Corner* and *Black Square* as starting points of Knifer and Malevich's creation, we can also connect Knifer with the notion of zero

point of painting. In the brochure for the 0.10 exhibition, Malevich declared that he transformed himself in the zero of form when he discovered the world of Suprematism. Probably the same happened to Knifer when he purified meander sign as from then on, as he says, there was no past or future, just the present: “Maybe this is absurd, but when I attained something firm, a foothold, I stopped thinking of the future and the past began to fade quickly. The past started to turn into a bad dream and the future became unimportant.”²⁷⁰

In the eastern spiritual tradition of Tantra, the mathematical point of zero dimension is a representation of the consciousness that signifies the starting point of the unfolding of consciousness, as well as the last point of its ultimate integration. This point is called bindu, and places at the center of the yantra, which is a visual tool, used for meditation that serves as a representation of some aspect of divine and is a pure geometric form without any iconographic representation.²⁷¹ In that sense, both *Black Square* and meander served as a method to open human consciousness and reach other dimensions of existence.



Figure 20. Exposition 0.10, St. Petersburg, 1915

Source: <https://helaniemoore.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/malevich.jpg>

²⁷⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.151) Zagreb: MSU

²⁷¹ Ellis, *Man: The Magic Square*

<<http://apps.acsaarch.org/resources/proceedings/indexsearch.aspx?txtKeyword1=%22Ellis%2C+Eugenia+victoria%22&ddField1=1>>

When we look at the Suprematist paintings and meander, we see that space is an important part of the composition. As we can see, space in both cases is flat, two dimensional, as both artists use the space to achieve their ideas, and at the same time to establish some kind of a new order and to show new ways of existence. Ljerka Mifka described Malevich and Knifer artworks as a:

A lonely experience in whose realm a metaphor of this kind ripens. It will appear to us in the overall work of the artist as the initiator of a vision that in its beginnings, often maybe even unconsciously, contained the essence of its aim, attainable maybe only in remote future. From the dispersion of the world from which every artist emerges in order to leave just one specific trace in the entire universe with his work, it is necessary to recognize or imagine a solid foundation of the world on which his metaphor will acquire the dimensions of the cosmic reality it testifies of.²⁷²

In the article *Spatial Determination of Julije Knifer's Meander* Ljerka Mifka uses the adjective cosmic which is very important for the Malevich's opus. As we can see, this term is also important for Knifer. He also, as Malevich, builds special space inside which it is possible to conquer entire space of the world. Mifka mentions that an idea can contain the densest perceptions if it is fully realized in a work. We can see the realization of this in the works of Malevich and Knifer that share similar spiritual ideas to find a viewpoint that is important enough to overcome the direct observation. Furthermore, Mifka mentions notions that are completely existentialist, such as absence and existence that she sees in the maximum of a minimum of contrasts, and in the opened border of space where being can penetrate. She finds the paradox of Knifer's oeuvre in the constant of transience that is found in the change of the constantly changing meander.²⁷³

Meander can also be analyzed in the context of positive and negative volume that Knifer repeats in its continuity and then unexpectedly stops. This can be compared to

²⁷² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.117) Zagreb: MSU, Zagreb

²⁷³ *Ibidem.*, p.117

the existentialist view where meander is depicting the artist's life stages, and stopped by certain events or by a change that at the end is the only constant in life in general. As Mifka described meander:

Maybe meander is Knifer's ornamental theme, but within this ornament the entire relation to life contained in the artist takes place. First he lets it flow freely, then he freezes it in a single scene, and this scene will again be the entire stage for the next one.²⁷⁴

With his meanders, Knifer expresses not geometry, not objectivity, not the space of the world, but his subjectivity and the feeling of the space of the world. Further on Mifka described Knifer's meander paintings as:

This is the destiny of this vertical spirit and its Pythagorean instruments: to be a builder without material, the architect of the unreal. Julije Knifer could not but record his desperate paradox position; the spirit of Mies and the means of a painter that have led this art to a higher catharsis, and it finally reached outside of the space where our disputes on painting facts take place, renouncement has reduced, devastated and confirmed his work, growing into a moral fact. Julije Knifer's poetry is not founded on the harmony of colors the clippings of geometrics academic seriousness, and the taste of purists the derivatives of upbringing.²⁷⁵

In Suprematism, the notion of cosmos is connected with the idea of infinite space inviting the spectator to meditate on the cosmos in a generally spiritual way. This is most evident in the *Black Square*, where the square represents the feeling and the white field the void behind the feeling. The same feeling occurs when we look at meanders on white background. Space in Knifer's paintings, as well as the mass, represent at the same time the maximum and minimum of volume. Space at the same time, can be closed and opened. It can be a part of the construction of the composition and creation of the order in the painting. Knifer created his cosmos through his

²⁷⁴ *Uncompromising*, (p.120), Zagreb: MSU

²⁷⁵ *Ibidem.*, p.88

persistence of recreating the meander for more than 40 years. The reality, according to Knifer, is always present in the same form and its modifications are slightly noticeable, meaning that meander is not represented as a passing of time but the essence of change.²⁷⁶



Figure 21. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915

Source:http://artemique.com/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/kazimir_malevich_black_square.jpg

Meander's progression can be stopped, it can stay in suspension or continue after a short break. Meander can start from the edge of a canvas. In its flow, it can stick to the border of the canvas or keep its distance by creating a floating effect. Meander can

²⁷⁶ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.113) Zagreb: MSU

cover up the whole surface or detach from it as an emblem as well.²⁷⁷ In that way, meander can be seen as a part of a system, while at the same time it represents the system. This system Mifka defined as:

In two directions vertically and horizontally, he has placed the entire world, that which grows and that which disappears. In its nature meander is linear, but in Knifer's work, it emerges as determination, as a closed unity that tightly protects its core, separates one flow from other, delineating and forming it. That forming could be called a rational perspective because it does not feature coming close of two points, but establishes its own law between them: the law of caesura.²⁷⁸

Space and the space of the painting become identical as the object of non-stopping contemplation loses its original meaning, while the inner picture crystalizes itself more and more in this process of transcendental reduction of phenomena, where Knifer is painting borderline situations that are represented by the flow of meander.²⁷⁹

Karl Jaspers, an existentialist philosopher alongside with other existentialists, considered that to exist means to be in situations. Under borderline situation, Jaspers considered unexpected events that we as humans encounter, but this situation in his opinion, cannot be dealt with rational knowledge that we use in everyday situations but with radical change in attitude in one's normal ways of thinking, and by becoming the Existenz we potentially are.²⁸⁰ The same borderline situations Knifer mentioned in *Notes*:

The process of work and thought, i.e. my process of thought and work strived and was directed towards borderline situations; Motivated by that goal, I chose a method of reducing the means of expression, while in the process of the procedure I sought borderline contrasts between black and white, vertical and horizontal; Using the method of reducing forms and colors I reached the ultimate borderline forms of simplicity; My intentions were directed

²⁷⁷ Pierre, A.(2001), *Julije Knifer: Meandres*, (p.49) Paris: Adam Biro

²⁷⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.120) Zagreb: MSU

²⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.113

²⁸⁰ Oppy, *Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Religion*, p.125, <<http://philpapers.org/rec/OPPTPO-2>>

exclusively at the rhythm of ultimate borderline elements (black and white, horizontal-vertical); The external form of painting is the consequence of the intention to use some means that yield the final form of painting in the way of the procedure to the anti-painting, and this form was supposed to result in the anti-painting.²⁸¹

Following this quotation, we can regard all these elements of anti-painting reduction, repetition, minimalism, monochromy, rhythm as existentialist symbols or means to achieve the freedom Knifer was striving for. Borderline situations are key situations of existence, when we make decisions, and in that sense they are represented on the canvas as facts which in the end create the form of meander as Knifer says in *Notes*: “I would like to start from the essence; For me this is a series of facts that make a meander or a series of meander, which are in the end only just one meander.”²⁸² We can see that Knifer was following the existentialist philosophy since he was avoiding doctrine and ideology, but avoided intruding on the lives and boundaries of others with his way of thinking saying in *Notes*: “I do not want to change the world, culture, civilization and especially the relation to art; I did not paint so that the paintings could serve someone else, they served me.”²⁸³

In this context, a borderline situation represents, what meander represents with its rhythm, the flow of life, together with another borderline situation, death, also a part of this life. Knifer was influenced in his work by the philosophers and writers who wrote about Existentialism and Absurd, mostly by the works of Sartre, Camus and Beckett. This can also be seen in his written texts *Notes*, *Banal Diaries*, *A Petitionary Letter to the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb*, *Notes* where he used the same literary structures as repetition, absurd, irony and nothingness. In Knifer’s painting and writing, we can notice existentialist feeling together with the conviction that nothing essentially changes, which is, in the end, expressed through meander and its variations that keep the same essence through all the changes.

²⁸¹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.150) Zagreb: MSU

²⁸² *Ibidem.*, p.146

²⁸³ *Ibidem.*, p.152

Existentialism disavows a sense of “pattern” in the universe, a grand scheme in which we all play a part. In that way, it is understandable why one meander painting is just a part of a whole meander opus, and since it represents just a part of the one whole system. Knifer never fully explained the meaning of meander. Instead, he followed the existentialist premise that there is no ultimate meaning and all people have to forge their own meaning for themselves, as to him the interpretation of meander was not important: “Rhythm and duration were very important to me, and if a painting of mine ever suggested a sign or significance, it was merely an accident. I wanted to achieve a course of time, if possible, a monotonous flow.”²⁸⁴

Freedom as another existentialist notion was extremely important to Knifer. In *Notes*, he repeated many times how important the spiritual freedom was for him: “For me the most important element in my work is to be completely focused and also to enjoy full spiritual freedom.”²⁸⁵ Knifer admitted that he freed himself through painting, as he was striving for his freedom in the domain of arts and painting, and not in the social or political context: “My primary aim was to make an anti-painting by means of reduction of form and content. Since for me absurdity is a very definite form of freedom; in that process; I reached for absurdity.”²⁸⁶ Knifer attained his freedom in 1950 when he decided to become a painter; and from that moment on; nothing was important, nor the past or the future:

My life at that time was the present with a firm foothold in art, although I did not think that I participated in art, and especially not that I created the art. My relation to art was a relation of a person to art and not of an artist to art. In this way, I developed an almost total feeling of freedom.²⁸⁷

The absurd, which is visible in meander by means of constant repetition and tautology, is a direct reference to the literature of absurd he was reading at that time, written by Camus, Beckett and Sartre. Knifer employed the absurd as an element not only in paintings but also in his writing. Existentialists believe that humans have

²⁸⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.234) Zagreb: MSU

²⁸⁵ *Ibidem*. p.234

²⁸⁶ *Ibidem.*, p.152

²⁸⁷ *Ibidem*. p.154

complete freedom to determine their fate and that the actions people choose in fact determine their existence. In that sense individuality, independence and uniqueness of a person are the most important things that need to be achieved. This same existentialist individualism and existentialist ethics can be seen in Knifer's firm decision to make his own choices and follow his own path: "From the moment of birth, we have no choice but to obey the order and rules of the game. I laid my own rules and no one could make me follow any others. It's a question of ethics, not art."²⁸⁸

The *Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus can also be referred to Knifer's life, as Knifer repeats the same action everyday through the everyday identical process of painting and working on the same motif his whole life. In that sense, we can define Knifer as a painter of will. Knifer himself claimed that what he was doing was a privilege while protecting himself in order to stay free, which was only possible through his work as everything else he considered to be a constriction.²⁸⁹ These principles of Existentialism are also visible in the group Gorgona. All group members were very individualistic in their approach to art or life, even though they belonged to the same group while they fought for their freedom through rejection of state authority, art institutions and through the use of the concepts of absurd, irony in their art.

Knifer always mentioned that in his work there was no progress or development, saying that meander was the beginning and the end, but still a lot of things happened in the middle.²⁹⁰ Probably he was reflecting upon the period before meander conception and life events that shaped him during his work, to which he referred as facts. Chronology and continuity for him are not relevant, as time continuity did not exist. This non-existence of chronology can be related to the repetition of the same motif through the variations of meander, as well as to following of the same spiritual idea that he developed in the 1959 and never gave up.

In *Postscriptum No. 4* printed in 1986, Vaništa discusses Knifer's perception of time contained in the sentence: "Chronology and order in my work do not have

²⁸⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.154) Zagreb: MSU

²⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, pp.9-12

²⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp.9-12

significance. Probably I have already done my last paintings, and first ones maybe I have not still.”²⁹¹ Vaništa finds the essence of Knifer’s work in these sentences, since it reveals that Knifer is not a pragmatic and rational artist that is just following logic and project, but he is more of an artist who with the inner dimension of his work, tests the limits of metaphysical and does not run from the feeling of absurd, surrenders to paradoxes, which is also the reason why his art and its sense is not understood easily.²⁹²

This notion of time in the whole meander opus can be related to Zeno, the Greek philosopher, who lived in the 6th century B.C. Zeno proclaimed that there was unchanging and constant Being. He also showed that the movements and the thoughts of a finite being in space and time are unrelated to and incompatible with the reality of the universe since the essence of the reality is infinity. In this process, Zeno separated two worlds from each other, the ostensible illusory world of the human being the finite world demarcated by time, which creates the delusion of flowing, change and movement from the real, on the other hand, and only one true world of the infinite universe as the “Being of a Unity” on the other.²⁹³ This meaninglessness of time in Knifer’s opus was connected through the absurd:

My primary goal was to make an anti-painting through the process of reducing the shapes and content. Because absurdity is for me a very definite form of freedom, in that process I undertook steps to absurdity. My entire work process is actually a stream without oscillations and with the aim to achieve monotony, which is the simplest and the most pronounced rhythm. The flow of my process shows no development or progress. From the year fifty-nine until today, in the process of my work, everything has been happening without development and progress. This is a process without oscillations. Monotony is simultaneous flow and rhythm. From my work process, a monotonous rhythm has emerged. Continuity matters, but chronology does not. My work is a course without continuity or an irregular continuity. Its direction is irrelevant, what matters is the flow. In my work, there has been only minimal evolution

²⁹¹ *Postgorgona 4*, <<http://digitizing-ideas.hr/hr/zapis/20283>>

²⁹² *Ibidem*.

²⁹³ Nietzsche (1996) *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of Greeks*, (p.46) Gateway Editions

or none at all, and if there has been any, it has led towards the total discontinuation of the painting.²⁹⁴

From Knifer's concept of time, we can understand the influence of absurdity on his concept of freedom that he found in anti-painting. The freedom is only possible if we accept the absurd, which he defined as a form of freedom. This concept of the absurd was taken from Camus who in the *Myth of Sisyphus* defined the idea of freedom. For Camus, an absurd man experiences the freedom to think and to act as he/she chooses.²⁹⁵ In that sense, we can see why Knifer never abandoned the meander motif and repeated the process of every day creating different variations of meander:

Today I can say that I was neither overly orthodox nor loyal, because only now do I realize that my loyalty was unwilling and unconscious of being true to an idea. I've tried to abandon meanders, but I've always returned to them. What else is there to do when you're at a dead end but turn back? This is my privilege. I can only attain my freedom through my work; the rest is just constriction."²⁹⁶

In this sense Knifer, as a Sisyphean hero, affirmed his immanent existence, as his lucidity compelled him to recognize hardships and challenges involved in affirmation. The response of Camus to the absurdity of life was awareness of the absurd, living life in the face of our fate, affirming life through rebellion, maximizing life's intensity and dying unreconciled. This is how Knifer, as Sisyphus, confronts his fate, refuses to yield, denies psychological crutches, embraces no doomed hopes for release and creates a fragile meaning through endless rebellion.²⁹⁷

By abandoning the idea that he had some role to fulfill, the absurd man attains the freedom by taking each moment of life as it strikes him, free of preconceptions or

²⁹⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.152) Zagreb: MSU

²⁹⁵ Al Mamun, Sultana, (2011) *Camus' Meursault in "The Outsider" Archetype of an Absurd Man: A Critical Study*, (p. 10), Scientific Study

²⁹⁶ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.223) Zagreb: MSU

²⁹⁷ Belliotti, (2001) *What is the Meanign of Human Life?*, (p.52) Rodopi Bv Editions

prejudices.²⁹⁸ We find the same notions with Knifer when he was talking about freedom in painting:

My relation to art was a relation of a person to art and not of an artist to art. In this way, I developed an almost total feeling of freedom. I had no obligations to art. Working from day to day I progressed like a plant, that is, I grew naturally without theories and pressure. I insisted neither on theory nor on practice; I already knew that I would never be a typical academic painter. My interests were much wider, beyond the borders of academic and middle-class painting. At that time, I lived under a heavy pressure of moral and physical consequences of the war and the post-war period. I did not paint so that the paintings could serve somebody else, they served me. For this reason, I do not have a logical oeuvre in terms of development.²⁹⁹

We could say that Knifer considers himself as the absurd man, which is proved by the way he appreciates only the present, and does not care about the past or future. Camus thought that absurd man was determined to live in the present since a person who is aware of each passing moment would experience more than someone who is otherwise preoccupied. This could be regarded as the reason why Knifer says that in his work, the focus is the most important, a method that keeps him present. As Knifer explained it in the *Notes*:

Maybe this is absurd, but when I attained something as firm as a foothold, I stopped thinking about the future, and the past began to fade quickly. The past started to turn into a bad dream and the future became unimportant. My life at that time was the present with a firm foothold in art, although I did not think that I participated in art and especially not that I created art.³⁰⁰

We can understand meanders as a sign of silent art where all interpretations are possible since the sign is brought to absurd by the means of monotony, repetition and extreme contrasts of black and white, vertical and horizontal. Repetition of the same

²⁹⁸ Kilicci, J.D. *Salinger's Characters as Existential Heroes: Encountering 1950s America*, (p.32), Indiana University of Pensilvania

²⁹⁹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.152) Zagreb: MSU

³⁰⁰ *Uncompromising*, MSU, Zagreb, 2014, p.152

sign of meander comes from the understanding that the focus must be put on the clear mental perception of the preliminary concept of the painting while its visual appearance is a product of circumstances.³⁰¹ This everyday process of repetition of the meander sign and the repetition of the meander creation process started from applying of the white color in endless layers by making repetition a truly religious way of life as Kierkegaard concludes: “As repetition is a religious movement by virtue of the absurd, whereas the final repetition is eternity itself, in which heavenly existence repeats itself endlessly.”³⁰² In that sense, Knifer identifies completely his life, which was made out of repetition, with the sign of meander that was transformed into an expression of absurd by the same endless repetition.

Meander is a concept of existence. It shows the constant renovation and duration of being whose form does not have the beginning nor the end. Meander is just stopped by the limiting space of the canvas, and in that sense, it represents the fragment of its endless continuity. By connecting the idea of motion with the idea of time, Knifer gets closer to the dialectic interpretation of reality where all factors that build the theoretical basis of this art mutually condition each other and come together in completely subjective and pure spiritual ideas of the whole life process revelation. That is why meander retained this dimension of personal inner sensibility that Knifer took over from Suprematism.³⁰³

³⁰¹ Denegri, J (2000) Jedan problemski raspon: od minimalnog do konceptualnog slikarstva in *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.114) Zagreb: Horetzky

³⁰² Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>>

³⁰³ Denegri, J. (2000) Jedan prilog tumačenju slikarstva Julija Knifera in: *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.24) Zagreb: Horetzky

4.2.3. MEANDER AFTER GORGONA

The Gorgona group stopped its activities in 1965 slowly as members stopped gathering and taking actions together like they used to. Two most active members, who initiated the most activities, Vaništa and Putar, tried to keep the group together even longer but their efforts did not result in a positive outcome. Nevertheless, the members stayed friends and kept the “Gorgona’s spirit” which still prevailed in their work regardless of the group’s dismissal.³⁰⁴

This period after the dissolution of the Gorgona group around 1968 can be considered the second period of meander formation, having in mind that during the Gorgona group was the first period marked by the *Meander in the Corner*. In this phase, Knifer defined meander even more in relation to positive and negative masses on the canvas, which represented emptiness and fullness of form and space with the use of black and white color. We can notice that in this phase Knifer introduced on a few paintings a shortened beginning or end of meander whose purpose was to obstruct the regularity of the rhythm. In that sense, Knifer continues with experimentations of meander form through rhythm. Furthermore, in this period meander fully became a sign. By the continuing modification of meander as a sign, meander became the method of work of repetition and deviations.³⁰⁵

In 1960s, Knifer affirmed meander as a sign, and reached anti-painting while in the 1970s he started to introduce new variants and meanings to meander. He started to create collages, sculptures, reliefs, large formats, began using acrylic and pencil, and performing the collective action. More and more meander became a concept as Knifer was approaching art movements of the 1970s that were focused on art that existed among its public. In that sense, he started creating meander on walls, metros, libraries and public spaces.³⁰⁶

Knifer also started to use acrylic instead of oil around 1968. In that sense the color on the surface became more condensed, compact, precise, solid and impenetrable, taking

³⁰⁴ Stipančić B.(2007), *Josip Vaništa: vrijeme Postgorgone i Gorgone*, (p.20) Zagreb: Kratis

³⁰⁵ Martičević, D (1990), *Prilozi perodizaciji opusa Julija Knifera*, (p.29) *Život umjetnosti*, no.47

Zagreb

³⁰⁶ Maković,Z. (2001), *Knifer*, (p.68), Zagreb: Meandar

on a new tactile quality.³⁰⁷ Knifer's new goal in art now was to create the painting without identity. He wanted to dematerialize it, similar to what Malevich was doing during the white phase when his white almost monochrome paintings were merging with the background of the white wall. From 1968 to 1970 meander transformed completely into a sign and its form was reduced to the extreme limits of possibilities of the new acrylic technique. As Vera Horvat Pintarić explained the meaning of the new technique use:

From the time the painter used acrylic (1968) the surface of the color became evenly condensed, solid and impenetrable, taking on a new tactile quality. One gets the impression that Knifer really tried to dematerialize the painting, separate its epidermis from its body, from the canvas as ground.³⁰⁸

In 1970s meander reached its transformation as a visual sign in comparison with the meanders of the 1960s and it was perfectly adapting to murals, collective actions, reliefs or even sculptures. Knifer started painting meander on a bigger scale, on facades or interiors. Meander became a part of everyday life, as it was no longer made just on paper or canvas.

The first meander mural was made on the school façade in the neighborhood Gornje Vrapče in Zagreb in 1971. In this way, public space was changed and personalized. Meander on this primary school façade was formed of connected rectangles forming meander in black and blue color. Blue color prevailed more on the geometrical parts of meander while black color is represented on separate meander parts that were not connected to the blue parts since they were just leaning on them. White façade of the primary school served as the white background. Meander here still represents the flow but it is more adapted to the architecture taking into account the windows, doors and the form of the building. Knifer again used the corner of the building to continue the flow of the meander to the other side of the façade as in *Meander in the Corner*. The floor is used as well so that meander is not just represented on the building, it is appropriating the space outside it and continuing to spread outside the surface of the façade.

³⁰⁷ Maković, Z. (2002) *Knifer*, (p.62) Zagreb: Meandar

³⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p.68

Knifer continued the same action in the lobby of the cinema in the Student Center in 1979, on the wall in Branimir Street in 1987, in gallery PM in 1988 in Zagreb and University library in Dijon in 1990. At the same time, he made a few murals for different galleries in France. In 2001, while representing Croatia for the Venice biennale, Knifer painted the walls in Palazzo Querini Stampalia.³⁰⁹ This shift of meander from painting to a wall mural is a new concept not only from the technical side but also from the conceptual side that we can see as the continuation of the idea that appeared in 1961 with *Meander in the Corner*. Knifer in this sense used meander as a way to conquer the space in which it was placed.³¹⁰

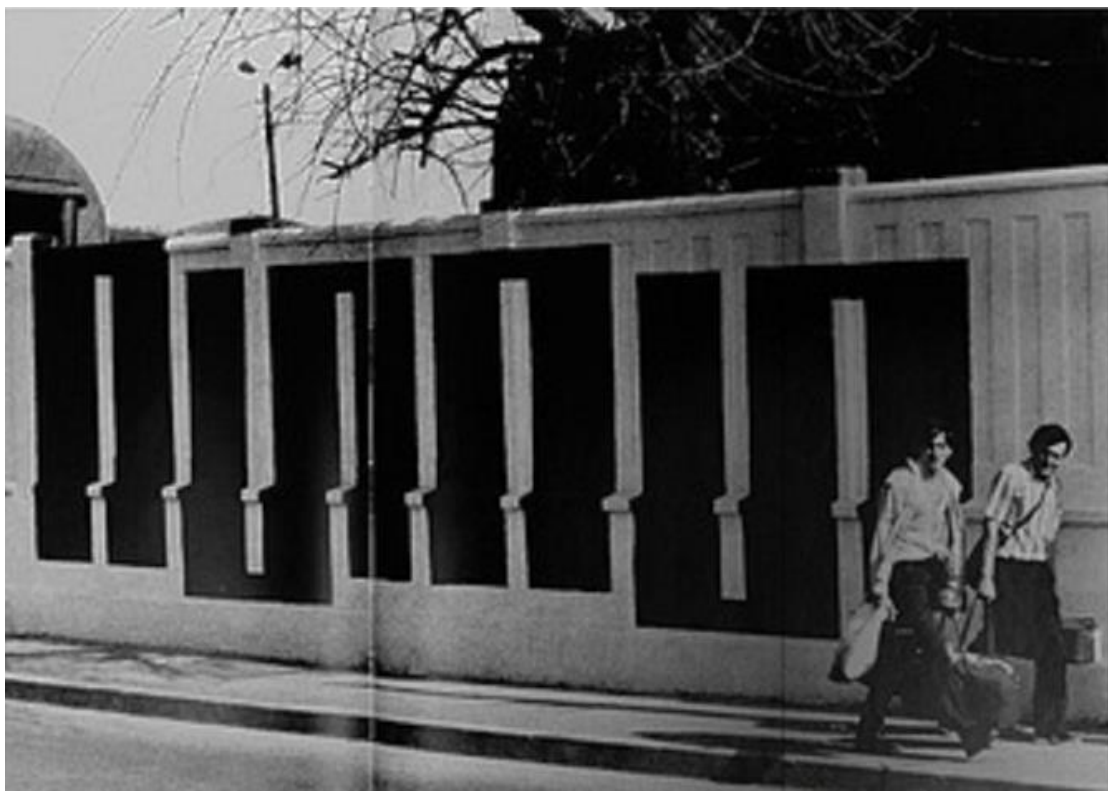


Figure 22. Julije Knifer, *Meander*, Branimir Street, 1987

Source:<http://www.telegram.hr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/julie-knifer-656x365.png>

At the same time, the differences became less and less visible in the formula of meander, as Knifer started to introduce color into the painting. The surface of the canvas or even the borders of the framework became grey, opaque, meander blue and light blue, putting a new dynamic inside the painting. White color disappeared, but

³⁰⁹ Maković, Z. (2002) *Knifer*, (p.66) Zagreb: Meandar

³¹⁰ Ibidem., p.67

black was still present. It is also indicative that with the introduction of the color Knifer also changed the title of the paintings shortening the name meander just to the initial M followed by a number/s and sometimes letter/s or the combination of the two, as for example *MZ 01* from 1970 where M stands for meander, sign and Z for gold background, “zlato”. Sometimes the numbers would suggest the time period of the paintings, for example, *MK 73-4*, which was done in 1973.

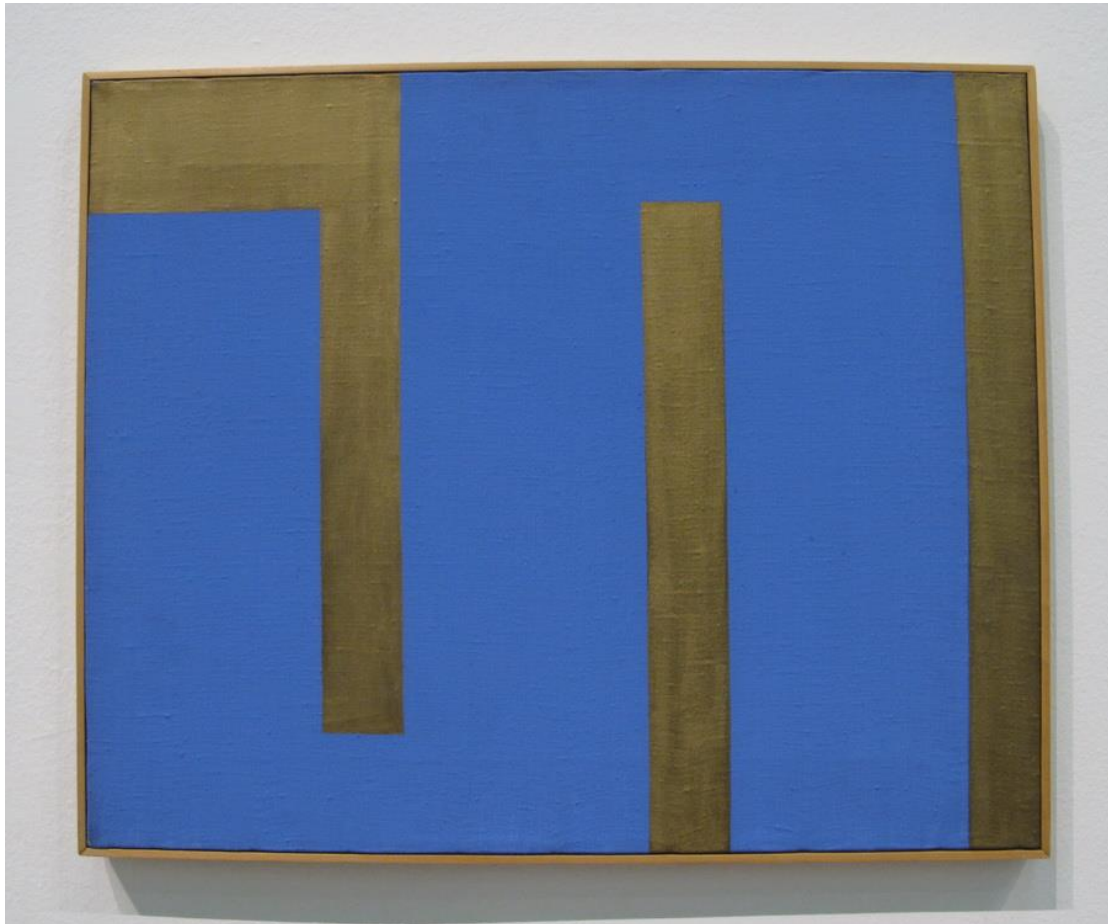


Figure 23. Julije Knifer, *MZ 01*, 1970

Source:<http://perceiveart.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/MZ-01-1970.-akrilik-na-platnu.jpg>

In this sense, Knifer was reducing the title making it more abstract and more minimal as at the same time the sign of meander was becoming more and more abstract. Through these new chromatic contrasts, for example, gold-blue, instead of black-white, Knifer explores the visual components of a meander that he abandoned in 1955/56. Knifer would continue to explore these visual phenomena through collages and reliefs.

In the first half of the 1970s, Knifer made first meander colorful collages. He would cut the meander in color and glue it on the paper of different color. He would use for example a very vivid orange background in contrast with blue meander making meander a more effective visual sign. We can see that through collages Knifer is exploring visual optic dimensions of meander, especially when using silver color as a background or the color that fills meander, making the surface shiny and more visually interesting, especially when the light is reflecting upon the surface. Meander in collages affirms itself as a fact, as a physical fact, through a process where the strength of the sign is weakened because its form is more highlighted by the color and material of the collage. In the cases when he was using blue color in the contrast with the black and gold Knifer was giving the tribute to Yves Klein that Gorgona group members considered an influence on their art. In that sense Gorgona group in the 1960s also created the black color named “*Gorgona black*” as an homage to Klein’s “*International blue color*.”³¹¹

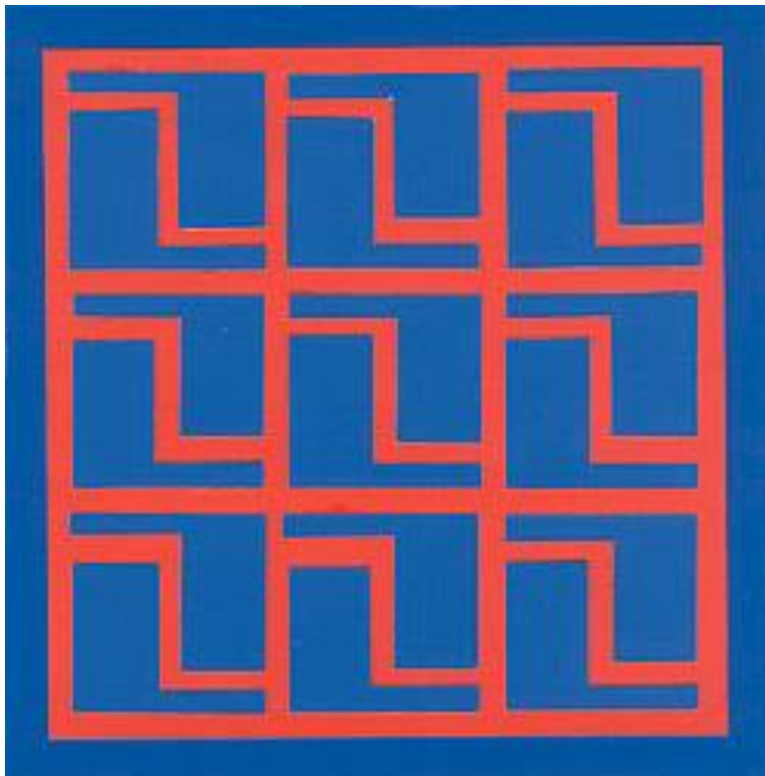


Figure 24. Julije Knifer, *Collage*, 1970-75

Source: http://galerija-rigo.hr/upl/izlozbe/izlozbe_m_88_123.jpg

³¹¹ Maković, Z. *Julije Knifer: Kolaži* <<http://galerija-rigo.hr/?w=izlozbe&g=5&id=88&sl=123>>

In the first half of the 1970s, Knifer continued with the explorations in a medium other than painting, as he started making meander sculptures and meander reliefs out of aluminum. These artworks were done under the influence of Neo-Constructivism since groups like Exat'51 were experimenting with the same materials. The structure of meander in the relief and sculpture is more complex and more developed. It is not reduced like in the paintings of the same period. The meander sculpture is interesting since the structure of meander is more developed than in other mediums, and it seems that the final endings of the lines of meander are a part of a larger puzzle waiting to be connected and build up into a larger grind. In meander relief, we have the feeling as in white meander paintings from the 1970s and that is as if space is opening the form of meander completely. Here Knifer wanted to make the same effect as he did with his painting to present the never ending flow of the infinite line that goes outside the artwork. In meander reliefs, color is also present.

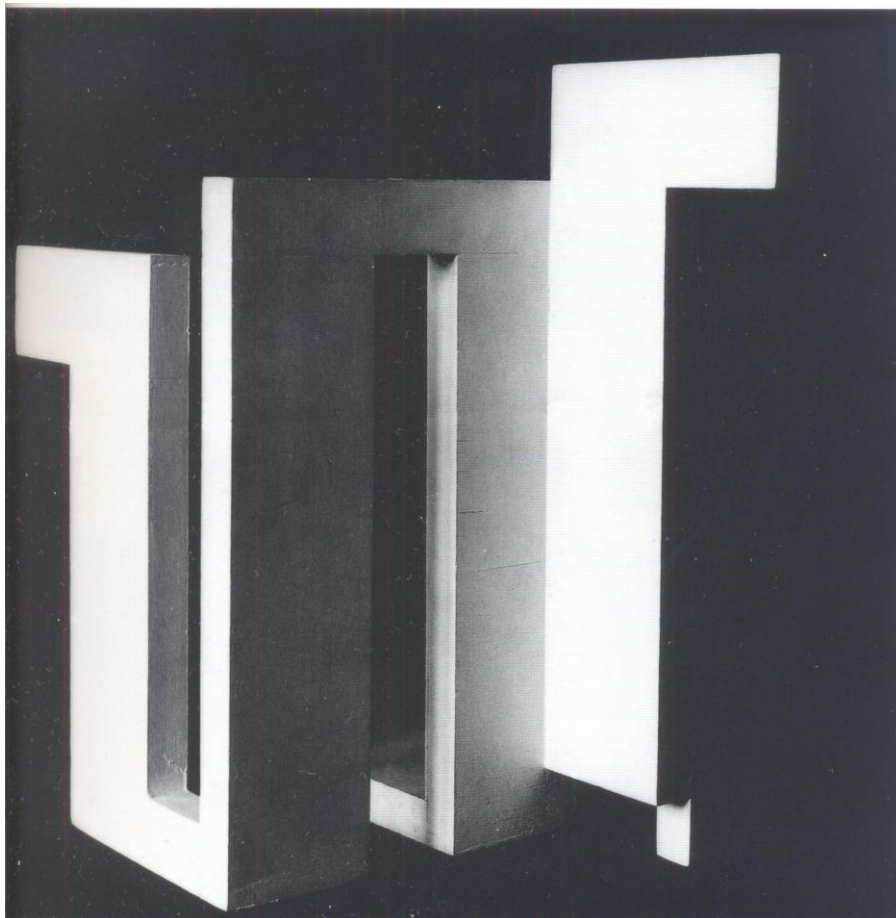


Figure 25. Julije Knifer, *Meander*, 1970

Source: http://radio.hrt.hr/data/article/052030_68fc7869b80427830a96.jpg

Between 1973 and 1988 Knifer occasionally spent time in Tübingen collaborating with collectors Ingrid and Živojin Dacić mostly during the summer while spending the rest of his time in Zagreb. This period spent in Tübingen allowed him to start creating meanders on large formats since he had resources and space to work. Following the period in Tübingen Knifer moved to Dijon, in 1991 to Sète, in 1992 to Nice and in 1994 to Paris where he stayed until his death in 2004.

In 1975, Knifer performed a collaborative action that put meander into a new sphere again, this time of a performance. During this collaborative action called *Arbeitsprozess*, in a quarry next to Tübingen, together with other participants, mostly friends, Knifer made a flag painted with a meander sign in dimensions 20x30 meters. This work represents the largest representation of meander sign in dimensions.³¹²

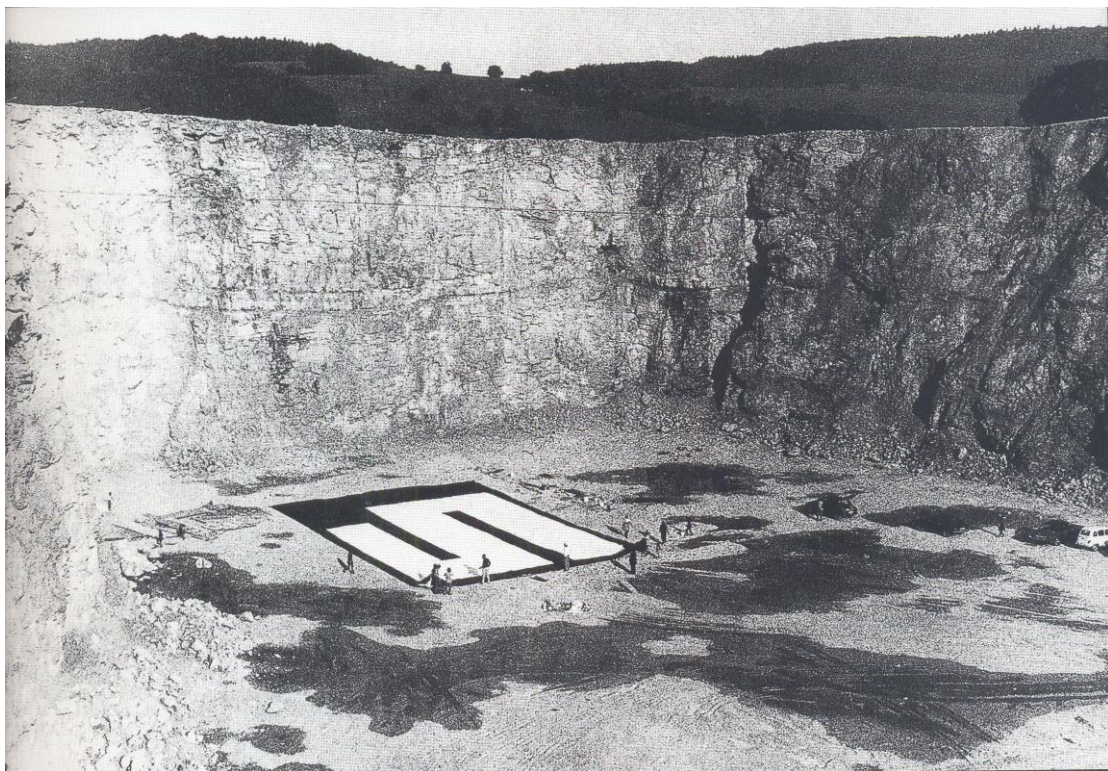


Figure 26. Julije Knifer, *Arbeitsprozess*, Tübingen, 1975

Source: Maković, *Knifer*, Meandar, 2001, p.227

³¹² Košćević Ž., (1989) *Julije Knifer. Meandar iz Tübingena 1973–1988*. Zagreb: Galerije grada Zagreba

This action is something completely different from everything Knifer did with a meander. This was a totally new context completely referring to the art movements of the 1970s such as groups Fluxus or even New Artist Praxis from Croatia that based their art on performances. In this collective action, the focus is on the participation and not on the end result. Still the action was photographed, recorded and filmed. This was the only collective action that Knifer made outside Gorgona group, which was originally initiated by Živojin Dacić collector from Tübingen. Dacić's wish was that Knifer activated passive art consumers by leaving the space of atelier and opening the new created spatial and time dimensions in his endless search for boundary situations of color, form and idea. It is possible to say that *Arbeitsprozess* is one of the most representative Knifer's works done in the period that is mostly marked by his work on large formats.³¹³

In this collective action, we see that by changing location and by exiting the studio new possibilities for the detailed representation of the shape, color and size of meander are made possible. At the same time, passive art recipients are becoming integrated as they became active participants in the work process. *Arbeitsprozess* reminiscences of the actions Gorgona group members did together, putting the emphasis on the communion, while taking part in the same idea, developing and creating it together. In this action, only the participants that knew Knifer and his work were included in creating a similar atmosphere of Gorgona's intimacy.³¹⁴

When analyzing meander paintings morphologically, we can notice that in the early 1970s compositions were presenting meander which flow is continuous and lines are connected. These compositions so frequent in the 1960s were becoming less and less frequent in the late 1970s as meander was becoming more individualized as a sign by the use of color and less defined by the rhythm. This flow, that used to be presented by connected lines, was now presented by the reproduction of basic single meanders put close one to another usually in the different level to create the rhythm that was lost by the isolation of these usually connected units. These compositions resemble the music text where the notes are replaced by meanders. It is possible to say that in the 1970s there are two kinds of compositions: isolated meander compositions that

³¹³ Maković, Z. (2002) *Knifer*, (p.76) Zagreb: Meandar

³¹⁴ Košćević, (1989) *Julije Knifer: Meandar iz Tübingena*, Zagreb: Galerije grada Zagreba,

represented meander more as a visual sign with a focus more on the color and not on the rhythm, and meander compositions where separated meanders are put close to each other on different levels, where rhythm is still the most important component of the painting.

Moreover, there is also the composition composed out of a single meander reproduction that is most visible on *Meander 1-8* from 1978. Here we have 8 black outlined meanders on the white background each in its own space of the canvas. Meanders are of different sizes, organized from bigger to smaller, and as size diminishes, the contours of the black color of meander get thicker. At the same time by the size reduction and by increased density of the contour, meander appears visually more effective.

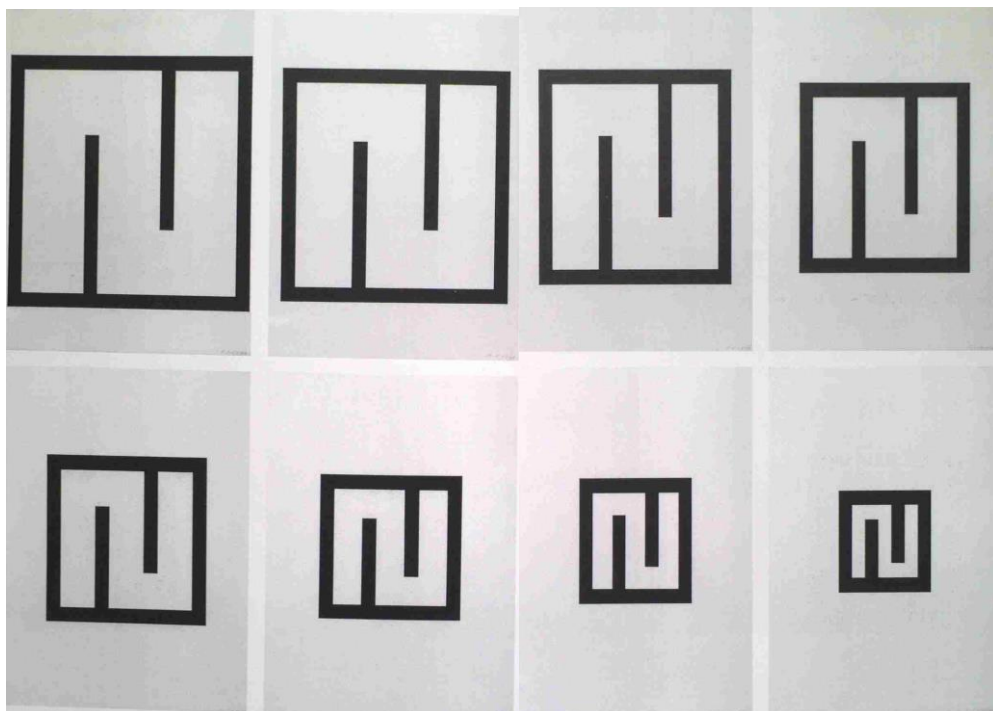


Figure 27. Julije Knifer, *Meander 1-8*, 1978

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.190-191

With the repetition of the same sign of meander, the focus is on the mental conception of the painting while its material elaboration depends on the pictorial interventions that vary through the time of creation. Knifer, as a pre-conceptual painter, went in the non-objective direction, where the forms of the painting, are organized in the firmly

organized structural systems. In this formation of the painting it is clear that there is a priori mental image of the final painting appearance.³¹⁵

In the late 1970s, Knifer introduced a new element in the painting that reminds us of this early phase around the 1960s when he was still using suprematist forms. Knifer introduced again a square into a painting together with the meander of black or white color that is perfectly outlined. In that sense, we can notice for an example white square on the black surface next to the single meander represented as a void of the canvas because it is of the same color as the background.

In 1978, Knifer made the painting *Meander*. The composition was created out of an empty black outlined square on the white surface, on the single canvas titled *Meander*. This canvas was put next to the painting with the white background having a black outlined shape of meander inside, also titled *Meander*. We can see that this work is composed out of two canvases that create one unity. The representation of the white square on *Meander* can also be referred to Malevich in the sense of the absence of meander, or as a representation of a void. We can see that Knifer often refers to the concept of emptiness that interchanges with the concept of fullness whether by the density of the color or the positive negative relations in the form of the meander. With this work, Knifer also goes outside the typical creation of meander painting as there is no focus on flow and repetition.

With this new concept of denoting the meander just with the title and not by its representation, Knifer was following the concept of Malevich's non-objective art that is represented in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. Since Malevich is against mimesis in art Knifer is leaving the space empty without any forms for interpretations, giving us just the name of the concept which in return confuses us with its absence in representation making the whole concept absurd. With this painting Knifer is exiting the conventions of his opus, making the works more individual and tautological as we can understand this work as an exploration of linguistic structures of meander, in this case, representation of something that is not there. Meander in this painting becomes a concept that is to be found in ourselves and not on the canvas, similar to suprematist

³¹⁵ Denegri, J (2000) *Jedan problemski raspon: od minimalnog do konceptualnog slikarstva* in: *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.118) Zagreb: Horetzky

philosophy, which refers to the experience that also transcends. In the 1970s, Knifer experiments more with other art movements applying their method and theory when representing meander but at the same time, he still continues working on meander paintings that contain the same spiritual idea of the 1960s.

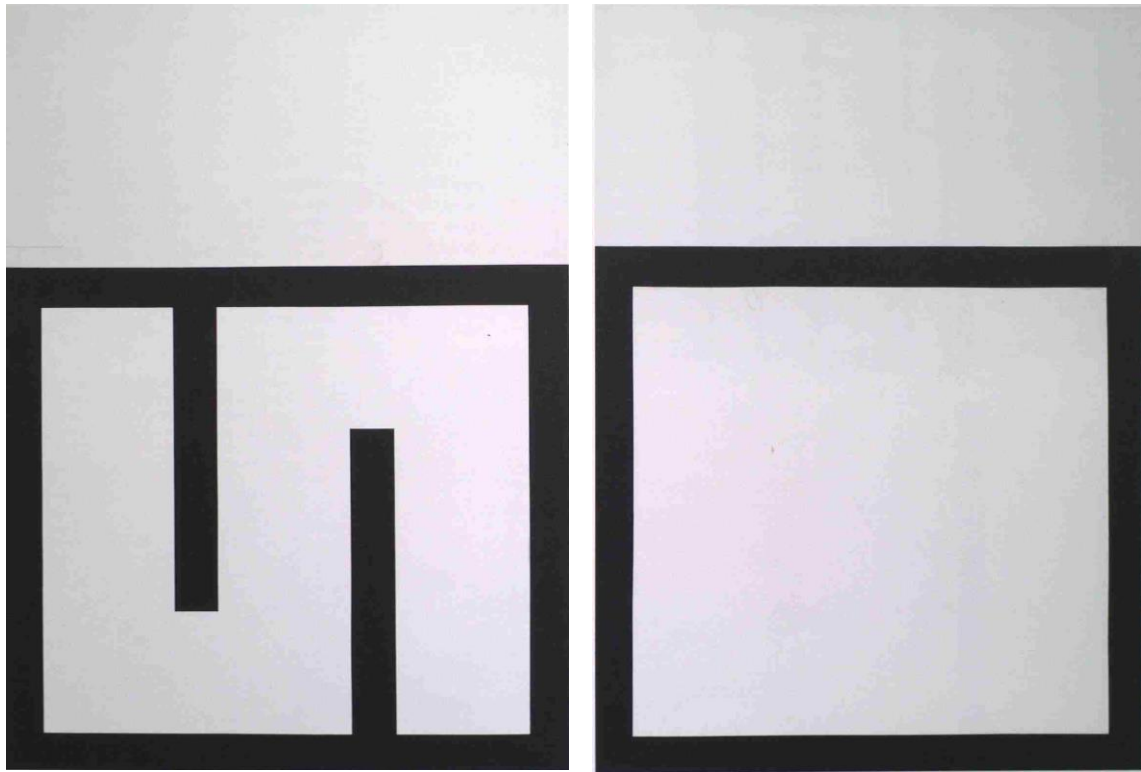


Figure 28. Julije Knifer, *Meander*, 1978

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p. 212-213

There are other examples when square appears next to meander on the same canvas as in *Untitled* from 1978. In these series of meander paintings the composition would be made on the black background with a white square on the left side and a meander sign on the left side of the same proportions and on the same level. This can be compared with the early phase of the 1950s when Knifer was still experimenting with geometrical elements creating meander out of non-connected geometrical elements. The same concept we see in the painting *TÜ H DA 75* from 1975 where next to meander he drew a single rectangular line. As we can notice the suprematist influence always stayed present in meander through geometry, reduction to which Knifer added “gorgonic spirit” of the 1960s or the conceptualism of the 1970s through which he explored the meander possibilities.

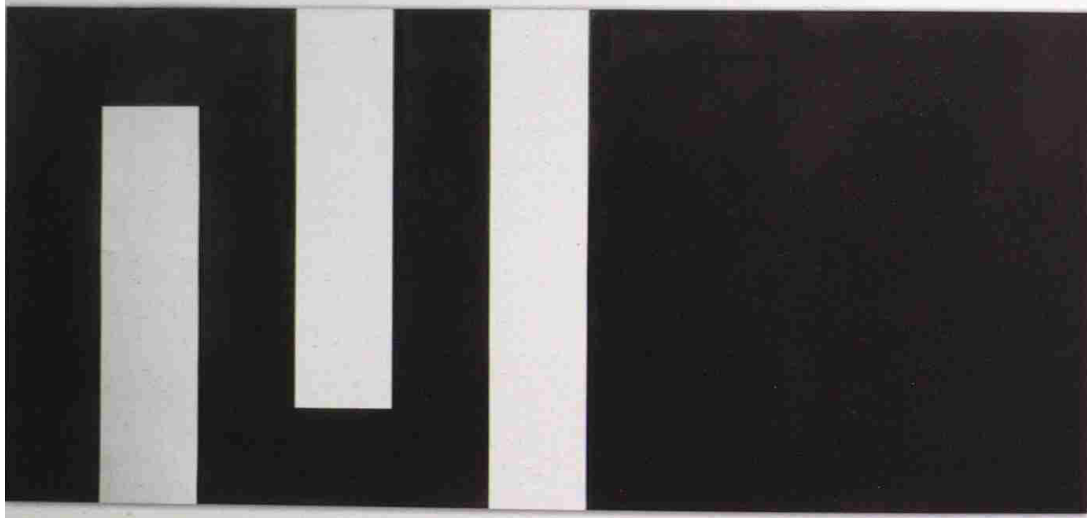


Figure 29. Julije Knifer, *Untitled*, 1970

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.156

In 1977, Knifer started the new period of pencil drawings on paper with meander as a motif in order to saturate the surface with blackness and to banish the light from the surface and to achieve absolute darkness. This period can be considered a beginning of the phase when Knifer was painting meanders on the large formats. In this process of applying black color on the canvas, Knifer is taking to extreme the resistance of both materials, pencil and the surface of the painting, creating another boundary situation. In these paintings, we can see a new concept where Knifer introduces the presence of absence. It is achieved with density and saturation of black on white canvas representing the absence of light. In that way, the surface of the painting became smooth and compact reflecting the graphite of the black color.

Trying to achieve maximum density of the black color, Knifer made drawings in series. He starts this long working process of shading first with a hard pencil and then with the soft one to achieve the blackness on the paper. Every day he was covering the paper with countless layers of graphite until its complete saturation, destroying light and at the same time creating a drawing from the maximum blackness of black. In this process, the use of time is very important as he invests a lot of time into one drawing. The importance of this process can be seen in the tiles of the paintings where intervals of the creation are marked, for example, *12 XII 26 XII 82*. At the same time, existence of the painting creation starts to relate to the existence of the painter as he stops time, which he invested in the process, on the painting.

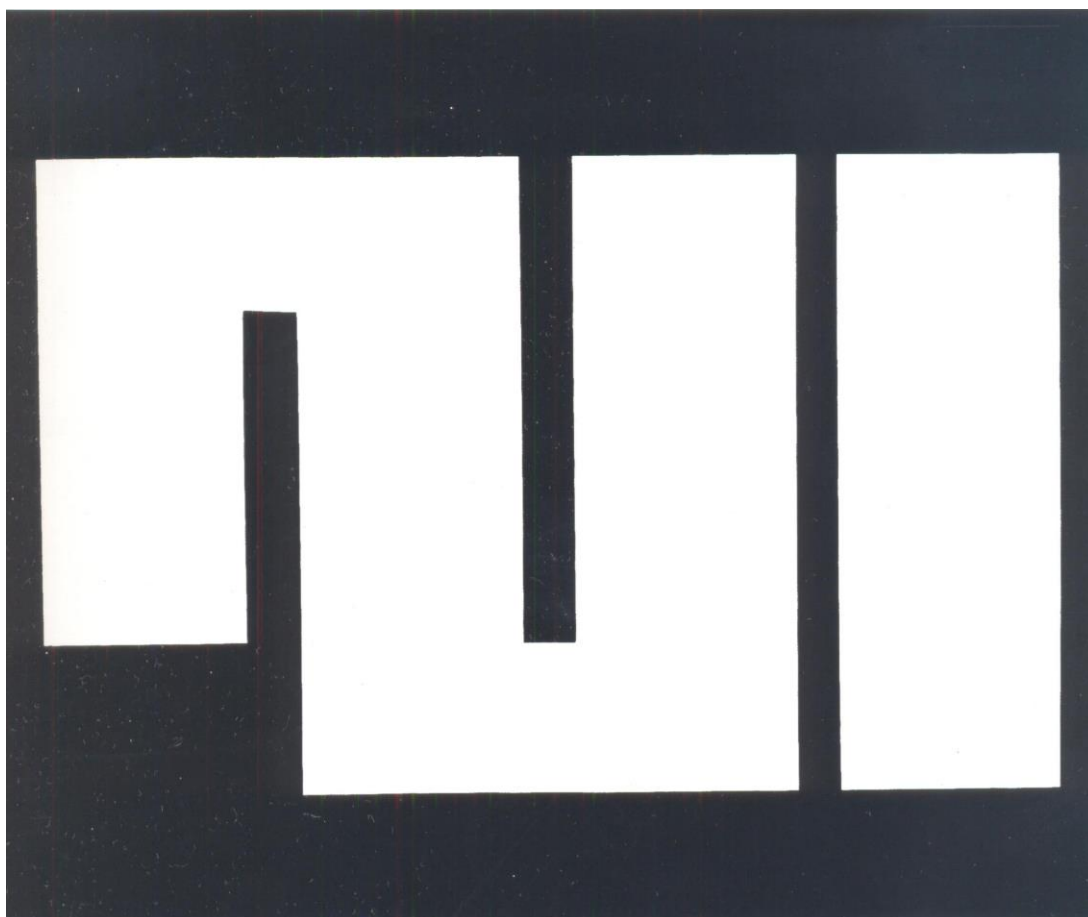


Figure 30. Julije Knifer, *TÜ H DA 75*, 1975

Source: Maković, *Knifer*, 2001, p.155

This repeated process of shading with graphite pencil on the paper through spans of time where he had to use all his focus and concentration can be understood as reaching a special state of consciousness and will. In Bergson's concept of duration, to exist means to endure what we can see in Knifer's efforts to continuously apply black graphite on the paper. According to Bergson duration is the thing out of which conscious existence is made. For a conscious being to exist is to change and to change is to endure. Knifer at the same time puts all his focus and time into a drawing identifying his time with the time spent on the painting. Bergson says that if time is to be thought of as real, the new must be ever up-springing and the forms that arise must be essentially unforeseeable; otherwise, time is only a repetition and not in any sense a reality. Bergson's thoughts on time corresponded to Knifer's variations of meander since he was always reinventing new forms through repetition. In that way, the conception of duration on which Bergson is insisting is basic to the reality of time itself. In that sense, Knifer was not only noting the facts in his paintings but, more

importantly, he was noting the time: “facts are important because my work consists almost entirely of facts. I must start with the time when facts became definitive.”³¹⁶

Time in Knifer’s earlier paintings was presented through the rhythm of noting facts. Now during the process of creating graphite paintings from 1977 until 1986 time becomes an even more important concept. We can see that time in previous meander and self-portraits paintings was represented by the variations of form and in the paintings made between 1977 - 1986 it is represented by the amount of time spent on the process. Time for Knifer is a flow, a series of events that he tries to stop on his paintings, as time itself for him does not have importance: “I stopped thinking of the future and the past began to fade quickly. The past started to turn into a bad dream and the future became unimportant.”³¹⁷ In that sense time exists on the painting as a continuity of representing facts: “continuity lasts from painting or in and out of a painting. Continuity exists but the order is unimportant. The sequence has no importance. Times and circumstances change people and only in that aspect my paintings change.”³¹⁸

Another concept of Bergson, which is important for the understanding of black meander paintings, is the passage from matter to spirit. We see that by creating black meander paintings Knifer is trying to inscribe himself into a painting by transferring his energy, time and consciousness. Bergson said that the orientation of our consciousness toward action appeared to be a fundamental law of our psychological life. Spirit and matter are thus non-distinguishable except in degree of intensity, extensity, quality, quantity, etc. In that sense matter becomes the name for the totality of the homogeneous units, and extension, space becomes quantitative and time, even inner duration becomes spatial.³¹⁹ Accordingly, the layers of shading start to become an autonomous part of the painting, a way of materializing nothingness, creating at the same time fullness of materiality of the reduced form.

³¹⁶ Watts, Cunningham, *Bergson’s Conception of Duration*, p.529, <<http://philpapers.org/rec/CUNBCO>>

³¹⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.150) Zagreb: MSU

³¹⁸ *Ibidem.*, p.146

³¹⁹ Mullarkey, (2006) *The New Bergson*, (p.131) Manchester University Press

Knifer was working long and slowly on drawings due to the exhausting method that included concentration, and also because the paper in his opinion needed rest from continuous application of graphite. In drawings, we can see Knifer's dedication and endurance as he continuously applied graphite on the surface and repeated the process to achieve the right density of black.³²⁰ In this long process of shading, the concept of invested time needed to remove the presence of light on the painting. To achieve its absence started to be the most important component of the painting. The time that used to disappear with the flow of meander is now present in the density of the blackness, as the rhythm slowly disappeared due to the further reduction while the form at the same time became more monumental.

The notion "absence of presence" that we connect to black meander paintings was mentioned by Kazimir Malevich when he attempted to liberate art from the burden of the object that resulted in the creation of the *Black Square*. He defined square saying that it is not an empty square but the feeling of the absence of the object.³²¹ In Knifer's case, we can connect this absence of presence of light in black meander paintings with an existentialist dimension, as the density of black relates to the density of hopelessness.³²² Furthermore, this insistence on the perfect blackness on the canvas, persistence in shading, makes the whole process absurd that is affirmed with the insistence on continuous repetition of the process:

I am trying just to achieve particular graphite surface completely compact and waterproof to confer to the surface its own glow that goes toward the inside and outside. In the work with graphite on the paper that I have started in the 1980s, I have gone till absurd. The work is always a process for me but in the simplest sense of the term. Till the extreme or as we can say till absurd.³²³

The largest reduction leaving meander disappearing in the black background was seen in the *Diptych* from 1979. In this painting, Knifer approaches the creation of the monochrome paintings. Here only two thin white lines that represent the almost

³²⁰ Denegri, *Apstraktna umjentosti u Hrvatskoj 2*, Logos, Split, p.70

³²¹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.34) Zagreb: MSU

³²² *Ibidem.*, p.28

³²³ Pierre, A.,(2001) *Julije Knifer: Meandres*, (p.82) Paris: Adam Biro (Je m'efforce seulement d'obtenir une surface de graphite complètement inacte et imperméable; afin de conférer à la surface son propre éclat; qui rayonne vers l'intérieure et extérieure) – Translation mine

disappeared meander divide the black surface. We see that Knifer is reducing the form of meander extremely and he does not use the whole canvas anymore to present the flow of the rhythm. In fact, in this phase, the rhythm is completely neglected, as it is not so much important. Instead of putting the emphasis on the rhythm he reduces it completely making it as short as possible and places more emphasis to the blackness of color. The paintings seemed as they were moving toward monochromy since the largest part of the painting was in one color and only a few white thin lines were representing the rhythm. On the other hand, we could say that Knifer was continuing the visual experiments of meander as a sign by outlining the meander making it look like a stamp or imprint.

In the 1980s, Knifer continued to use large formats in painting and he started to put meanders together to create diptychs or triptychs. The title diptychs or triptychs do not refer so much to the religious connotation as to the form that is now divided into two or three segments. The most representative paintings from this period were *Triptych TR-TU-H-DA I* from 1981 and *Diptych* from 1986. Both were of large dimensions and resemble mural paintings. *Triptych* meander was white on the black background slowly disappearing from left to right, creating the effect as if meander was merging with the white wall like in Malevich's *White on White* painting. On the other hand, in *Diptych* blackness as well as the absence of light was dominant.

In this period, the focus is still on black color with which Knifer fills completely the whole surface of the painting leaving just a little light letting us know that meander is still represented. The biggest abstraction of meander sign and fulfillment of the surface with black color is seen in the painting *28 VIII...6X* from 1985 where there is just one white vertical line that goes almost till the top of the painting. The rhythm on this almost completely monochrome black painting is very slow and lasts longer.

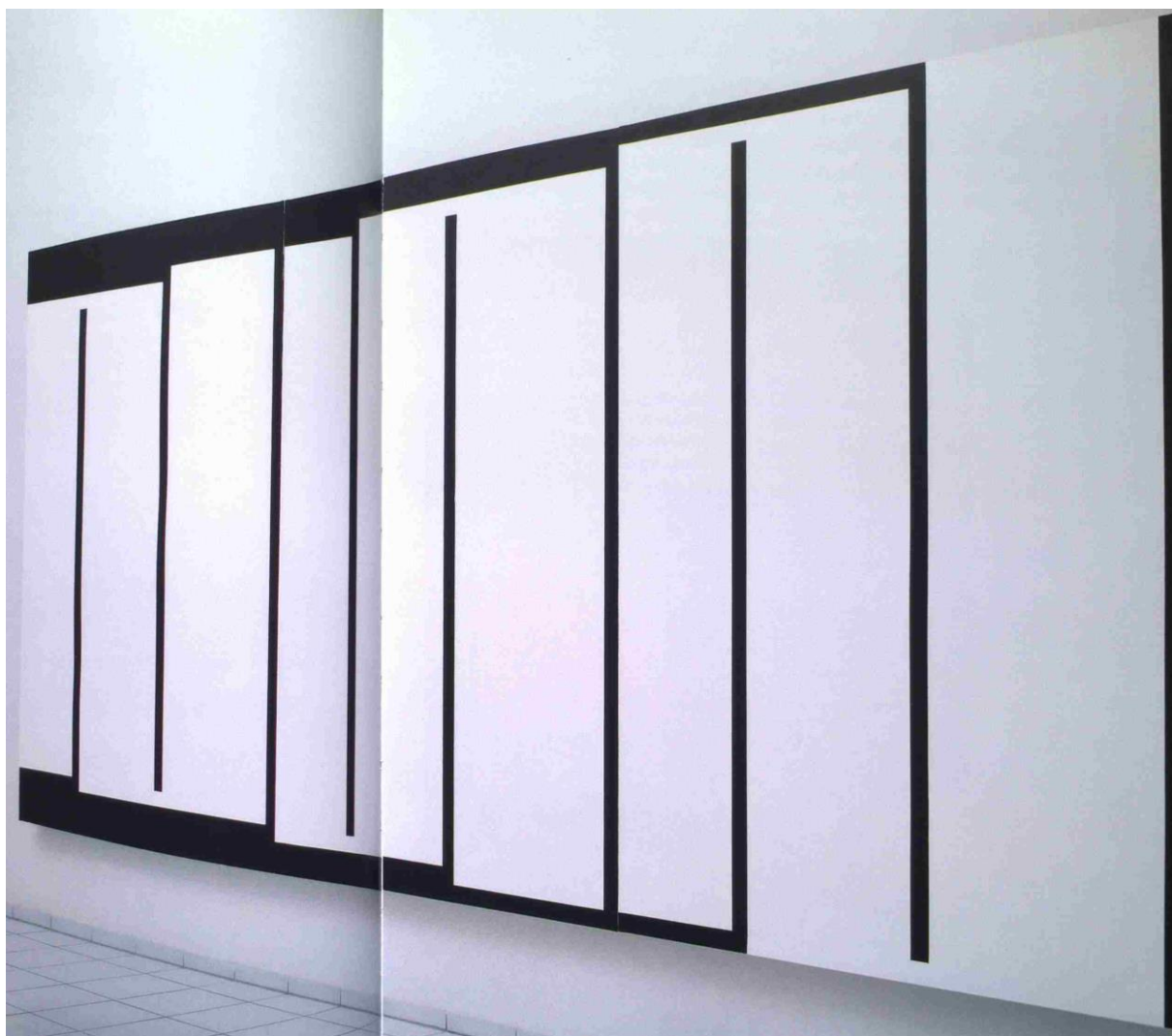


Figure 31. Julije Knifer, *Triptych TR TÛ H DA I*, 1981

Source: Maković, *Knifer, Meander*, 2001, p.166-167

Also during the 1980s, we can find compositions where Knifer again introduced an empty square as he put meander on one side and left the rest of the painting empty, filled just with the color of the background as in *Meander TU-H-SCH/V* from 1986. On the other hand, there were examples where he fit meander in the format of the canvas filling the whole as in *H-TU* from 1986. By then Knifer just painted on large formats making meander seem more elongated. This effect was accentuated by the use of lines that now serve as a more abstract representation of meander. This can be seen on *Meander TU-H-DA-DI* from 1987 where meander was just presented as its own fragment with four black lines on the white background of the different level. Painting *TU-H-DA-DI* belonged to the white meander paintings Knifer started to paint in the late 1980s. In these paintings we see the same tendency as in Malevich's white

phase when the white painting merges with the white wall since Knifer was using black color just to outline meander but not the whole painting leaving the form open. Here the rhythm is dynamic and fast as in the early meander paintings from the 1960s, in contrast to the black meander paintings where the focus was on black color while the rhythm was static. In the late 1980s, Knifer also started to use intertwined white lines on black meander paintings as is the case on 22 VII-86. In this painting surface was still dominant as one part of the painting is left black and on the other part black half white lines formed meander more like the grind than one sense flow.

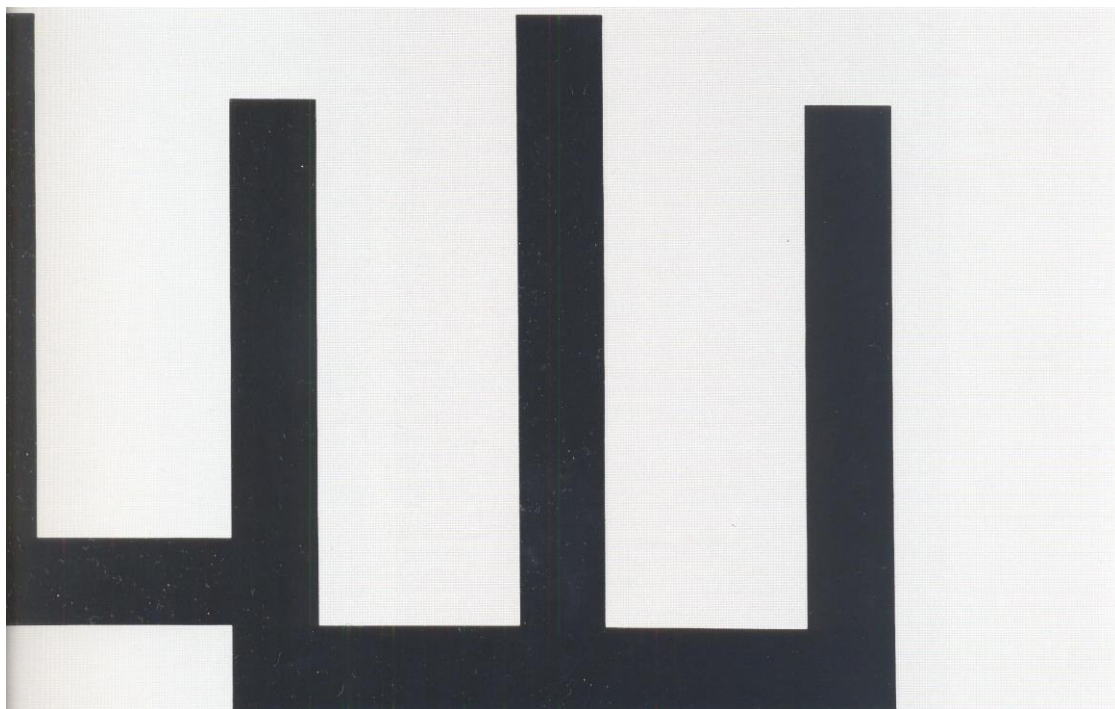


Figure 32. Julije Knifer *TÜ-H-DA-DI*, 1987

Source: Maković, *Knifer*, Meander, 2001, p.175

In this phase, Knifer did not title his paintings just meander as its form became more abstract. The titles represented dates of creation, shortcuts of words and sometimes they were even titled *Untitled* or *Diptych*, *Triptych*. Knifer was paying more attention to graphic experimentation, as the most representative parts of the meander paintings were black monolithic surfaces. On the other hand, meander form appeared more abstract and even more reduced. There was not so much focus on the flow and rhythm as the painting was almost monochrome. It is possible to say that in this phase as meander was merging with the background the reduction of the form was going in the

direction of the disappearance of meander in the mass of the blackness or whiteness of the wall.

On these almost monochrome paintings, the intensity was bigger. Meander was shown more dramatically, as it was disappearing into blackness, or it was almost unrecognizable in the whiteness. The meander was almost becoming monochrome and the only step between monochrome and the sign were thin lines resembling grids making the flow extremely reduced. This dramatic emotion of disappearing was created in two ways; first way was with the increase of the amplitudes from one side to another creating a new optical experience, as the fragments of meander created one whole with other separated unities where the harmony was made by the imbalance of the black motifs on the white background or vice versa and the second way was when the vertical lines of meander were dominant and the composition was formed by one amplitude separating one or two surfaces while the same surface was disappearing. In these paintings, the rhythm practically disappeared and it transformed into stiffness adding to the dramatic feeling of the disappearance of the meander. As we see in the 1980s the loss of the rhythm was dominant as well as the surface.³²⁴

From the 1990s until his death Knifer continued to work on large formats as he continued to create diptychs, triptychs, polyptychs where the focus was more on the flow of meander and on meander fragments. At the same time, he continued to create large formats of black and white meander paintings, and simple meander paintings where meander took over the whole space of the painting from the top until the bottom of the canvas. In this last period, Knifer started with the fragmental representation of meander as it was seen on *9.X.97.6.I./II 19.II-7-XI-98 21.V*. This painting can be seen as a further evolution of black meander paintings that Knifer started to disintegrate with white lines in the late 1980s. In the 2000 Knifer goes back to the use of acrylic as then meander was formed out of bigger white or black volumes that were connected or non-connected. The rhythm was mostly achieved with the different level of meander fragments or units on the painting. In his last years Knifer was combining all the methods of meander representation, but still inventing new possibilities, as meander was mostly presented as fragment as in *AP XIV/14*

³²⁴ Matičević, D. (1990) Prilozi periodizaciji opusa Julija Knifera, *Život umjetnosti*, No.47 (p.33), Zagreb

from 2002 or a dense flow as in the Mural in the Jean-Jaures Underground Station of the line B in Toulouse from 2007.

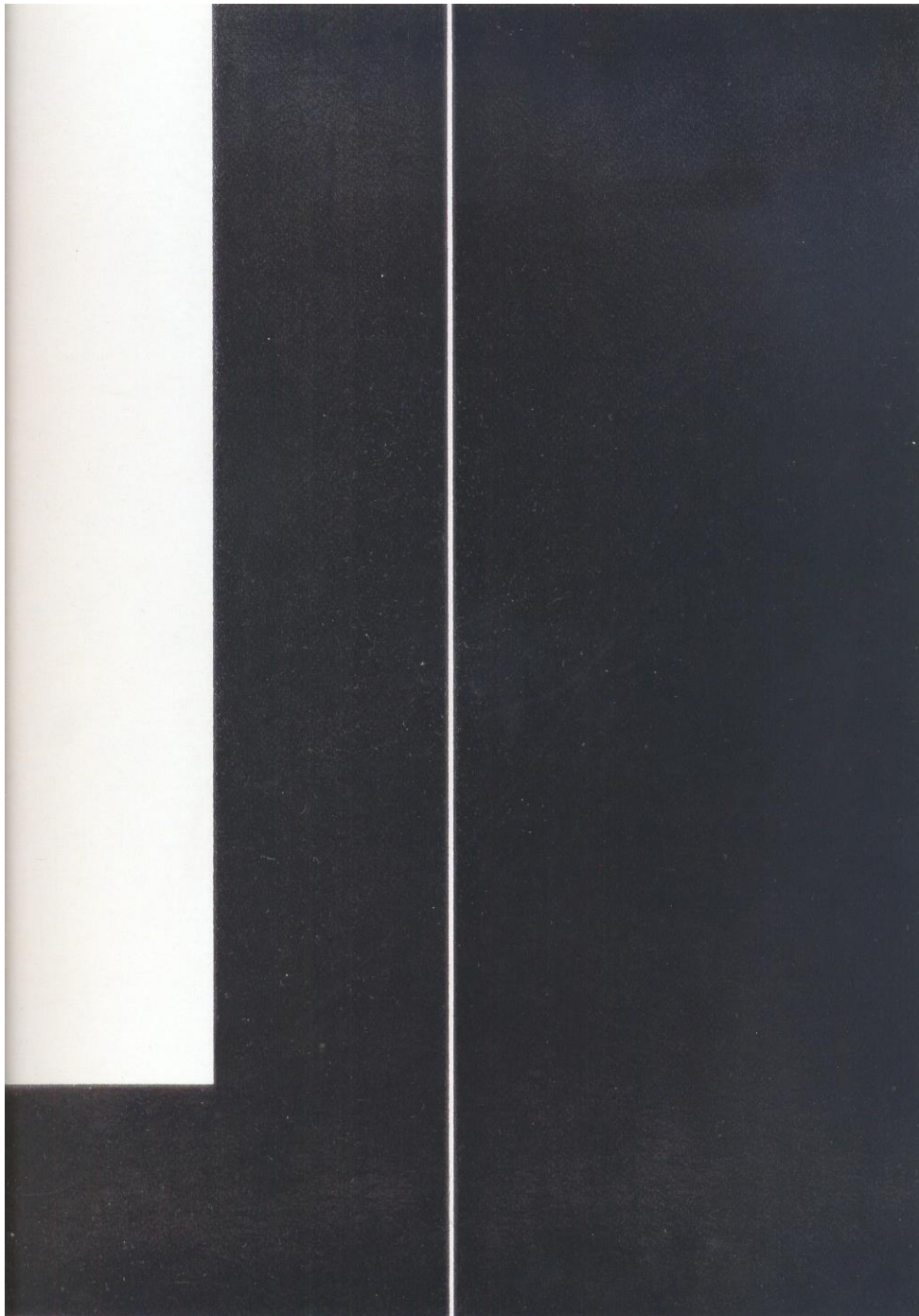


Figure 33. Julije Knifer, 9.X.97.6.I/II 19.II-7-XI-98 21.V, 1998

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p. 260

5. COLOR

5.1. COLORS

Knifer was known for the absence of color in his work and for the use only of black and white color to create meander paintings. Even though Knifer said he loved color he did not feel the need to express himself through it. In Knifer's meander paintings multi-coloring is reduced to black and white to achieve minimalism in the structure of the painting. At the beginning of the 1950s before the creation of meander paintings in his *Compositions*, Knifer was using colors belonging to the same chromatic base whether it was brown, grey, dark green, dark ocher in combination with black and white. Since 1959 Knifer had been reducing color spectrum to non-colors black and white negating color completely. Until 1963, we can still see grey, brown, instead of black on white background.

From 1968 to 1970 meander transformed completely into a sign, as its form was reduced to extreme limits of possibility. At that moment, Knifer started to use color again as he created black meanders on a grey background or blue meanders on a gold background. The ground of the canvas seemed more compact since oil was replaced with acrylic making the brushstrokes invisible as they had become an indivisible part of the impermeable upper layer of the painting giving it a new tactile quality. Through that process one gets the impression that Knifer was trying to dematerialize the painting, separate its epidermis from the canvas.³²⁵ In this period, Knifer experimented with the surface and function of the meander presenting it in collages, sculpture, relief, murals, flag, and at the same time meander became a completely individual whole. Spirituality is here stripped away, as these paintings can be seen as Knifer's ironic response toward his own artworks.³²⁶

Opposite to Malevich, Knifer had a short colored phase lasting two years while Malevich gave autonomy to color that became independent in the second phase of Suprematism. In that sense, the period from *Black Square* to *White Square* 1915-1918 was characterized by painting depiction of optical phenomena of pure sensation that happens when the eye is affected by light and darkness phenomena that Malevich called color masses. The difference of color spectrum depended on the fact whether

³²⁵ Maković, Z. (2001) *Knifer*, (p.70) Zagreb: Meandar

³²⁶ Pierre A., (2001), *Julije Knifer*, (p.56) Paris: Adam Biro

the eye is in the area of light producing the range of reds, magentas, blues, greens, oranges and yellow, or in a dark spectrum producing the tones of greens, blues and violets.³²⁷

In Suprematism color is an independent element, something that speaks about the construction of the world and moves depending on the energy that evokes artist's sensibility. To Malevich, color first appeared as one unusual state, as undetermined mass after which an artist organized this color in two ways: creating a utilitarian form of practical things or non-utilitarian form of non-objective nature.³²⁸

Knifer did not take Malevich's Suprematism as a concept for the use of color but he did for the use of black and white contrast from the first suprematist phase, to create balance. In this colored phase he was more inspired by the color use of Yves Klein who had an exhibition in Zagreb in 1971. Yves Klein had an influence on the Gorgona group as in the 1960s the group produced "the Gorgona's black color", that Vaništa gave Knifer as a birthday present. The Gorgona group also planned Klein's contribution for the anti-magazine *Gorgona* that was not realized and used Klein's quote for the *Thought for February* in 1961: "abstract painting is the picturesque literature of psychological states. That's sad. I'm glad I'm not an abstract painter."³²⁹

Klein used blue, pink and gold color to create monochromes as an attempt to present in painting transcendental and metaphysical categories such as emptiness, immateriality and eternity. When talking about color spectrum we can see that Yves Klein mostly used blue, gold and pink for his monochromes as they possessed the same nature, as he would say: "any exchange at the level of these three states is honest."³³⁰ Klein considered gold, blue and pink the elements of the Holy Trinity: gold for the father, blue for the son and pink for the Holy Spirit. Independent from each other together they form an alchemical equation gathering, the sun represented by gold color, the water represented by blue color and blood represented by pink color. Klein was pursuing the meaning through the purity of a color so that it can

³²⁷ Kandinsky, Malewitsch, Mondrian *The Infinite White Abyss*, (2014) (pp.255-6) Kunst Sammlung Nordrhein Westfallen, Snoeck

³²⁸ Ibidem, pp.255-6

³²⁹ Gattin, M.,(2012) *Gorgona*, (p.33) Zagreb : Museum of Contemporary Art

³³⁰ Klein, (2001) (p.20) Taschen

trigger a spiritual experience. To him, color was an abstract element that transmitted ideas and concrete feelings. The same colors gold, blue and even pink in combination with black will be used by Knifer for his colored meanders.³³¹

In the early 1970s, Knifer did not use a white background on colored meanders but he focused on black, blue and gold color. In that sense, he made blue-black, blue-gold, black-grey, black gold, blue-gold meander paintings. Knifer felt that the reduction of structure and chromatics was taken to its extreme limits, so he wanted to bring back the chromatic values. In this process, the relationship of white and black was replaced with gold-blue, warm-cold combinations.³³²

In this short color phase when Knifer included color in the contrast instead of white, he was using acrylic instead of oil so that colors could make a compact surface of the painting seem neutral and smooth. In that way, meander appeared two-dimensional, as a visual sign. Also, in color collages from 1970, meander revealed itself as an object, as a material fact. In this period, Knifer was not relying so much on the metaphysical or existentialist qualities of the meander as on visual ones. Knifer would cut the meanders and glued them to the surface. In collages, he made between 1970-1975 he used a combination of colors: red-blue, blue-silver, gold-red and in relief blue-black. All those meanders were of small format but visually very close to ornament, where the focus was more on the visual appearance.³³³

In this colored period meander is no longer a statement of existence but a decoration. Even though the value of the sign is reduced in a new chromatic relationship, the monumentality is highlighted by a classic seriousness of the combination. Instead of signification, Knifer presented a sign, instead of symbol a fact, and meander served its own purpose. This larger chromatic choice represented further testing of visual elements in the cycle of meanders. Meander became more a design object as Knifer experimented further and employed color not only on the painting but also into reliefs and collages. It was because he also wanted to see the possibilities of meander in other color contrasts and materials. In color phase, we see that Knifer was slowly

³³¹ Maković Z., (2001) *Knifer*, (p.60) Zagreb: Meandar

³³² Ibidem., p.60

³³³ Ibidem., p.60

abandoning the idea of anti-painting that was still present, but at the same time he was searching for other dimensions of a painting on the way towards the creation of the painting without identity that he would create in the late 1970s represented in black and white meanders.³³⁴

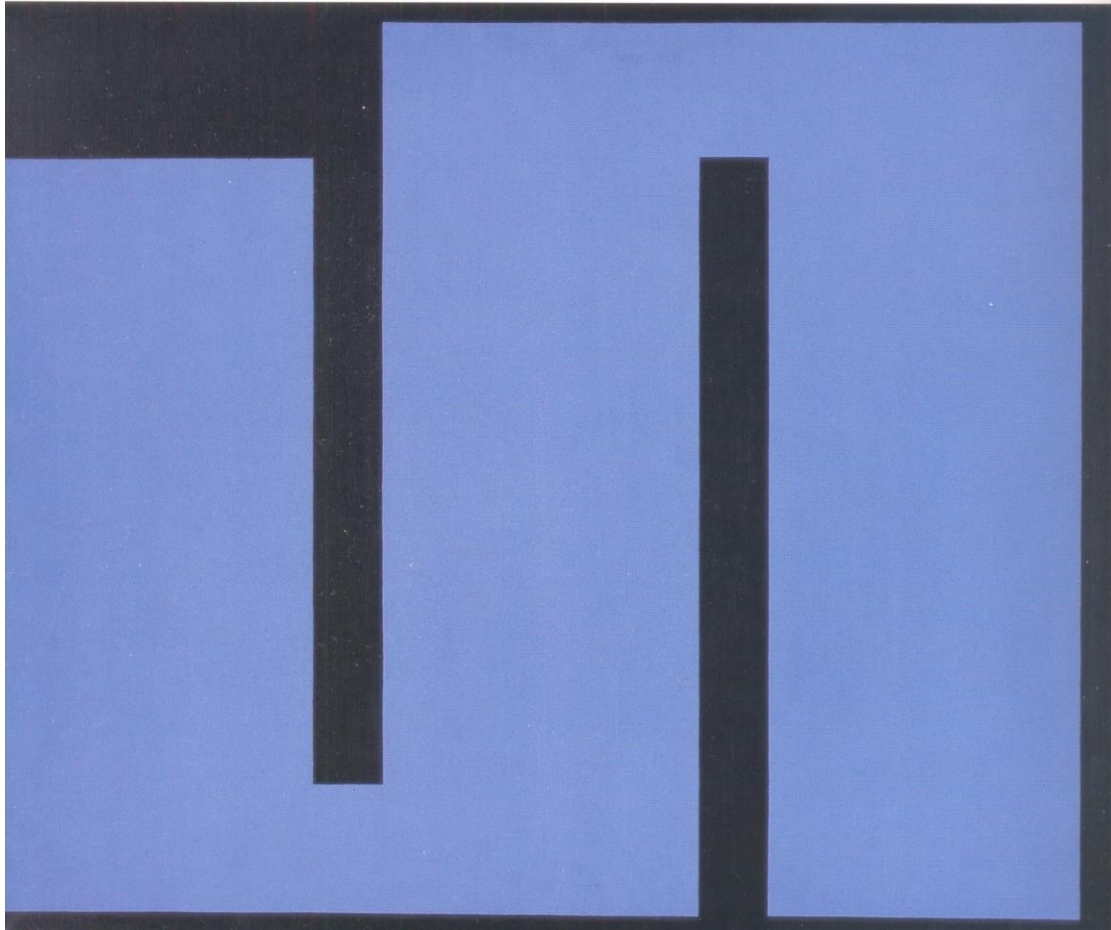


Figure 34. Julije Knifer, *MBN*, 1970

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.131

³³⁴ Denegri, J. (2000) Jedan prilog tumačenju slikarstva Julija Knifera in: *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.24) Zagreb: Horetzky

5.2. CONTRAST

In avant-garde period Malevich, Kandinsky and Mondrian created their own vision of cosmos on the canvas by using contrasts of colors. Knifer did the same when he made his anti-paintings with the extreme contrast of black and white color. Anti-paintings helped Knifer reach freedom, while Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian were trying to create a new order that would serve the new society of the 20th century. In this way, we can see that Knifer's approach was more individualistic and in touch with the existentialism and individualism of the 1960s. On the other hand Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich's approach belonged to the period after the revolution when new society system had the possibility to be established and they were ready to offer their own visions of the future.

In this process, Malevich was searching for the new principle of existence and considered Suprematism the highest perfection of abstraction. He linked idealist ideas to form a radical concept for a non-objective world. On the other hand, Kandinsky saw himself as a pioneer of a new social order in which the artist would play a prominent role. He regarded the white space of canvas as a space of possibility because white according to Kandinsky was: "like a silence of great magnitude it is not dead silence but one pregnant with possibilities."³³⁵ At the same time, Mondrian developed an art of new time by using consciousness whose ideal he recognized in the balance of equivalents. In that way, Mondrian achieved synthetically harmonious pictorial solutions using colors as well as non-colors black and grey, and in particular white. His compositions can, therefore, be read as an actual anticipation of a new model society.³³⁶

Utopia is a concept that over centuries transformed from a concrete counter image of Thomas Moore's *Utopia* and Plato's *Politeia* into a form of a hypothesis. It expanded to include the dimension of anticipation of the hypothetical possibilities coupled with the hope of its progressive realization. The classical notion of space utopia is based on a form of progression philosophy, its belief in the perfectibility of man permitting a counterfactual forecast of the future, driving the desire for its realization. In the 18th

³³⁵ Kandinsky, Malewitsch, Mondrian *The Infinite White Abyss*, (2014) (p.15)Kunst Sammlung Nordrhein Westfalen Snoeck

³³⁶ Ibidem. p.261

century the transformation of the notion of utopia from classical space utopia to time utopia occurred, that placed utopia in the future instead of locating it at a remote place somewhere in the world.³³⁷ In the preface to the catalogue for the exhibition *Kandinsky, Malewitsch, Mondrian The Infinite White Abyss* utopia is defined as:

Structurally utopian constructs have the status of fictions. They are free of referentiality, as their spatial perspective is pointing only to a non-locality or in terms of time to something non-existent. These social systems aspired to be for the most part free of conflict as they are characterized by the pursuit of a state of harmony. This quest for harmony is often linked to aesthetic-theoretical, architectural, geometric-mathematical and spiritual paradigms that seek to compensate deficit inherent in the structure of utopia. This utopia is the indeterminacy that results from the contradiction between the future and thus non-real and its realization or representation within the work.³³⁸

The utopias constructed by Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian demonstrated a spatial and a temporal moment. The spatial moment already existed in the arts as works reveal themselves to the viewer intuitively via space. Regardless of differences in their artistic use of form, the constructs of utopia of Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian are characterized by a high degree of abstraction. These artists placed emphasis on the form in their pictorial work as well as in their extensive theoretical writings showing a tendency toward aestheticizing the utopian potential of the works.³³⁹

Knifer, on the other hand, was taking a more individualistic approach toward his utopian project of achieving his own freedom, and perhaps somebody else's, through his work. In contrast, to avant-garde utopias, Knifer resisted the temptation to fill the gaps of existence and to project the image of fulfillments elsewhere onto a reality that does not and cannot take place. As Knifer explained:

³³⁷ *Kandinsky, Malewitsch, Mondrian The Infinite White Abyss*, (2014) (p.10) Kunst Sammlung Nordrhein Westfalen Snoeck

³³⁸ *Ibidem.* p.261

³³⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.261

I did not paint so that the paintings could serve someone else, they served me. My painting is in a way a mode of my behavior. I do not want to change the world, culture, civilization and especially the relation to art. Visual arts went on in their liberation and the liberation of people and creators. I don't know if I have liberated something in the painting, but I know I have liberated myself with the help of painting.³⁴⁰

Knifer presented his utopian project in *A Petitionary Letter to the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb* that was published in 1983 in *Život umjetnosti* but was written back in the 1960s while Knifer was a member of the Gorgona group. In the letter, Knifer was writing to the highest intellectual institution in Zagreb to solve his existential problem: “as the signee of this letter I have not found a good reason not to address you directly as follows: because I consider the addressed institution the only competent one to solve the problem of other people's existences, both a) successful existences and b) unsuccessful existences.”³⁴¹

The reason Knifer wrote the *Plead*, as we find out in the text, was the difference between day and night, which for him is a purely existentialist problem. This existentialist problem presented nausea to Knifer, as his conscience was bothering him during the night. The same extreme contrast we find in the meander painting, as the day that could be referred to as white and night that can be referred to as black is present. Following, in the text Knifer mentions existentialist problems of anxiety, nothingness and absurd as he struggles with his own anxiety. This experience of anxiety is connected to the absurd that for Knifer is a form of freedom and very important component of his actions.³⁴²

Sartre argues that anxiety provides a lucid experience of freedom, which characterizes human experience as such. For Sartre freedom is the dislocation of consciousness from its object, the fundamental negation by means of which consciousness can grasp its object without losing itself in it: “to be conscious of something is to be conscious of not being it because nothingness is just what consciousness is. There can be no

³⁴⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.152) Zagreb: MSU

³⁴¹ *Ibidem.*, p.95

³⁴² *Ibidem.*, p.95

objects in consciousness but only object for consciousness. This means that consciousness is radically free.”³⁴³

In Knifer and Malevich’s non-objective art, consciousness is differently represented. For example, in Malevich’s *Black Square* white color is presented as infinity, while the black square is something existing in this infinity. This reality of infinity represents the new cosmic consciousness, feeling of four-dimensional space, the unity of everything, the sensation of world harmony and the new morality. For Malevich cosmic consciousness is an unconscious state in which differences collapse into identity.³⁴⁴ On the other hand, consciousness in Knifer’s painting is represented with the same extreme contrast of black and white, which in this case represents the flow of consciousness. We can see that the difference in expression lies in the fact that Knifer presented his feeling, consciousness by the variations of the movement that is reached by the extreme contrast of black and white in the form of the meander. Malevich on the other hand reached it by the negation of the object. Still the result is the same, transcendent feeling, as they both approach the metaphysical borders of art and experience by representing infinity in flow or space.

In Existentialism, the experience of anxiety yields absurd, a kind of alienation from the world that appears when a person does not experience themselves fully “at home” in the world since he/she as a person does not experience the connection between meanings and their own projects he/she is engaged in. In that sense, a person that is in the mood of anxiety loses their character in the world as he/she is not practically engaged anymore and things become absurd and words lose their meanings. In that way, things do not disappear but all that remains is the blank recognition that they are.³⁴⁵

Prior to exhibiting *Black Square* Malevich also felt a sense of anxiety. In that sense, Malevich was experiencing similar feelings by abandoning the world of objects as they lost meaning for him confirming Heidegger’s claim that in anxiety our relevance towards entity in the world disappears. When our involvement with entities is absent,

³⁴³ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.95) Zagreb: MSU

³⁴⁴ Taylor, (1992) *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, (p.82) University of Chicago Press

³⁴⁵ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/#SarExiMar>>

the world appears to offer us an infinite field of possibilities, just as *Black Square* gives possibilities of various suprematist forms.³⁴⁶ Malevich, as well as Knifer, did not run from this nausea and anxiety, creating in his art his own truths and spectrums of freedom that were not possible in the real world. As Malevich said:

Even I was gripped by a kind of timidity with fear when it came to leaving “the world of will and idea” in which I had lived and worked and in the reality of which I had believed. But a blissful sense of liberating non-objectivity drew me forth into the “desert” where nothing is real except feeling...and so feeling became the substance of my life. This was no “empty space” which I had exhibited but rather the feeling of non-objectivity.³⁴⁷

In *Petitionary Letter to the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb* Knifer separated day into two parts. The first part of the day he spends in lethargic sleep and the second part in an allergic doze, after which during the night he wakes up. Already in this part, we can see a component of absurd and irony as he continues to express his deep gratitude and mercy towards everybody. In the next part of the text we see the complete irony and mockery towards institutions as Knifer’s only reason for writing is the frustration with awakening and consciousness that appears during the night, unworthy of a real man who is only allowed of a lethargic semi-sleep at most. Because of this sin of waking up, he is addressing himself to the institution since it is the most competent to suppress all kinds of awareness. Furthermore, he asks for the assessment of his own present spiritual situation.³⁴⁸

Knifer in *Plead* found himself in the situation that he was awake and fully aware. He was destined to the existence and its absurd duration without any palpable stronghold. Finding himself in this situation Knifer described different kinds of absurd situations trying to find a solution to his problem, awareness. In the text, we can see a complex world hidden in the sequencing of non-possibilities in which there is no order and in which all values and facts are relativized and turned meaningless with time as the only mover. In this way Knifer becomes the absurd hero once again, that does not fit

³⁴⁶ Dreyfus, (2006) *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, (p.246) Wiley-Blackwell

³⁴⁷ Taylor, (1992) *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, (p.82)University of Chicago Press

³⁴⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.95) Zagreb: MSU

into society, whose fictive life had been exchanged with absurd duration, a duration that lasts between the lines of the text that forms the monotonous rhythm, rhythm of the meander.³⁴⁹

As a solution to his anxiety and peace that he lost at night, Knifer suggested the abolition of night. According to his proposal, the day would be spent living sleeping, as people should work sleeping and sleep working. Following, Knifer proposes another two solutions that should be enforced in order to steal people's identities and describes the dystopian society reigned by the Academy. Here it is clear that Knifer is taking the situation towards absurd and blaming the institution for the disidentitization of society claiming that progress is to go back progressively and that the world in that sense has to be disavantgardised. At the end, we could characterize *Plead* as a letter of disappointment toward the system in Yugoslavia that was supposed to bring more freedom and liberation of individuals but it just brought more state repression.³⁵⁰

The contrast we find in *Plead* between day and night is also found in Knifer's paintings between black and white. The extreme rhythm in meander is not just presented by the contrast of black and white, two non-colors that make the most extreme oppositions on the color scheme but also by the extremes of vertical and horizontal, two extreme directions. These two extreme contrasts give meander dynamic spatial quality as time gets transformed into space. In the contrast, the importance is put on the change and duration of the form. There is also the analogy with music as in meander we can notice durational contrast, but for the painting still the spatial contrast remains more important. The rhythm that comes from different contrasts connects Knifer with painted meander as his own inner rhythm is giving the existence to meander that does not repeat itself but continues from painting into painting. In that sense, Knifer presents meanders as a place where the constant of his being lies.³⁵¹

Rhythm in the exchange of black and white space is important not only for a changeable form of meander but also for the creation of the borderline situations in

³⁴⁹ Maković, Z. (1983) Notes, *Život umjetnosti*, No. 35 (p.27) Zagreb

³⁵⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.95) Zagreb: MSU

³⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p.90

painting that constantly need to be reestablished. These represented situations are in this case established by a contrast so it is important that one contrast does not take over the domination over the entire system of meanings and symbols. In that sense, it is important to create a contrast that will acquire the dimensions of reality it is testifying. Through contrast, it is possible to conquer the entire space of the canvas as it constantly re-enacts the form that establishes the connection with the perceptible.³⁵²

We could say that meander is the mediator between white towards black. Knifer reached meander, this minimalistic, repetitive and geometrical form by the method of reduction. This phenomenon of transcendental reduction that occurs in meander we can see in discarding of everything that precedes the essence of visual art. The process of reduction allowed that the space of Knifer and the space of painting become identical. This identification is most evident in black meander paintings from the 1970s. We can see that in time under unceasing contemplation meander gradually loses its primary meaning and its external characteristics as later it hardly has a common outline with the previous meander. On this path of constant dissolution of sensory reality, the inner image is purified and sharply contoured. The only thing that always stays the same is the essence of the meander.³⁵³

The relationship between black and white or fullness and emptiness of the form is the basic construction element of the meander painting, as Ljerka Mifka says: “colors were just means that served exclusively to form the shape of the painting. The form of black and white meant in the context of the content of the painting its definite shape. There is no additional meaning outside this.”³⁵⁴ On the meander paintings, white and black color exchange places of the volume filling in the composition and we can notice that black is not always equally heavy or white is not always equally light. We see that fields of black and white are most of the time equal in balance and just sometimes one color dominates the other on the surface creating an imbalance. This imbalance is most evident in the 1980s when Knifer started to cover the whole surface with black paint with one white thin line representing remains of the meander. Moreover, all these extreme contrasts take on different plastic, psychological and

³⁵² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.117) Zagreb: MSU

³⁵³ *Ibidem*, p.119

³⁵⁴ Radaković Ž (1994), *Knifer Povest o Juliju Kniferu*, (p.167) Beograd: Radio B92

emotional significations. In that way, by careful variations of more or less the same elements of the filling, different contexts arise as the meaning of every individual part depends on the whole composition.³⁵⁵

Meander is not just built out of color contrast but it is also made out of two structures physical and spiritual one, meaning that black and white contrast create the physical and spiritual part of the painting. This is one more dichotomy that can be added to the contrasts of black-white, space-void, public-private, vertical-horizontal, darkness-light, plus-minus, annulling-computing, lack-overabundance, existence-non-existence. As Knifer said:

The physical form of the painting at the same time represented the ultimate spiritual state of the primal idea. My aim is to create some form of anti-painting with minimal means in utmost contrasts to obtain a monotonous rhythm, which represents a spiritual continuity he was getting ready for several years.³⁵⁶

As we can see meander is defined by absence and presence that at the same time show opposite situations and create a border that separates them. Existence is presented as a border of space in which a being can enter, or one into which the being enters. He presents two worlds, the world of nothingness and the world of perceptible reality. The dichotomy of these two extremes is resolved in the ever-changing figure of meander through the search of its unchangeability, in its alterations.³⁵⁷

Ljerka Mifka further explains that the contrast between black and white is only a starting point for all kinds of contrasts and meanings that represent Knifer's existentialist philosophy. To reach black and white contrast it was necessary to master all the colors so that the result could represent the dichotomy of two non-colors. By persisting on the same motif, Knifer discloses his world in which reality is always present in the same form by which its modifications are almost imperceptible. In that

³⁵⁵ Maković, Z., (2002), *Knifer*, (p.17) Zagreb: Meandar

³⁵⁶ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.88) Zagreb: MSU

³⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.117

sense meander emerges not just as a representation of the passage of time but the essence of change.³⁵⁸

By using black and white contrast Knifer was exploring the visual perception and experience of the viewer. Chronologically looking in the post-Cubistic phase during 1955/56, Knifer was using colors with different tones that disappeared with the appearance of meander in 1959 where this contrast became the builder of the painting. When meander structure reached its limit, Knifer introduced color once again in the opposition to the cold and warm tones such as gold and blue, for example, reducing the monumentality of the meander. In the 1950s Knifer was already conducting chromatic reduction showing different tones of one color through brown, grey, green, ocher, black and white, using them to build rhythmized surfaces. In the 1960s by reducing all the colors to black and white, Knifer rejected all illusions toward the object world and illusionist elements of the plastic language as well.³⁵⁹

All significations of the extreme contrast of the black and white dualism were reflected on Knifer. Sometimes he was seen as the fiercest nihilist and sometimes as an artist who found his spirituality in his art. Maybe at first glance, we can connect Knifer to nihilism because of his representations of the dystopian world in *Petitionary Letter to the Academy of Arts and Sciences*, the construction of anti-painting with non-colors and representation of meander as a void. Nihilism can also be seen present in the space where meander spreads since meander is going back from where it came into nothingness. Nothingness found in Knifer's works is far from true nihilistic tendencies since they represent a new kind of reality that cannot be understood by reason but by feeling.³⁶⁰

According to Ljerka Mifka by the contrast of black and white Knifer was also giving the direction to the void. When the direction is outlined, meander shows itself as fullness formed by painter's being so that it suddenly stops to exist as nothingness and emerges as a final border that can be conquered in the tangible world by that same

³⁵⁸ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.120) Zagreb: MSU

³⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*, pp.55-57

³⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*, pp.95-97

nothingness. In that way by insisting on the same motif of meander we find paradox of circular closeness and linear flow.³⁶¹

The visual order is not just the form of artwork, it is the way we see and think, relate, conceptualize and fantasize about the world. In that sense by creating meander, Knifer, was obtaining the maximum effect with minimal resources.³⁶² Color contrast in meander can also be read as the opposition of positive white and negative black color. The black color is characterized by fullness and white by purity through which Knifer realizes the complete spiritual contemplation. For Knifer black was a color of the biggest passion and white its opposite. With both non-colors, he was creating his own visual order in a painting where meander was “the border of his freedom.”³⁶³

This spiritual dimension of the painting is visible in the characteristics of meander, in the monotony and slowness of its variations but also in the persistence on the homogeneity of the structure. In that sense in meander movements, we can notice the constant renewal of the being and its existence. We could say that Knifer reaches the white subliminal phase of Malevich following the art of pure spirituality in the search of calmness, the essentiality of thinking.³⁶⁴ In *Notes* Knifer gave more information on spiritual and physical contrast in meander:

I tried to achieve the overlapping between the spiritual and the physical in a painting, because in its physical form my painting is exhausted spiritually as well. The initial stage of my work on canvas consisted in covering the canvas in white. This was already the spiritual part or the spiritual conception of painting. Maybe I should put this more precisely – the physical conception of the painting. The physical shape of the painting at the same time meant the ultimate spiritual state of the initial idea. My current compositions contain the same spiritual origin and the same structure of those years-fifty nine and sixty.³⁶⁵

³⁶¹ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.120) Zagreb: MSU

³⁶² Horvat Pintrić, *Meandar kao sistem*,
<http://www.msu.hr/files/15179/KNIFER%20JULIJE_1970.pdf>

³⁶³ *Ibidem*.

³⁶⁴ Denegri J. (2000) *Jedan prilog tumačenju slikarstva Julija Knifera* in: *Umjetnosti konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p.296) Zagreb: Horetzky

³⁶⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.88) Zagreb: MSU

Igor Zidić sees meander in all of its contrasts as a representation of Knifer's forlornness, to be and not to be, plus and minus, life and non-life, black and white. In that sense, we understand why meander is most of the time presented through its drastic interrelations. Adding the color to this dimension would bring weakness of the primary before secondary, the elementary before the acquired, the ethical before the visual being. Having in mind all mentioned contrasts we can look upon the constant production of meanders as an ethical complex since each canvas represents the peak of moral catharsis where crisis engraves maximums on the sharp edges of existence and non-existence.³⁶⁶

Knifer consciously rejects the colors and reduces his spectrum to black and white. This process of color reduction adds to the feeling of monotony. Black and white contrast is important not only because it creates the form of meander but also because it creates the space of existence, of absurd, of freedom, of Knifer's being and of existence itself. In this process of reduction, Knifer succeeded in creating the world inside his paintings that enables him to encompass everything that the outside world is capable of disclosing by its existence. This equality applies to the maximum and minimum of the matter being, an amplitude that will base its constant not on the endless flow, but on the possibility of endless flow. For this reason, it appears that Knifer in his creation of space inside of meander managed to leave out everything that happens outside the world of essence. In the end, meander gained its independence through the fact that it opens the immediate reality and at the same time persists outside of it.³⁶⁷

Knifer is creating his space of existence through the contrasts of black and white. These two colors representing maximum and minimum of meander's mass form interexchange all the time creating absurd situation full of coincidences. By each new meander, a new space is being created, a new borders are being made that open or close space creating new order, new existence of things. The dynamism that Malevich was creating with free color forms in the second phase of Suprematism Knifer was

³⁶⁶ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.88) Zagreb: MSU

³⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p.113

establishing with the movement of the form through black and white contrast while both of colors in the process negate the borders of painting.

We could say that Knifer in his art presented only whiteness of light and blackness of darkness. However, he also knew that these two non-colors cannot be divided even being so extremely apart. Meander through contrasts shows inner tensions, intimate histories, divisions and distributions. We can see the same principle in Malevich's *Black Square* as in meander where black square, line, color cannot exist without its surrounding white plane that determines both the form and anti-form of the composition. The more Knifer progressed in his work, the thinner white portions would get through cutting into the black, as if breaches of our awareness into nothing without an object would increasingly shrink.³⁶⁸

Black Square is the primordial cell of the suprematist system that found its formal dogma in a geometric form floating in the infinity of white space. Suprematist theory postdating Malevich considered the square as the basis of the non-objective thinking. Between the end of traditional and the beginning of new art the *Black Square* as a zero form marks the zero point of painting. Malevich's *Black Square* embodies everything and nothing at the same time. The white base can be understood as a metaphor of infinity in the form of boundless space and as a color that simultaneously depicts the entire spectrum. Black, in turn, manifests a form of a non-color as it cancels out all the other colors.³⁶⁹

The influence of Malevich in Knifer's art can be seen in the radical reduction of all expressive elements since Suprematism in its purest form and original inception was colorless. It is clear that Knifer reduced all elements in his art to achieve anti-painting because in this way he could express the "concreteness of infinite" by the continuous repetition of the same sign. The black and white contrast is most visible in the first phase of Suprematism on the paintings: *White and Black*, *Black Square*, *Black Circle* and *Black Cross*. In these paintings, we see the same approach Knifer was using in meander anti-paintings, the opposition of two naturally opposed masses of color: black and white. The difference is that in Malevich's paintings white was not set on

³⁶⁸ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.146) Zagreb: MSU

³⁶⁹ *Malevich* (2014) (p.118) London: Tate

black but in opposition to black. In suprematist white final phase, white abolishes the entire range of colors as matter without differences, reducing black to narrow black stripe like a small crack through which only darkness inaccessible to any kind of light can be seen. In the same way, black color in Knifer's work keeps spreading over the plane surface reducing the white to a crack that offers possibilities in this contrast between the visible and invisible, existence and being, where the feeling is manifested.³⁷⁰

Suprematism was colorless at the beginning, as in *Black Square* the color was suppressed. Malevich regarded black and white to be excluded from color spectrum and at the beginning Suprematism was mainly monochromatic so that painting seemed more radical and could announce the zero point of Suprematism more firmly.³⁷¹ In the first phase of Suprematism Malevich was already considering suprematist forms as not fixed, but as masses in a state of becoming with the emphasis on the non-objective vitality and their deform ad infinitum. As can be seen, black and white color are deducted from the color spectrum and this deduction conferred upon these two colors an aesthetic and hence philosophical importance that went beyond established pictorial practice. In 1920, Malevich wrote: "the most important in Suprematism are the energies of black and white serving to reveal the forms of action."³⁷²

Within a few years, Malevich leads Suprematism to complete abstraction from black via the red and the white square to pure action, finding its most decisive form of representation in the white fading surface on the white ground. According to Malevich today we are in the phase of colored Suprematism of the colored energy concentration. From this explanation, we can see that the color is important only in the short period of Suprematism, in the second stage that lasted from 1914 until 1917 following and preceding the strong energetic contrast between black and white square.³⁷³

³⁷⁰ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.250) Zagreb: MSU

³⁷¹ *Malevich* (2014) (p.118) London: Tate

³⁷² Nakov (2009), *Black and White*, (p.31) Moderna Muset, Steidl

³⁷³ Lamač, Padrta (1980). *Ideja Suprematizma*. in Mijušković S. (Ed.), *Maljevič, Suprematizam – Bespredmetnost* (p.126). Beograd: Studentski izdavački centar UKSSO.

In utopian projects colors had symbolic meanings and, on the other hand, they served to establish harmony. Suprematism between the years 1913-18 had three phases: black, colored and white. The paintings were done according to the economic principle, as one surface would transmit the force of statics or visible dynamic peace. In addition, this system formed a completely new world of a white structure as pure activity, understood as the knowledge of the purely utilitarian perfection. Three Suprematist squares in black, red and white color represented the establishment of a certain worldview and the world organization. The most important principles in Suprematism were the energies of black and white, as they were to Knifer as well since they built up the form. This perfect balance of black and white is found in *Four Squares* from 1915 in which black and white are equal in form and color. In everyday life, suprematist colors had another meaning: black was a sign of the economy, red a signal of revolution and white of pure action.³⁷⁴

Meander can also create different optical effects in the same sense as Malevich was talking about colorful Suprematism with optical overload or through different tempo of following meanders. In that way, meander gets one more dimension, one that exceeds the formal painting and creates a visual experience that is out of its control. In the structure of meander, color is also independent and it is equal to the form since the form is built out of the contrast of black and white. In blackness, Knifer condensed the weight of the mass while with the white he does the opposite making the painting more light. In that sense, the balance of existence or non-existence of color reflects on our perception of the painting. Moreover, we can perceive that Knifer used the white same as Malevich, to open the space that extends over the boundaries of the painting frame, mapping a trajectory into the infinite.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ Malevich K. (1980) *Suprematizam* in (Ed.) Mijušković S. *Maljevič, Suprematizam – Bespredmetnost* (p.18) Beograd: Studentski izdavački centar UKSSO. (Original work published 1920).

³⁷⁵ Horvat Pintarić, *Meandar kao sistem*,
<http://www.msu.hr/files/15179/KNIFER%20JULIJE_1970.pdf>

5.3. BLACK

Black color seems cold and passive as it contains the smallest amount of light. This definition is similar to Kandinsky's definition of black color being closed, soundless, static, finished color next to which every other color gains on sound and strength.³⁷⁶ For Knifer, on the other hand, black was the color of biggest passion while white was its opposite.³⁷⁷ During his studies, Knifer was impressed more with Hals' painting than with Rembrandt's and spent hours in the museum studying the effects of black color that he found in his paintings. He thought that the pathos of Hals' paintings came from the sole matter, reduced register of color and not from the story and the picturesque scene.³⁷⁸ Black color started to appear in Knifer's paintings as a dominant color after the reduction of color palette in 1959.

In the 1970s, black color got more importance than white due to the black meander paintings done over a large time period with pencil and graphite. In that sense black meander paintings in the 1970s represented Knifer's attempt to make paintings without identity. In this process, by using reduction, Knifer abandoned painting as an object, as he was getting closer to the forms of conceptual art of the 1970s that was going toward the complete disappearance of a painting. From that moment, Knifer stepped away from meander scheme that was already clearly articulated and got more concerned with the problem of black elements on white surface, elements that broke down the flat space of a painting. With black meander paintings, Knifer was reaching extreme reductionism and approaching monochrome first in black and then in white color.³⁷⁹ In *Notes* Knifer said:

Today, the idea of the anti-picture is very likely not part of my thinking and I do not know if my current compositions suggest the formula of the anti-picture, although they bear with themselves the same spiritual origin and the same spiritual and physical structure from those fifties and sixties years. For that reason for me, it is important to go on with the logic of a certain course and flow one that began then and which represents above all a high calculated

³⁷⁶ Kandinsky W. (1999), *Duh apstrakcije*, (p.200) Zagreb: IPU

³⁷⁷ Pintarić, (1970) *Meandar kao sistem*, Zagreb

http://www.msu.hr/files/15179/KNIFER%20JULIJE_1970.pdf

³⁷⁸ Maković (2001), *Knifer*, (p.46) Zagreb: Meandar

³⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*, (p.14)

and objective logic in which I did not set off in the investigation of unknown forms but simply recorded the final rhythms of events on the surface. From the idea of the time of the possible formulae for the anti-picture, gradually and temporally not controlled and without any wish for a logical course of development, I arrived at the realization that my ultimate aim and a more or less determined objective was to create a picture without an identity.³⁸⁰

In the second half of the 1970s, Knifer went back to drawing, after a long period, since 1959. From meanders that he would finish in two or three days Knifer started to draw meander on large formats with graphite pencil to achieve reflecting surfaces that reveal texture of the paper. In that phase drawing was not just a phase of research before the outcome, it was a form of expression, a finished work of art. These drawings were made with black pencil shading but over the years, Knifer started to use softer pencils while black color became more dense and profound. In this process, the line that was usually outlining meander left its function of delimitation and became construction element of the surface.³⁸¹

By putting the biggest density of black color on the paper Knifer tried to exclude light out of the painting and achieve absolute darkness. Knifer was applying black color slowly, in long thought through actions during a long period of time. The application of black color can be compared with the application of white color that served as a background, which he was also applying in multiplied layers until he achieved the perfect saturation of white as he had envisioned it. The most important thing to mention in this process is the time, which in the case of application of black color, lead toward the disappearance of light. As we can see this application of black color is a long, continuous, monotonous process.

In this process of drawing the light away from the canvas art historian, Zvonko Maković sees one more important dimension of Knifer's art and that is the presence of absence that connects Knifer together with Malevich who said that *Black Square* is not an empty square but the feeling of absence of the object. Maković thinks that we

³⁸⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.296) Zagreb: MSU

³⁸¹ *Ibidem.*, p.296

could say the same for Knifer since he wanted to show the absence of light and time through meander, as Malevich showed the absence of object through *Black Square*.³⁸²

Malevich was dealing with non-objective world while Knifer was dealing with time that can be represented by the flow of meander as well as by the application of the color especially black over a certain period of time, which resulted in negation of light. In his artworks, Knifer was dealing with opposites all the time, black and white, bright and dark, rhythm and the absence of rhythm, transcendence and visual sign and other borderline situations that he always tried to push and address through meander.

In the interview for the magazine *Oris*, Knifer said that he did not know for how long he was going to do drawings, or whether the format of the painting would change, as in the end he was working on big formats. When he started to do drawings he noticed that after two or three days of drawing on paper no effect was visible. At that moment, he told himself that all of this was absurd so he decided to take the absurd as far as he could even if it took him a year to do one single drawing.³⁸³

In conversation with Žarko Radaković, Knifer said that he discovered his technique of drawing on paper in the 1960s when in Graz he saw a special kind of paper. He bought the paper and started to work on it but then he had a thought that he would not be able to finish those drawings so he left them aside. In 1974, he started working on them again as he continued creating pencil drawings wanting to achieve the biggest density of black so that the surface would revive itself, become smooth and compact. In that sense, Knifer's objective in this period of late 1970s was to affirm the medium, whether paper, color or graphite as a strong matter.³⁸⁴

For Knifer paper was as a living organism. He preferred Zanders-Parolle paper, a type of papier-mâché that had a little bit of grease inside and was a little bit yellow. As Knifer would work he would get nervous and his hand would not be calm anymore as he would make mistakes. In that moment, he would remove the drawing and wrap it up in several layers while touching the paper with gloves and never with hands.

³⁸² Maković, Z. (2001), *Knifer*, (p.79) Zagreb: Meandar

³⁸³ *Oris No. 10*, (2001) (pp.144 -167) Zagreb

³⁸⁴ Radaković, Ž., (1994) , *Knifer*, (p.33) Beograd: Radio B92

Because of this physical problem Knifer would work on several drawings at the same time.³⁸⁵

Knifer replaced hard pencils he used in his first drawings with softer ones to apply deep and dense black layers. Knifer was using pencils 6B, 7B, 8B, and 9B because their blackness was soft so he could get the maximal shine out of black. As he moved to the large formats he was using thinner pencils and graphite. In that sense, the density of black was a product of this layering process made through the possibilities of paper and graphite since Knifer discovered that paper was exerting by gradual imprint trails. Because of this reason he was working on other drawings while the first one was relaxing before starting again and continuing to work on it.³⁸⁶

The most important part of creating drawings was his ability to concentrate when he was calm and disconnected from his surroundings. Knifer did drawings very slowly. He would do series of drawings without repetitions. In an interview for magazine *Kontura*, he said he was working from drawing to drawing until he decided that the drawing was finished no matter how much time it would take him to finish it. Also, some drawings stayed unfinished since the paper was not good enough.³⁸⁷

From 1976 on Knifer started a series of continuing short meanders in black pencil that interplayed with white margins. A simple black square set a measure of their regular development and from time to time Knifer would include meander sequence as a starting point, the final point or a caesura. By putting a pencil on the surface Knifer wanted to achieve the biggest density of black and absence of light from the canvas to achieve absolute darkness.³⁸⁸ Later, in his works dating from 1979, Knifer used lines of meander to widen the margins of a painting. The composition did not change, but greasiness of black color varied from one sheet to another. The line abandoned the function of simple delineation of contours and widened to the measure that was perceived as a surface.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁵ *Kontura No.24* (1994) (p.11) Zagreb

³⁸⁶ *Oris No.10*, (2001) (p.165), Zagreb

³⁸⁷ *Kontura No.24* (1994) (p.11) Zagreb

³⁸⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.122) Zagreb: MSU

³⁸⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.269

In drawings, the place of the neutral dimness of paintings in acrylic was taken over by an ever-changing effect of grainy and vibrant surfaces. The density of obtained matter was not the same as in usual drawing techniques. A drawing saturated with black graphite made paper rigid because of the heaviness of the graphite giving it an appearance of a metal surface. Knifer called this effect black light or black as unique state of light, light hidden in darkness:

I want to get the maximum gloss out of the black; I am only attempting to make the surface of the graphite, smooth, compact and impermeable so that it attains a gloss of its own that radiates to the inside and not to the outside.³⁹⁰

Time is an important component of Knifer's work as it is present in every meander. In black drawings time got a new component of obliteration of the time flow by a process that was now reduced to the continuous application of black layers by pencil over a period of time that can even be weeks. Here, the monotony rises but now it was not based on rhythm but on the continuing process of shading that was again creating the affirmation of absurd. As Knifer said:

In my work with graphite on paper that I had commenced by the beginning of the nineties, I went, so to say, to absurdity. Work is for me always a process but in the simplest meaning of this word. To the extreme and, so to say, to absurdity.³⁹¹

From the existentialist point of view, we can consider this absurd task of covering the surface of the painting in layers and layers of black graphite a representation of art that does not have any specific meaning, but it is just a representation of a simple process of "wasting time" that arose from Knifer's developed consciousness of his own unjustified presence in the world. This process of "wasting time" was inscribed on the paper in a gradual progress and measured by successive passages of the pencil. Different kinds of "wasted time" were present at the same time in different layers of graphite and in the whole black matter of canvas. We can notice that time was even

³⁹⁰ *Kontura No. 5* (1994) (p.11) Zagreb (Želim dobiti maksimalni sjaj od crne boje, Ja samo pokušavam napraviti površinu od grafita, glatku, kompaktnu i nepropusnu tako da može sadržavati svoj sjaj koji ide prema unutra, a ne prema van) – Translation mine

³⁹¹ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.271) Zagreb: MSU

present in the title of meanders as Knifer puts the dates of beginning and finishing or, as we could say, time ranges of shading of the painting.

Drawings for Knifer had one more dimension that paintings did not have and that was the dimension of physical wear, which in this case was the precondition of painting's creation as it was impossible to separate the physical investment from psychological tension and the intensity of concentration required by a specific artwork. Painting became the space for the exhausting manual operation in which Knifer was trying to engrave himself as much as possible, as the material allows it, through the means of a pencil or graphite and his psychological endurance. Knifer's black paintings in that way became a mental process and stopped being a painting process. At the same time, identification with the painting process becomes the way of living.³⁹²

Bergson in *Matter and Memory* affirms the reality of spirit and the reality of matter by trying to determine the relation of one to another, similar to what Knifer was doing in the process of creation of his meanders and black meander drawings. In that way, present time that according to Bergson is composed out of sensory-motoric consciousness that subjects have about their body is a path through which Knifer created his meanders.³⁹³ By visualizing time through the repetitive process in which it is hard to distinguish between psychological tension and physical effort, Knifer was giving the meanders autobiographical dimension by inscribing his being into the lasting duration of the matter. He was giving his subjective input to the monotonous process where he took over the control of all the aspects of his life to create the space of freedom. The process that Knifer ritually did every day in creating his drawings is composed out of set of rules Knifer imposed on himself:

I usually work on the same drawing four days in a row and then I proceed to the next. I manage to work on up to six drawings at the same time. I obey the rules I have devised. They enable me to fully master the surface, which means that I work on series of drawings in a rhythm increasingly faster every day from the first to the last drawing and then another way round, increasingly slower, from the last to the first. The protocolary monotony is present in the

³⁹² Kusik,(1985) Julije Knifer, *Život umjetnosti*, No. 39/40 (p.114)

³⁹³ Bergson, (1987) *Materija i memorija*, (p.67), Zagreb: Informator

technique as well. As far as graphite pencils are concerned, I usually move from 3B to 6B; then I use 5B, 4B, 7B, 8B and then again 7B, 6B. Then I start the sequence over. This is work that goes to extremes if we take into account that I make less than ten drawings a year.³⁹⁴

Because of the density of black graphite, black meander paintings did not have depth, but just metal glow made out of the mass of black paint that would shine toward inside and not toward outside. This was achieved by the slow process of applying black color which was challenging for Knifer himself on the level of concentration and for the material of the painting as well. The repetition of the process was more in focus here than the repetition of the sign. In black paintings, the meander as we see it was just a starting point since monochrome planes with thin dividing lines in negative were domineering on the canvas. At the same time, meander got reduced to the extreme. We can interpret that the reduced meander motif was composed out of thin grid in negative dividing two interspaces of freedom.³⁹⁵

Dominant element now is the energy and time that Knifer himself put into each painting. The black and white meander paintings in that sense were the results of will and consciousness. By creating them Knifer wanted to inscribe his consciousness and not to present meander flow as earlier, and this demanded more will, strength, concentration, persistence and determination as he was repeating the same action several times until he exhausted both himself and the paper.

The idea of monochrome painting to which black meander drawings approach started with Malevich when he put a black square on the white background but was finished with *Triptych* of Rodchenko from 1921 when surface lost any meaning as well as color. In that sense, we can notice that by sticking to the idea of meander and representing it on the black paintings even with a thin white line, Knifer stayed faithful to the original idea of meander from 1959.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (pp.271-272) Zagreb: MSU

³⁹⁵ Matičević, (1990) Prilozi periodizaciji opusa Julija Knifera, (p.32) *Život umjetnosti, no.47*, Zagreb

³⁹⁶ Maković, Z.(2014), *Tabula Rasa*, Zagreb: Gliptoteka

With black meander paintings, as well as with white meander paintings, Knifer approached monochrome painting as he reduced meander to an extreme. Still the balance existed, as the domineering element was the absence of light in black paintings or the whiteness full of possibilities in white paintings. Both white and black meander paintings were brought into connection with nihilism and absence, as Knifer was materializing this nothingness following the suprematist example of the annihilation of an object. On the other hand, black and white meander paintings represent an abandonment of neutrality as the balance on the painting was in favor of one color, white or black, which was not the case before. In that sense, we can say that these paintings carry on a larger emotional charge since meander had been stopped and there was no flow, as meander was almost static.³⁹⁷

By renouncing all additional components of visual communication and reducing it almost completely to black color, removing the dynamisms through the contrast of black and white, Knifer was focusing only on black color and its mass. This further led to a larger spiritual dimension of meander as now the fullness of meaning of the painting comes from spiritual contemplation. Knifer was searching for consistency of thought, stillness and recollection, as before he was focusing on everlasting changes of life and stream of consciousness.³⁹⁸

Black meander paintings appear as containing the experience of the concentrated presence of time, concentration and focus. Through black meander paintings, Knifer tried to say the unsayable through the inscription of his own presence in the painting. Black paintings and meander appear as koan exercises in zen that serve to open human mind for the truth of zen. While reduction of form and meaning in modernism was a question of style, in eastern tradition it represented overcoming of a contrary, the result of perception or insight into the essence of things. In that sense even in black paintings, we can see the white meander line, this dualism of positive and negative, being and non-being contained in the formula of eastern spiritual tradition.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁷ Matičević, (1990) Prilozi periodizaciji opusa Julija Knifera (p.33) *Život umjetnosti, No.47*, Zagreb

³⁹⁸ Ibidem., p.33

³⁹⁹ Briski Uzelac S. (2014) , Upis etičkog koncepta u plohu (p.28), *Zarez* 395, Zagreb

In the late 1970s, Knifer went back to draw with a pencil after using oil and acrylic, as he was trying out the characteristics of the surface of the canvas and maybe trying to see how black color could appear on it and what its limits are. The technique of saturation of canvas with black color as well as the creation of meander was a process and it was possible to say that everything in Knifer's art included some kind of process. By applying a black pencil color Knifer added another process in the creation of the painting that made the whole procedure more complex.⁴⁰⁰

From the late 1970s, we can see the influence of analytical painting on Knifer as he dedicated himself more to the process and material but still stayed faithful to the same spiritual idea of the meander. The analytic art of the 1970s was based on the idea that auto-referentiality and tautology were expressed by a painting and not linguistic means while using primary means for examination of its own formal nature. In that sense, a format, layer of paint and surface of the canvas did not represent anything but just affirmed itself. Moreover, in this period artists, examined possibilities of the primary artistic process through non-referentiality and auto-reflexive means that enable tautological identification of work process with artwork. The artwork, in that sense, was reduced to its materiality and became *tabula rasa*.⁴⁰¹

In the 1980s graphite surfaces spread through Knifer's enlargement of the format and meander took the entire field of the sheet. On large formats only one black or white field that was the dominant was present, which was another reason why Knifer connected meander in this phase into diptychs and triptychs, showing more sequences done in different time ranges due to the long process of color application. We could say that between 1981 and 1986, Knifer just concentrated on the saturation of the canvas with a black pencil while almost abandoning the painting, which he took on again in the 1990s. In the paintings from the 1980s, blackness took over everything, leaving only a thin, white, vertical line that divided two segments of meander widened to exaggeration. In that way, black meander paintings can be perceived as further experiments of the formal possibilities of the painting. From the 1990s on Knifer worked on all forms and variations of meander paintings from short meander

⁴⁰⁰ Maković Z. (2014), *Tabula rasa – analitičko i primarno u hrvatskoj umjetnosti*, (p.15) HAZU:

Gliptoteka

⁴⁰¹ Ibidem., p.15

paintings, wall paintings, drawings, black meanders and white meander. He did not introduce any new representation of meander. In that way, aesthetics of the painting was reduced to its ethical proportion, as we can see Knifer's attitude in it.⁴⁰²

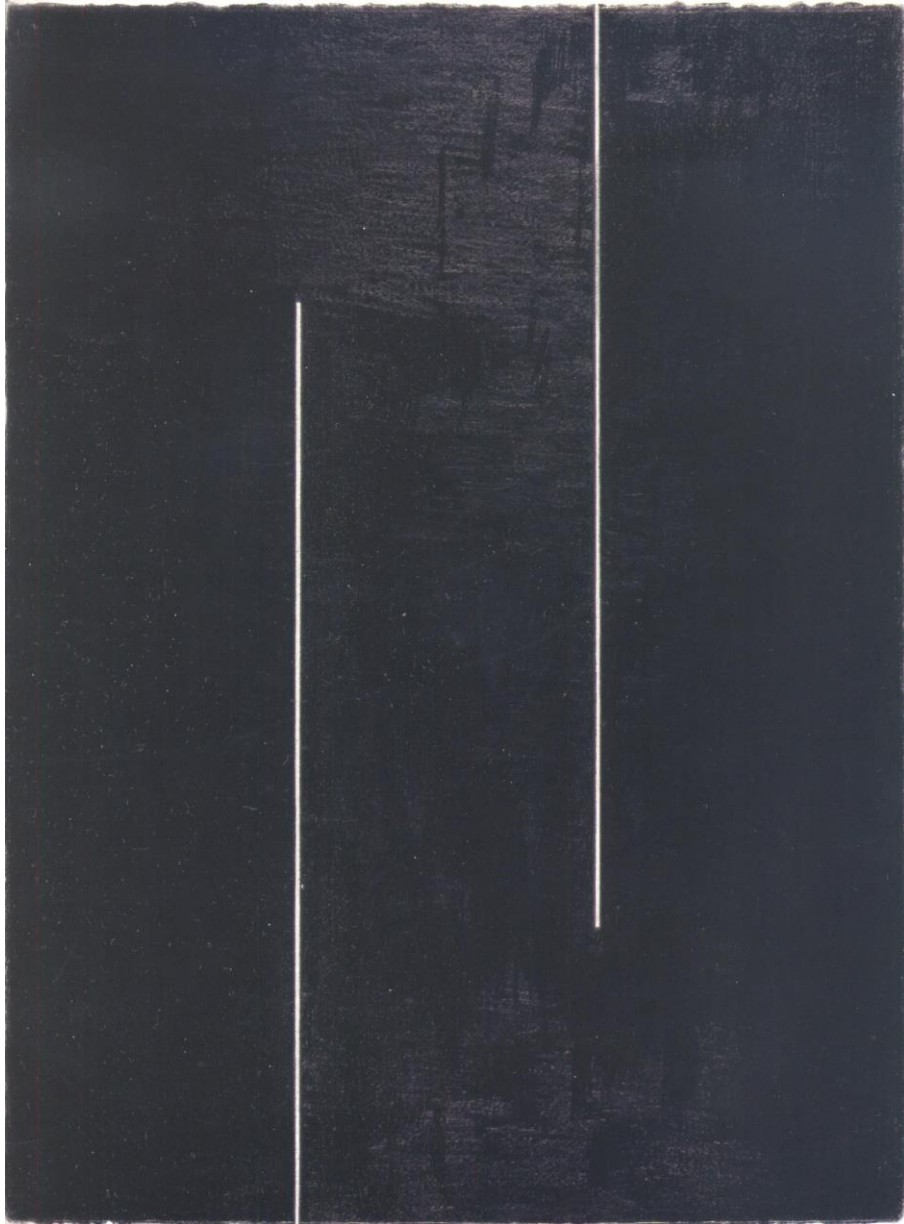


Figure 35. Julije Knifer, *Meandar 3.IX-16.IX 1981/ 1-81, 11*, 1981

Source: Maković, *Knifer*, Meandar, 2001, p.171

⁴⁰² Pierre A. (2001), *Julije Knifer meanders*, (p.82) Paris: Adam Biro

5.4. WHITE

We can define white color as a warm and active color since it contains the biggest quantity of light and appears to be exiting the painting. Knifer said: “White color can be at the beginning and disappearance of the painting.”⁴⁰³ In that sense, white void contains echoes of the emptiness of romantic notion of the sublime. Traditionally the sublime was considered as something which is beyond comparison but later had come to stand for an experience that exceeds our perceptual or imaginative grasp and marks the limit of reason or comprehension. Furthermore, the sublime is defined today not by its intimations of transcendence but rather by its confirmation of immanence that overwhelms the individual.⁴⁰⁴

For Lyotard, the sublime is best understood through avant-garde, as it is able to present something that cannot be presented, a concept which he draws from ideas of formlessness of the mathematically sublime. The sublime is a matter of time not space since the sublime is a feeling evoked by awareness of possible ontological void. Lyotard interprets the Kantian sublime to show a transcendent movement where the subject feels in the object the presence of something that transcends the object. Some artists like Malevich and Knifer sought to capture the sublime in their artworks, and they succeed in it by conveying the sense of formlessness through something that has a form, if not sublimity as such. Instead of trying to imitate the sublime subject matter these works seek to capture or embody the metaphysical force of greatness and throw the human self into transcendent modes of being. But despite their reference to something beyond themselves, the boundaries of these works ultimately limit their force, as these are still canvases with their two-dimensionality. Color, line or rhythm in Lyotard’s philosophy of the sublime are not what they might portray. It is a representation that makes them sublime.⁴⁰⁵

Lyotard claims that Abstract or Minimal art may well be able to bring about the same kind of breach in the formal synthesis of consciousness as natural formlessness does by making it impossible to see, by flushing out artifices of presentation which makes it impossible to turn away from the something that cannot be presented. In that sense,

⁴⁰³ Radaković Ž (1994) , *Knifer*, (p.70) Beograd: Radio B92

⁴⁰⁴ Watson, Watson,(2014) *The Philosophy of Emptiness*, (pp.124-125) Reaktion Books

⁴⁰⁵ Brady (2013), *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics and Nature*, (p.139), Cambridge University Press

the message of artwork is the presentation, but it presents nothing, it is a presence. Following, Malevich and many of his contemporaries were attempting to produce visual analogs for feelings, intuitions, as they believed that the visual could no longer be of value to the artist. What the artist must do now is to construct forms from nothing discovered by intuitive reason.⁴⁰⁶

Opposite to black meander paintings where time was bound to the surface, white meander paintings are reigned by the sublime, gaining meaning from the silence that surrounds them due to the resonance of emptiness. The difference between white and black meander paintings we also find in the fact that in white meander paintings meaning exits and merges with the surroundings. The more space is allotted to the void, the more important the viewer's role becomes, as they must engage actively in the space of emptiness.

Like Knifer, avant-garde artists Malevich, Mondrian and Kandinsky were also interested in actively painted white color, as for them white color had different connotations. They had in common an anti-materialistic attitude that was reflected in their work, particularly concerning the white surface. As a color, white initially possesses clearly defined physical characteristics, yet as a flat field, it points to metaphysical or rather immaterial entities such as harmony, infinity, cosmos and spirit, all notions that are able to convey a utopian potential.

According to Malevich white color was clearly not meant to be a color that contains all other colors within itself but liberation from any color: "a system is being constructed in time and space independent of any aesthetic beauties and experiences, moods. It is rather a philosophical color system for realizing new achievements of my ideas as cognition."⁴⁰⁷ At the same time application of the non-color white over an area is supposed to evoke a sense of infinite space: "the flat suspended plane of pictorial color on the white canvas immediately gives us a strong sensation of space. I feel transported into a desert abyss in which one feels the creative points of the

⁴⁰⁶ Austin, (2014) *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination*, (p.143) Routledge

⁴⁰⁷ Shatskikh A., (2012) *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism* (p.251) Yale University Press

universe around one.”⁴⁰⁸ For Malevich, all colors should fade to white so that the transition to a new limitless space through the indefinite white that points to the universe could occur.⁴⁰⁹

For abstract art pioneers Malevich, Kandinsky and Mondrian white color became a potent symbol for a future world. For Kandinsky white was the color that reduced effects of its colored surroundings, it was a color of infinite resistance, the zero point where everything began and where all possibilities revealed itself. The white surface marked a space of possibilities, as Kandinsky considered white to be an original force of evolution and spiritual enlightenment. For Kandinsky white also signified silence with the widest variety of nuances.⁴¹⁰ Kandinsky wrote about white in *On the Spiritual in Art*:

White is a symbol of the world from which all color as a material quality and substance has disappeared. This world is so far above us that we cannot perceive any sound coming from it. For this reason, white affects us with the absoluteness of a great silence. It sounds inward and corresponds to some pauses in music, which, though temporarily interrupting the development of a melody do not represent a definite end of a musical sequence. It is a dead silence but one full of possibilities. For that reason, white is used to color pure joy and infinite purity.⁴¹¹

On the other hand, Malevich said in 1919: “the white free abyss, infinity is before us”.⁴¹² In Suprematism, the white surface as emptiness and nothingness forms the monochrome ground as the geometric shapes seem to be floating in front of it. At the same time, white is a mystical color for Malevich and he describes it as pure excitement. Looking for new modes of existence for mankind he considered white Suprematism to be the highest perfection of non-objectivity as he coupled it with

⁴⁰⁸ Shatskikh A., (2012) *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism* (p.230) Yale University Press

⁴⁰⁹ Kandinsky, Malewitsch, Mondrian *The Infinite White Abyss*, (2014) (pp.225-231)Kunst Sammlung Nordrhein Westfalen Snoeck

⁴¹⁰ Pintarić V (1970), *Meander kao sistem*, Zagreb, <http://www.msu.hr/files/15179/KNIFER%20JULIJE_1970.pdf>

⁴¹¹ Kandinsky, Malewitsch, Mondrian *The Infinite White Abyss*, (2014) (p.250) Kunst Sammlung Nordrhein Westfalen Snoeck

⁴¹² *Ibidem.*, p.250

idealistic ideas to form a radical concept for a future society. In 1915, Malevich wrote about infinite space as a place where spiritual forces are at work. In *Suprematist Manifesto* Malevich writes: “I have broken the blue boundary of color limits, I have beaten the lining of the colored sky, torn it away and in the sack that formed itself I have put color and knotted it. Swim! The free white abyss infinity lies before you.”⁴¹³

The white color was also important for Knifer. Besides creating contrast with black in the construction of meander, white was also the spiritual beginning of the painting. In the 1980s after black meander paintings, Knifer started to make white meander paintings. These paintings were not so heavy or filled with a density of time, matter or renounced of light. The white meander paintings spread into space, as there is no frame and they open horizons for interpretation. At the same time they, as almost monochrome black meander paintings, served as a starting point of meditation, zen and reflexive thinking, because they represented a more philosophical sphere of sublimation and existence.

It is evident that Knifer’s meander as well as Malevich’s suprematist works, especially *Black Square* and *White Square*, have a metaphysical, spiritual and sublime dimension. In Suprematism around 1915, the affirmation of transcendence of color into white was achieved as Malevich started to draw masses in aerial or liquid states, while in 1917 planes in dissolution were merging with cosmic infinity. The word dissolution found in titles of paintings referred to another level of energy density. In that way, the colorful painterly masses went into the sphere of purely philosophical, existential sublimation as they shifted to another level of metaphysics. This can be seen on the paintings *On Suprematism (Yellow Plane in Dissolution)* from 1916 that features one external edge of the massive monochrome form that runs into the white underground or *Construction in Dissolution (Three Arches on a Diagonal Element in White)* from 1917 and *White Plain in Dissolution* 1917-18.⁴¹⁴ Malevich’s white painting overhung the precipice where painting ceases to exist since through abstraction Malevich touched the limit allowed by painting and made it visible.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ *Art Quotes* <<http://www.art-quotes.com/getquotes.php?catid=43#.Vth9LpPhC1s>>

⁴¹⁴ Jakovljevic B. (2004). *Unframe Malevich!: Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism*, Art journal, vol.63, no.3, (p.24). <<http://kirkbrideplan.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/unframe-malevich-ineffability-and-sublimity-in-suprematism.pdf>>

⁴¹⁵ *Ibidem*. p.24

In 1918, Malevich allowed the white color to triumph and define itself entirely as an icon for a new beginning in painting. In the painting *Suprematist Composition: White on White* from 1918 where *Black Square* turned white, Malevich proclaimed the culmination of Suprematism in the absence of color, represented by white. In that sense, Malevich's *White Square* was not a limit of the expressible but a threshold of thinking. *White Square* was the philosophical symbol of Malevich's ontology, feeling of pure non-objectivity, non-existence in the nothingness that was referring to the higher cosmic being. We could say that *Black Square*, *White Square*, meanders were concepts before anything else that present limitlessness of thought and the supreme autonomy of the pure act of all means of expression.⁴¹⁶



Figure 36. Kazimir Malevich, *White on White*, 1918

Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/kazimir-malevich/white-square-1917>

It is clear that Malevich, like Knifer, handled white in a very deliberate way. This is seen in the choice of pigment, the degree of transparency and opaqueness of the texture and brush technique. Malevich applied it to all of his paintings but particularly

⁴¹⁶ Jakovljevic B. (2004). *Unframe Malevich!: Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism*, Art journal, vol.63, no.3, (p.24). ><http://kirkbrideplan.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/unframe-malevich-ineffability-and-sublimity-in-suprematism.pdf>>

to those of his white suprematist period when the white surrounding did not function as underground or background but as an exponent in the representation of his cosmic philosophy of intangible and pure light. In all these paintings white color served as a natural supporter of forms, it became an active participant in the continuous foreground of the suprematist canvas.⁴¹⁷

Knifer's meanders are not in dissolution but there is a tendency that the form exits the frame as in Malevich's paintings where forms slowly dissolve. In the late 1980s, Knifer started white meander paintings following black meander paintings. The paintings were done in acrylic where he interfered with a black color to close or open the form. In this phase, we can see the beginning of fragmented meanders that will appear in the late 1990s. For example, in *AP XVI/16* from 2000, composition is conceived out of meander details, whose development is interrupted at the edge of the painting, on the angles of the canvas.⁴¹⁸

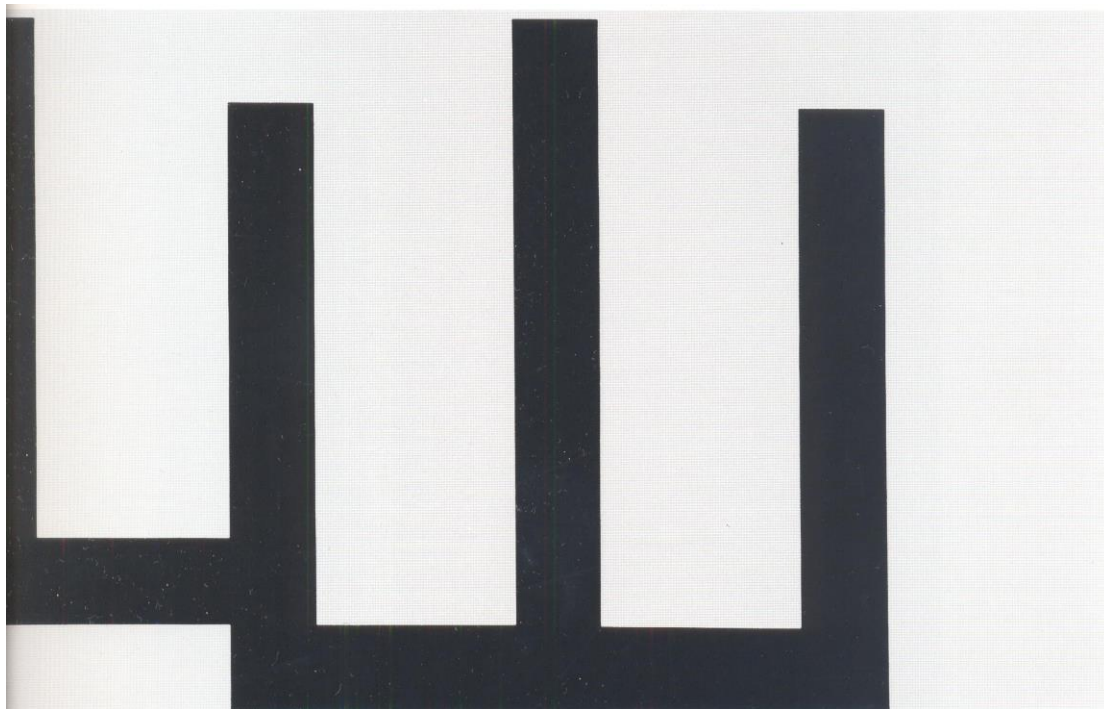


Figure 37. Julije Knifer, *Meander TÛ-H-DA-DI*, 1987

Source: Maković, *Knifer*, 2001, p.175

⁴¹⁷ Jakovljevic B. (2004). *Unframe Malevich!: Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism*, Art journal, vol.63, no.3, (p.21). <<http://kirkbrideplan.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/unframe-malevich-ineffability-and-sublimity-in-suprematism.pdf>>

⁴¹⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.270) Zagreb: MSU

In the late 1980s, white meander paintings were framed by black color as in the painting *Meander TÛ-H-DA-DI* from 1987. In the 1990s paintings became more open since black color now, as white color did in black meander paintings, represented only a minimal meander flow and not closed frame as for example in *Untitled* from 1990. White meander paintings from the 1990s resemble the image of piano keys reminding us of the importance of rhythm in Knifer's oeuvre, which now in white meander paintings, as well as it was in black ones, is more static. Nevertheless, in white meander paintings the form is more open as white meander merges with the white background wall continuing the tradition of *Meander in the Corner* from the 1960s that was spreading into space.

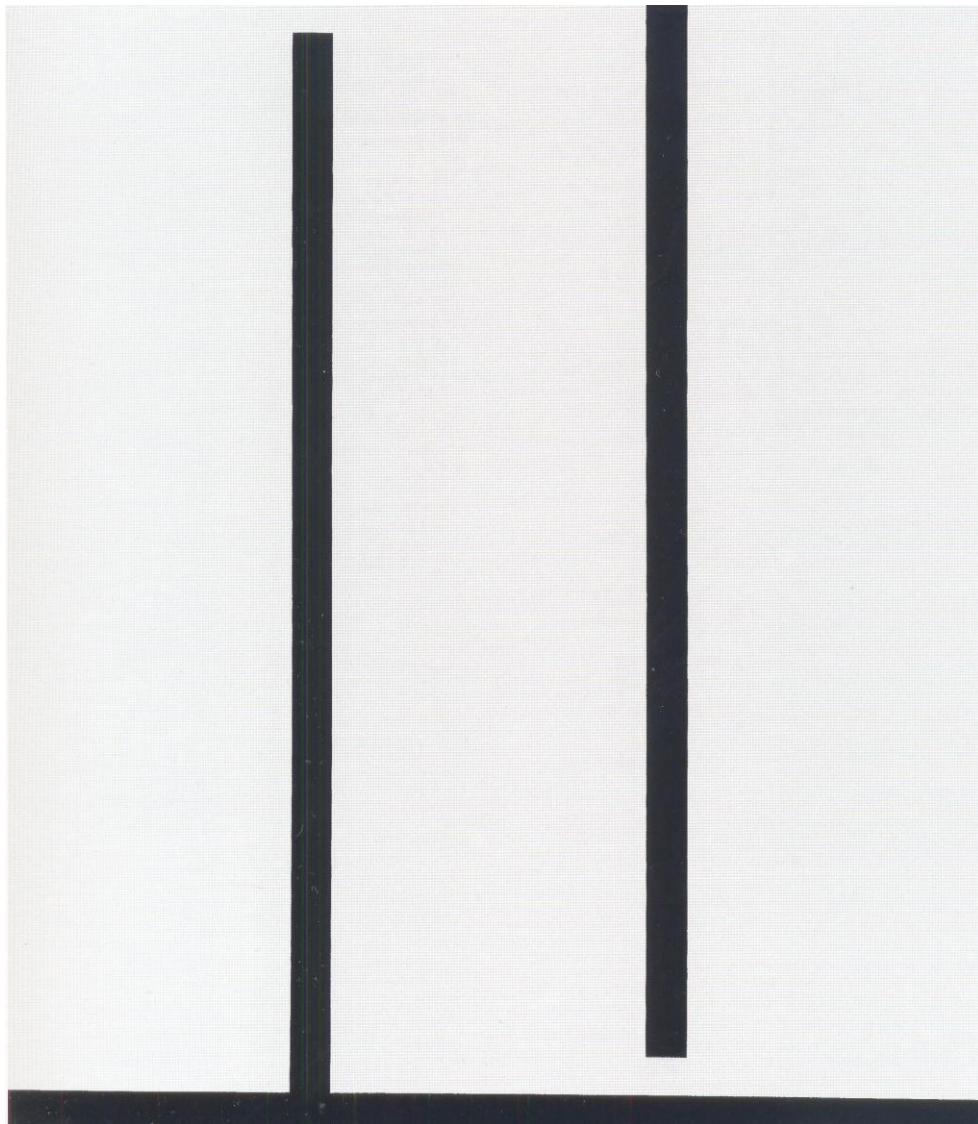


Figure 38. Julije Knifer, *Untitled*, 1990

Source: Maković, *Knifer, Meander*, 2001, p.183

As in Malevich's white suprematist phase, Knifer's white meander paintings make the concept of boundary and division between canvas and background meaningless, as Malevich and Knifer leave the paintings unframed. White meanders, as well as suprematist works from white phase, are inseparable from spatiality. Its proper space is not the illusionist space of painting but the concrete space that surrounds it, which is seen in the absence of the frame that opens up the interior of the painting.

In the essay, *Parergon* Derrida writes that when we look at a painting we take the frame to be part of the wall, yet when we look at the wall the frame is taken to be part of the painting. The parergonal frame stands out against two grounds, but with respect to each of these two grounds, it merges into the other. The frame of the work marks or affects the divide between the work and what is exterior to it, yet within our understanding and response to the work this boundary or divide between what is internal to the work and what is outside becomes invisible. As Derrida says: "there is always a form on the ground. However, the parergon is a form whose traditional determination is not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy."⁴¹⁹

In his analysis of white meander paintings, Zvonko Maković said that this connection between surrounding space and the painting is done by the dominance of the white color that forms a system and at the same time is the deviation of the system. In that sense, the reduced motif of meander in white series appears as a white screen. The density of white layer is almost invisible as Knifer made at least 15 layers of white color, but it is still difficult to see where the spread stops and where the illusion of the depth of the mass begins, as the whiteness opens all the possibilities since it contains all the colors of the spectrum. The surface here infiltrates the straight black lines, making the relationship between the two spatial planes extremely taut. At the same time, the light fields sometimes seem extremely deep and sometimes completely reallocated by the sharp black ribbons. Here opposition of full and empty is heightened by the opposition of the full black and the empty white as the dense black

⁴¹⁹ *A Companion to Art*, (2015) (p.137) Blackwell

takes on the firmness of the full geometrical volumes that determine the rhythm within the white unbounded space of the base.⁴²⁰

In the interview, Radaković asks Knifer what it means for him to apply the white color and he responds that this is the beginning of the painting: “white is never a base, it is an active color that participates in the division of the surface.”⁴²¹ When asking him if the white color has some other meaning Knifer answered that white was always a symbol of nihilism and that the first paintings of that type from the 1960s he called anti-paintings since he was destroying the classical painting by applying the black and white contrast. While applying layers of white the most important step for Knifer is to leave the color to dry well. White opens the possibilities for black but also represents a void on which Knifer intervenes with black color. The reason why Knifer was applying up to 15-20 layers of white was because with one layer the white would become yellow with years and would destroy the black and white contrast.⁴²² In that sense, white applied in many layers stayed white and black stayed black: “I stayed with classical elements of painting, but I would clean the painting till absolute whiteness and I would start from this absolute whiteness. That is why especially now white surfaces are important to me.”⁴²³ We can see that for Knifer the white symbolizes absolute nothingness and emptiness and the spiritual beginning of the painting. In *Notes* Knifer wrote:

From my point of view, I thought that a form of anti-painting can be achieved by reduction. I retained the classic instruments of painting, but purified it to utmost whiteness and took this whiteness as my point of departure. For this reason, especially now, white surfaces are important to me. Even to the almost white canvas, as bought in a shop, I apply another white layer of paint and only then I intervene on the white ground until the darkest black is achieved.⁴²⁴

⁴²⁰ Maković, Z. (2001), *Knifer*, (p.14-16) Zagreb: Meandar

⁴²¹ Radaković, Ž. (1994), *Knifer*, (p.167) Beograd: Radio 92 (Bijela nikad nije samo baza, ona je aktivan boja koja sudjeluje u podjeli plohe) – Translation mine

⁴²² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.11) Zagreb: MSU

⁴²³ Radaković, Ž. (1994), *Knifer*, (p.167) Beograd: Radio 92 (Ostao sam s klasičnim elementima slike, ali ja bih očistio sliku do apsolutne bijele i onda počeo od nje. Zato je meni pogotovo sada bitna bijela površina) – Translation mine

⁴²⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.147) Zagreb: MSU

White color has also a lot to do with a work process for Knifer:

I find it very hard to start painting. My paintings begin the moment I start painting the canvas white. White is very important and, therefore, I always start with it, even if the painting in its final form will be black. The ground can never be as white as it would have to be for black to be really black. Once I decide the ground is white enough, it's black's turn; the painting needs to be defined, it has to become a definition. It's no problem for me to decide when the painting is finished; I don't wonder whether to add a little of this or a little of that like other painters. On the other hand, I can start facing a white surface for days before starting to paint, staring at it and thinking: if you start now, there is no going back. And then I break out in a sweat as if diseased, in front of an empty white surface.⁴²⁵

Black and white meander paintings are marked by self-consciousness and self-control. Knifer himself calls this process of painting black and white meanders "Zagreb zen" since he is including his moral values at the same time in the paintings.⁴²⁶ How important white color was to Knifer can be seen in a photo-performance "the relation between the artist and his painting" from 1975, done in Tübingen. In the performance, Knifer is dressed in white posing in front of white canvas spreading his arms like he is trying to encompass its width. Through the performance, Knifer was invoking the void Gorgona members used to contemplate upon. This void has two aspects, being void of absolute nothingness, connected to nihilism or the void of absolute fullness connected to zen. No matter which kind of feeling Knifer wanted to transmit we can notice that the absolute whiteness of the canvas is a result of a patient work process. In this process Knifer was coming close to the artists of the 1970s who wanted to liberate painting of everything representative, reducing it to the material and procedures that constitute it. The proof can be found in his writings *Notes* where Knifer wrote about his paintings being reduced to visual fact but still admitted that he was following the same spiritual line from 1959. Another difference between the analytic art of the 1970s and Knifer's work is that while this process of applying the

⁴²⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.234) Zagreb: MSU

⁴²⁶ Radaković, Ž. (1994), *Knifer*, (p.167) Beograd: Radio 92

black or white color would be the beginning and the end of an analytical painting, for Knifer it was just a basis to start upon on the way to the form of a meander.⁴²⁷

In the domination of white over black we can see Knifer's aspiration to go on with his own ethical principles and employ them in the artistic process. Art is ethical, Lyotard believes because it obliges us to give away all personal interest, to subside in front of the event, to be disinterested. In this sense, the artwork is the silent feeling that needs to be listened to: "I (the viewer) am no more than an ear open to the sound which comes to it from out of silence; the painting is that sound of an accord."⁴²⁸ Knifer's work process represents anonymous work in isolation full of renunciation but at the same time, it is more individualistic, as it was during the times of Gorgona when the behavior was in the center of the artist's interest. We could say that in this period Knifer was approaching other international artists who also wanted to express the fullness of the nothingness.⁴²⁹ As Lyotard says: "the sublime is no other than the sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field...this heralds the end of aesthetics, that of the beautiful, in the name of the final destination of the mind, which is freedom."⁴³⁰

⁴²⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.20) Zagreb: MSU

⁴²⁸ Lyotard, (1992) *Inhuman Reflections on Time*, (p.137), Stanford University Press

⁴²⁹ Matičević, (1990) Prilozi periodizaciji opusa Julija Knifera, *Život umjetnosti* No. 47 (p.34)

⁴³⁰ Silverman (2002) *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime*, (p.198), Palgrave Macmillian

6. TEXT

6.1. INFLUENCES

The influence of poetry and music can be seen in the artworks of Malevich who created alogical paintings influenced by zaum poetry and Kandinsky who made *Compositions* and wrote poems inspired by the music of Schönberg. Furthermore, Malevich was writing zaum poetry and Kandinsky published a collection of poems and woodcuts between 1908 and 1912 under the title *Klänge* in 1913. Kandinsky's poems and illustrations represented an experiment with word-sound-image, where the poems are without "semantic meaning", freeing the word in favor of the sonority of the human voice, abstracting it. There is no conventional relationship of parallelism between the text and the illustrations but rather a free abstract game of feedback, the poem as image and the image as a poem. On the other hand, Knifer attempted to write texts that corresponded to the logic of his meander paintings, as we can see in *Banal diaries* where he uses fragments of text to form meander and create absurd. In all these attempts, artists tried to accomplish the same expression in written works and paintings, and the most important thing was the consistency of the same idea in the text and on the canvas. Kandinsky and Malevich continued to write theoretical texts while Knifer came closest to the theory in *Notes* where he described his anti-paintings and influences.⁴³¹

Existentialism, absurd, doubt, life changes, borderline situations that Knifer marked on canvas with meander variations were verbalized in his written works. Even though music influenced the rhythm and form of meander, a deeper meaning of these works can be found in the influences Knifer received while reading works of Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Camus and Beckett. Knifer's text was also often compared to these authors as he himself recognized his own worldview in their texts. The struggling, hesitating and conscience-ridden awareness of Beckett's absurd and tragic figures also applies to the worldview that comes out of Knifer's meandering monologues written in his *Banal Diaries*.⁴³²

Surprisingly, in the interview with Zvonko Maković for the magazine *Oris*, Knifer says that for him literature was more important than music since in his opinion it was

⁴³¹ Crone, Moss (1991) *Kazimir Malevich The Climax of Disclosure*, (p.118), London: Reaktion Books

⁴³² Maković Z. (2001), *Knifer*, (p.90) Zagreb: Meandar

easier to educate himself through literature than through music. One would think that music was more important since it formed meander through rhythm, but at the end literature defined its essence. As Knifer explained:

Of course, I listened to music, grasping its inner flows, its rhythms...But the kind of literature that influenced me most was what was issued from the circle of existentialists. Prior to that, I had read Malraux, Hemingway and Faulkner. Only then came Sartre and Camus, and then, finally, the French nouveau roman.⁴³³

Similar to New French roman Knifer presents in his paintings an inner world in specific time and space, repeats, focuses on his conscience and thoughts and presents the absurd of the world. Also, we can see other similar elements as missing chronological order and the fact that the focal point is on the inner life of the narrator. It is easily seen that Knifer found many similarities with the line of “anti-writers” that were deconstructing novel, theatre since he himself was deconstructing art.⁴³⁴ In the article *Spatial Determination of Julije Knifer's Meander* Mifka recognized literary narration of life in Knifer's anti-paintings:

Maybe meander is Knifer's ornamental theme, but within this ornament, the entire relation to life contained in the artist takes place there. First he lets it flow freely; then he freezes it in a single scene, and this scene will again be the entire stage for the next one. The scene is interrupted and the stage, because it emerged from the same life radiation, will repeat former boundaries so that in Knifer's painting, otherwise than in the ornament, the flow will be repeated and by doing so it will confirm that here we have the same thing and not something different. In this structure, Knifer's work is pronouncedly rhythmic and broken into segments and we recognize the abundance of rhythm as

⁴³³ *Oris, no.10*,(2001) (p.147) Zagreb (Naravno slušao sam glazbu, pokušavajući svatiti njezine unutarnje tokove, ritmove...ali literatura koja je najviše utjecala na mene je bila iz kruga egzistencijalista. Prije toga čitao sam Malrauxa, h-emingwaya i Faulknera. Tek tada je došao Sartre i Camus a onda konačno francuski novi roman) – Translation mine

⁴³⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.39) Zagreb: MSU

identical form. The new dimension emerges from the repeatability of the content.⁴³⁵

In art, Knifer valued the absurd most as it represented freedom to him, which can explain why most of his literary influences were writers of the absurd as well. The main idea found in Absurd philosophy, which is also important to Knifer, is that human existence is without metaphysical purpose or rationality and out of harmony with the universe. The human subject is thought to live in a transitory and yet stagnant world of the mechanical convention without authenticity and stripped of all metaphysical illusions. An insight into this situation leaves the individual alienated and isolated and even language itself is no longer able to convey a sense of truth or reflect a meaningful reality.⁴³⁶

On the other hand, absurdism is defined as a philosophy based on beliefs that the universe is irrational and meaningless and that the search for order brings the individual into conflict with the universe. The plots of absurd texts were often not of a typical plot and usually had the same pattern, ending the play the same way that it started, while the written language in its broad semiotic sense was of double means.⁴³⁷

If we look at some written works that Knifer appreciated we can notice different problematic connected with the absurd that Knifer later developed in his texts. For example, Franz Kafka registers the world as absurd, resists it via the absurd and takes refuge from it in the absurd. Even the attribute “kafkaesque” is marked by senseless, disorienting, menacing complexity. Kafka was conscious of absurdity that for him was real, and not a figment of mind, which goes away by thinking differently. In Kafka’s works we find the absurd in the situations in which protagonists find themselves in absurd situations connected to radical transformation as in *Metamorphosis*, or bureaucracy as in *The Trial*, *Castle*, that makes them feel like isolated victims of an inimical world they can no longer comprehend, where social intercourse and communication breaks down. Although characters in novels try to use reason, common sense and traditional values to make sense of their alienated

⁴³⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.121) Zagreb: MSU

⁴³⁶ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.40) Zagreb: MSU

⁴³⁷ Esslin, (1965) *Absurd Drama*, (p.30) Penguin books

situation, they encounter only more brutality, ridicule, and finally humiliation and death. This makes Kafka's written works at the same time serious and comical, tragic and ironic.⁴³⁸

On the other hand, Albert Camus searches for a meaning because of the conclusion that the world is unreasonable, which he does not want to accept. In this dichotomy between the human need for meaning and the unreasonable silence of the world, he finds the absurd. Camus rejects irrational faith and opposes the world's meaninglessness with revolt, freedom and passion. In his thinking, since the world lacks providential meaning, human beings must be providers of the meaning.⁴³⁹

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus writes about an absurd hero who engages in the struggle and in spite of insurmountable difficulties finds a way to live within the absurd. As an example of revolt, Camus presents Sisyphus as the ultimately absurd hero. Sisyphus decides to defy the gods, rejects traditional eternal values and makes a meaningless life worth living by making his punishing fate as a human his own. In the fact that Sisyphus is condemned to roll his rock up a hill so that it can roll back down, Camus finds the emblem of absurd that he sees in our repeated struggle against the obscure terms of our existence. The silver lining is in the moments when Sisyphus is walking back down the hill when he is briefly free, when he is superior to his fate when he is stronger than his rock.⁴⁴⁰

The absurd is for Camus a complex notion of man's relationship with the world. By the absurd Camus primarily means the whole scandalous paradox of the human condition, secondly the name of a situation, and thirdly a revolt in which absurd feelings become weapons against the tragic paradox of man's fate.⁴⁴¹ According to Camus, the absurdity of life lies in alienation caused by living in a hostile and inhuman world. In the *Myth of Sisyphus* Camus defined the notion of absurdity as:

The world can be explained by reasoning, no matter how faulty a familiar world is. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions of light, man

⁴³⁸ Gray, (2005) *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia*, (p.2) Greenwood Publishing group

⁴³⁹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/>>

⁴⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴⁴¹ Hall, (1960) *Aspects of the Absurd*, *Yale French Studies*, N-o.25, (pp.26-32)

feels a stranger. He is an irremediable exile because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.⁴⁴²

In Camus and Sartre's works we see a cynical and ineradicable view of a man lost in an alien universe where no human truth is meaningful, no values are to be found, no heroism, no altruism is praised, and where anguish and defeat are the only expectations possible. Sartre, as well as Camus, viewed the universe as an irrational, meaningless sphere. Existence was absurd and life had no sense, no purpose, and no explanation. Consequently, Sartre thinks that existence is absurd because it lacks meaning. In the end, absurdity comes as the sole way out of the reverse significance of lost hopes, their positive rebirth, as it pronounces irrationality as a sound voice against nothingness.⁴⁴³

Even though Sartre was existentialist and Camus was absurdist there are elements that connect their philosophies. Sartre identifies the theory of freedom with that of human consciousness, showing that all objective descriptions of humankind, which he calls "situations", fail to define humans adequately. Since a person's consciousness is outside the boundaries of objective inquiry, only one's freedom to choose one's own lifestyle allows for a definition of essence. Here Camus and Sartre agree that since there is no God and life is meaningless people themselves have to give meaning to their life. The difference is that Sartre puts an accent on freedom of choice and Camus puts it on revolt. In case of Knifer, we could say that he is closer to Camus' idea of the absurd since everything he does in his life represents revolt that can be seen in the perseverance in his work, as he is representing one sign all the time, no matter what outer circumstances are, insisting on the absurd till the end. Knifer's persistence with the representation of meander can be compared with the resistance described in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴² Worthen, (1993) *The Hbj Anthology of Drama*, (p.920), Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

⁴⁴³ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/>>

⁴⁴⁴ Ibidem.

Continuing the overview of different meanings of the absurd that influenced Knifer, we can see that Ionesco defines the term absurd as: “that which is devoid of purpose...cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendent roots, man is lost: all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”⁴⁴⁵ Again we can see that the absurd lies within the condition that is devoid of meaning. For Martin Esslin, the inventor and theoretician of the term “*Theatre of the Absurd*”, the absurd is part of the “anti-literary” movement which found its expression in abstract painting through its rejection of literary elements in pictures, or in the new novel in France with its reliance on the description of objects and its rejection of empathy and anthropomorphism. Esslin does not assign a particular meaning to the notion of the absurd. Instead he points out the relation between the abstract text and abstract painting of the 1950s as he compares Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* with abstractness in art for the ways the both notions challenge the ongoing structures through devaluation of ideas or through defying the structures of artistic and literary production in art and literature.⁴⁴⁶

From the 1950s onwards, absurdism in drama and theatre, Pop art, Minimal and Conceptual art both negated the autonomous status of art and thereby did not accept the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, as well as the individual nature of artistic production and reception. This deconstruction of reality seen in Absurd theatre can be seen in Knifer’s meander paintings from the 1970s when he was presenting the fragments of meander no longer concentrating on the flow but on scattered pieces.⁴⁴⁷

Absurd Drama and Theatre reject realism in their settings and therefore deconstruct reality by a consistent use of nonsense and absurd language which fits the prevailing atmosphere of irrational reasoning that underlies the whole arrangement of a plot, characters and stage scenario. Whereas Ionesco reflects upon man’s uprooting from his traditional beliefs in religion, metaphysics, and transcendence to explain his hopeless sense of loss in the modern world, Kafka shows a man almost as an aberrant creation in the midst of a mindless and soulless universe. On the other hand, Beckett presents his plays as parodies of pointless human actions in a world that had already

⁴⁴⁵ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.37), Zagreb: MSU

⁴⁴⁶ Esslin (2004), *The Theatre of Absurd*, (p.23) New York: Vintage Books

⁴⁴⁷ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.37), Zagreb: MSU

forgotten to question them.⁴⁴⁸ Beckett challenges the absurd by establishing the characters in pairs and shows that the best revolt against the absurd is friendship. The dominating idea between each pair is that they cannot be without each other since if one is alone one cannot know unquestionably if one still exists. In *Waiting for Godot*, the strong friendship between Vladimir and Estragon rises from the same purpose they share, to wait for Godot, which bounds them together and helps them share the burden and overcome the absurd.⁴⁴⁹

In all Knifer's written texts the absurd was a connecting point as Knifer considered absurd to be the ultimate freedom, in line with Camus's thought: "I derive three consequences from the absurd: my revolt, my freedom, and my passion."⁴⁵⁰ In some written texts Knifer was closer to Kafka's notion of absurd when criticizing power that operated in society, which is most evident in *Plead*: "in order to immediately proceed to current tasks, I am enclosing the following text for a petition that my identity be taken away from me."⁴⁵¹ In this case, the absurd represented the freedom away from the artificial constructed society that dictated people how to live. On the other hand, in *Notes* Knifer defined what for him absurd represents: "to me absurdity is a very important component in my actions. Absurdity is a form of freedom."⁴⁵² The absurd can also be found in *Banal diaries* through the repetition of everyday problems, monotony: "I am describing my life in the most boring way. My flow of life (without content). It is all exceedingly boring."⁴⁵³ Furthermore, in *Notes* from 1986 Knifer described life with the absurd:

I cannot move. I have the feeling that I am stuck, which means that I don't have to move. I don't have to move in any direction. I'll stay right where I am. Not bad. I don't have to move. I like movement, but I don't know where to go. I can find neither an aim nor the way to that aim. I stay put. This is my status.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁴⁸ Vasconcelos, *Absurd Language in the Theatre and Arts in the 20th century*, (p.9)

<http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/4232.pdf>

⁴⁴⁹ Graver, (2004) *Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, (p.38), Cambridge University Press

⁴⁵⁰ Camus, (1991), *Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Essays* (p.64), First Vintage International Edition

⁴⁵¹ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.95), Zagreb: MSU

⁴⁵² *Ibidem.*, p.137

⁴⁵³ *Banal diaries*, private collection (Opisujem svoj život na najdosadniji mogući način. Moj tok života (bes sadržaja). To je sve izvanredno dosadno) – Mine Translation

⁴⁵⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.209), Zagreb: MSU

When we look at the structure of the written works and meander paintings we can see the same elements and the same aim. The goal is to show the absurd through the elements of repetition and monotony. This process ultimately leads to the absurd giving the impression that everything is meaningless because of the monotonous repetition. Bergson regards repetition as something that creates nothing in the object while it maintains its particularity. Repetition forms are not general ideas since they do not envelop a plurality of objects. They resemble each other but only present the particularity of an object, which repeats itself in an identical way. Thus, repetition for Bergson is a sort of difference that is always exterior to itself, a difference that is indifferent to itself. The inversely difference, is in turn, a repetition. It rises to coexistence, which otherwise was repeated.⁴⁵⁵

For Deleuze difference is not merely a negation of sameness, as it can have a meaning that is independent of the sameness of any given events or actions. Deleuze says that Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence affirms the nature of pure difference because it views reality as a continual state of becoming. Difference and repetition are affirmed by the eternal recurrence of all things. The eternal return may be compared to a circle in which difference is at the center and sameness is at the periphery. In this circle difference becomes a divergence or decentering, and the eternal return thus leads to multiple centers of meaning that give depth to the world of difference. However, representation of an object or perception is a kind of mediation that has only a single center and that lacks the depth of the world of difference. If sameness is placed at the center of the circle of representation, then the difference is at the periphery. Even if an infinite number of representations of an object is produced, they will all converge at the point that corresponds to the identity of the object at the center of the circle of representation.⁴⁵⁶ In that sense, we can see that Knifer puts sameness in the center, as he called it the spiritual idea that appeared around 1959 and that he followed ever since. Following, all the different variations of meander have the same spiritual background and are part of one system.

⁴⁵⁵ Ed. Mullarkey, (1999) *The New Bergson*, (p.58), Manchester University Press

⁴⁵⁶ Deleuze, (1994) *Difference and Repetition*, (pp. 55-56) New York, Columbia University Press

On the other hand, in *Repetition* Kierkegaard describes the various ways in which the pleasure we take in life is menaced by repetition, as it kills the originality and novelty of our experience. From that experience, Kierkegaard concludes that the only way to outwit repetition is by making it religious and by seeing repetition as the truly religious way of life. Repetition in that sense becomes a religious moment by virtue of the absurd. The final repetition is eternity itself in which heavenly existence repeats itself endlessly.⁴⁵⁷

Repetition which during the course of time became a real ritual as Kierkegaard said, can be noticed in the visualization of the same motif of meander, in the same rhythmical shifts of meander, which is the essence of Knifer's art. However, we can also find repetition in the persistent sequencing of the same strokes, from which every expressive quality has been squeezed out, whether this is a matter of the strokes of a brush upon the paintings or the lines with the pencil and graphite. On the other hand, we can find a very explicit repetition in all the writings that Knifer published, *Notes*, *A Petitionary Letter to the Academy of the Arts and Crafts in Zagreb* and especially in the pages of his *Banal Diaries*. This kind of procedure of constant repetition could be understood as an endeavor to condense time and to get closer to the absurd.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁷ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>>

⁴⁵⁸ Maković Z.(2002), *Knifer* (pp.21-22) Zagreb: Meandar

6.2. BANAL DIARIES

Banal diaries are Knifer's most intimate texts based on introspections and personal thoughts on art, work, life and family. In the interview for ČIP magazine a journalist asked Knifer: "You write all the time?" and he answered: "it is something for me to do when I get tired of drawing."⁴⁵⁹ Knifer wrote diaries from 1956 to the end of life. He titled them *Banal diaries* or anti-journals, as the subjects he was writing about were banal things such as work-related problems, weather, his feelings or some anecdotes from the family life. We can notice Knifer's interest in writing and literature since the time of Gorgona when the group members were publishing anti-magazine *Gorgona*, wrote letters to each other and shared *Thoughts for months*. In their writings, Gorgona members were influenced by the existentialists, Sartre, Beckett and zen philosophy. In *Thoughts for months*, they used quotes from the same authors to express their own feelings and standpoints. All these literary influences left a mark on Knifer.⁴⁶⁰

In all Knifer's written works we come across the problem of language. This evolution of language can be seen in the text as the language structures change from the beginning to the end. In the beginning, text usually makes sense and it resembles the ordinary diary, as Knifer is writing about everyday events and his work. The text is clear, written in blue pencil in the notebook that students would use at school. After some time, the pencil starts to be unreadable since the entire space of the notebook becomes filled with handwriting.

In the early diaries, Knifer wrote from the beginning of the page until the end in the same color, blue, leaving no space, while in the later phase *horror vacui* can be noticed. At that point, he used various colored ballpoints to pack the text fragments in more or less regular blocks to create the form of the meander and to make it more visually interesting. When Knifer started to write diaries with a color pencil he used it in different paragraphs and in that sense changed two or three colors on the same page, for example, pink-black, or violet-black. At the same time, text became more and more fragmented. Finally, Knifer introduced different text orientation of

⁴⁵⁹ ČIP, No.44, (1997) (p.17) Zagreb (Pišete cijelo vrijeme? To je nešto da imam za raditi kad se umorim od crtanja) – Translation mine

⁴⁶⁰ Gattin,M.(2002), *Gorgona*, (p.14) Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

sentences of different pencil color, as the text more and more resembled the painting making diaries more difficult to read. In the later phase around the 1990s Knifer created meanders with text fragments written in color and text completely lost its meaning, it became unreadable and totally absurd.⁴⁶¹

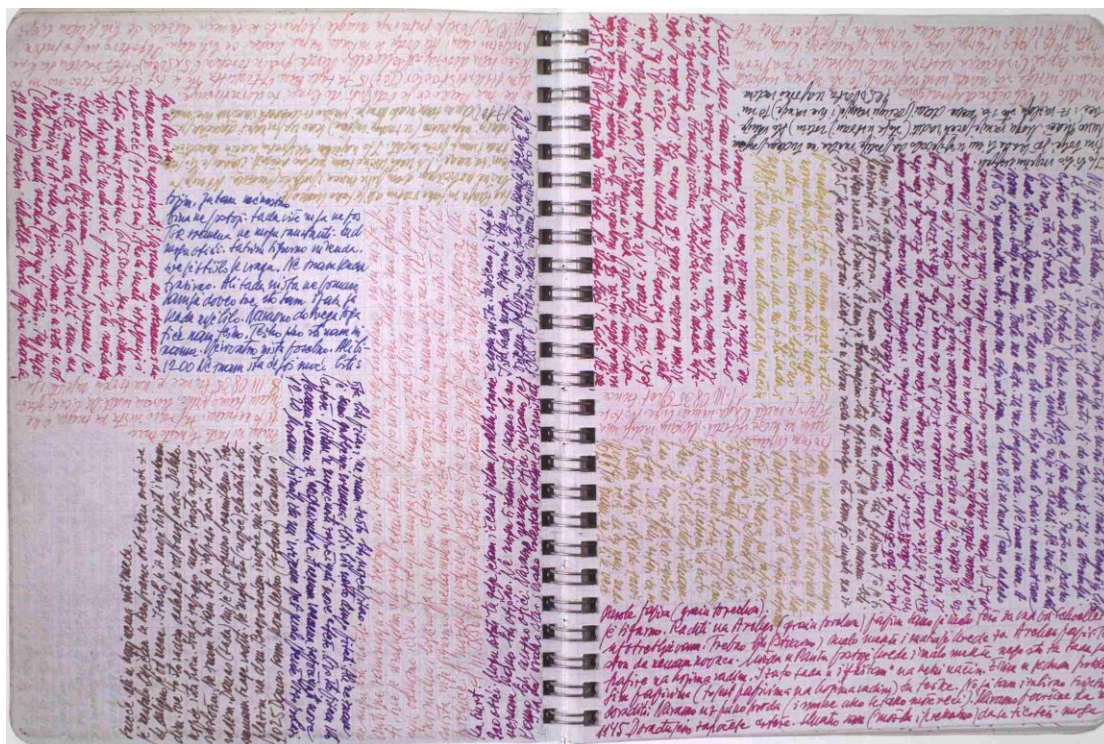


Figure 39. Julije Knifer, *Banal diaries*, 1975-2003

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, Zagreb, p.274-275

If we continue to analyze the diary pages we can notice different styles of writing. Almost all pages are filled with words from one side to another, there is little space left, as it seems Knifer was filling the pages like he was saturating the canvas with black color. The notebook lines resemble layers of graphite that blacken the surface, as Knifer densifies it by blending several entry times, through which reader is able to find his way thanks to precise indications of the day and hour of the note. There are examples when Knifer changes color throughout the diary as for example one day is written in blue and another in black pen. Knifer would change the color of the pen from violet, red, pink, green, blue or black. In that way, the rhythm would change as on the paintings, with vertical or horizontal lines creating meander. He indeed wanted to create paintings with his diaries, since in the text paragraphs we find colored text

⁴⁶¹ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.266) Zagreb: MSU

without space as in black meander paintings. Sometimes Knifer would not even begin the new sentence with the new pencil, he would change it in the middle similar to the paintings where he was creating a certain flow. Knifer would also leave blank spaces of the pages that resembled white rectangles shaped into meander by lines of written text in different colors.

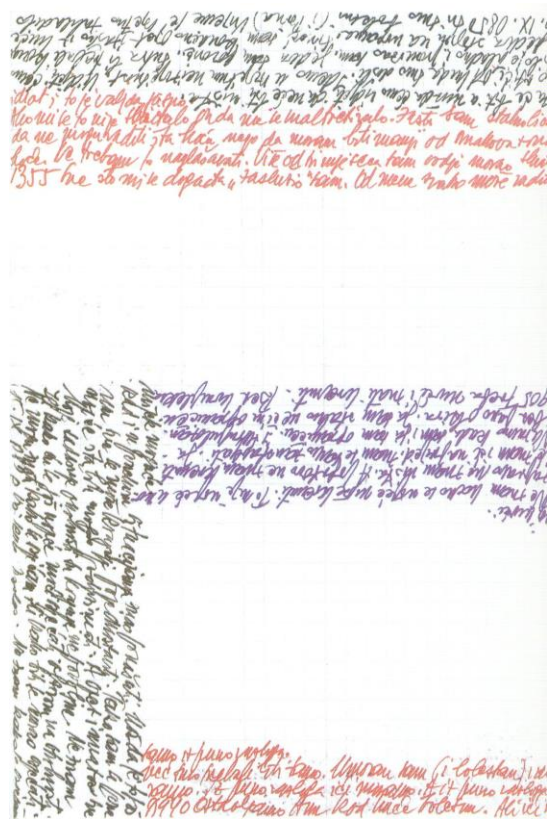


Figure 40. Julije Knifer, *Banal diaries*, 1975-2003

Source: Maković, *Knifer, Meander*, 2001, p.246

From 1999, Knifer would use two pages of the notebook as one surface and he would organize written text in different colors written in a different orientation and different length, not following the organization of the page but creating small written paragraphs of different size like a puzzle. In these cases, life events served just as material for visual compositions. It is possible to say that by using color Knifer got closer to the decorative traditions as for example manuscripts since he was negating the meaning of the text by creating meanders made out of textual fragments.⁴⁶² There is no order saying how to read these different sections organized more to serve

⁴⁶² *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.266) Zagreb: MSU

visually than for reading. Clearly Knifer was influenced by existentialist literature and absurd literature, which in a way allowed him to play with the text. In the pages organized as canvases out of fragments of sentences, Knifer was creating squares and rectangles in different colors exploiting the opportunity to neglect the literary sense since his text was supposed to be abstract and absurd just as his artwork was supposed to be.⁴⁶³

In *Banal diaries*, Knifer did not respect the margins of the pages, the sentences were written from the beginning until the end of the paper, characterized by unified rhythm, resembling his paintings. “Density of hopelessness”, the term that can be connected with Knifer’s black paintings regarding the numerous layers of black graphite can also be connected with the horror vacui found on the diary pages that evolve by spontaneous writings of words and sentences with often completely mangled syntax. By the term “density of hopelessness” art historian Maticević was referring to the text that fills the pages but at the same time makes no sense; it is either repeated or absurd. If we look at the text of *Banal diaries* we can see that it is at the same time absurd and very personal as journals are supposed to be. By negating diary and creating an anti-diary, Knifer made diary absurd in the end as well.⁴⁶⁴

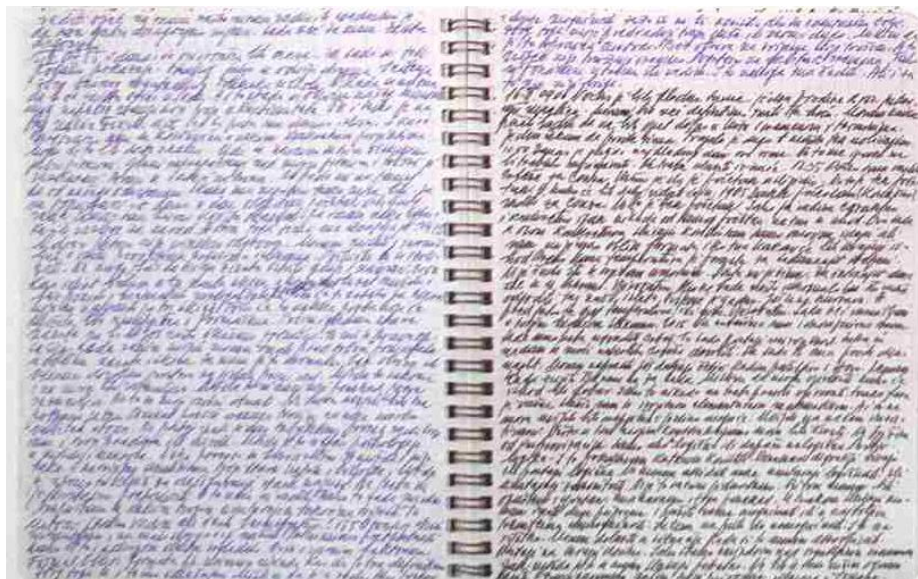


Figure 41. Julije Knifer, *Banal diaries*, 1975-2003

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.276

⁴⁶³ *Uncompromising* (2014) (p.35) Zagreb: MSU

⁴⁶⁴ Maković, Z. (2001) *Knifer*,(p.79) Zagreb: Meandar

The very facet of writing a diary emerges from the protocolary forms that were involved in the creation of meander paintings. Diary entries, in fact, are the consequence of the imposed rules since they occupy a very specific space within the whole system that consists of certain procedures. The absurd is present in the diaries just by the notion of obligatory everyday diary writing and through the repetition of unimportant events that constitute daily life and have repetitive characteristic through days, weeks, months. The constant repetition of banal facts created by a non-changeable sequence of pages filled with monotony reminds of the monotonous meander rhythm. By sharing important events from his life, but just focusing on non-important, banal, repetitive ones, Knifer justifies the title of his journal *Banal diaries* and establishes himself as an anti-writer.

In the diaries, we find a written date and time of the note, written in the same color or different one from the text. Knifer would write more notes in the same day where he would describe his physical and psychological state, life problems, anxieties, events that happened during the day, his thoughts on work, family issues, friends, alcohol, etc. In these notes, the prevalent sentiment is anxiety, doubt, pessimism, fear of the future or fear whether everything was going to be all right. Doubt is constant in the written text, as he doubts his life, his choices, and his path. In that way, all limits and bounds between life and the works are expunged, and deep doubt in the point of his own existence, in his past, in his own future, is constantly equated with doubt in the sense of his work.⁴⁶⁵

In diaries we can see Knifer's uneasiness toward the world and his relation towards his work as he was sharing his feelings, his states of mind, introspection, describing his everyday life and problems he needed to overcome in order to work more efficiently. As he was striving to absurdity as a form of freedom in his paintings, we can say he was doing the same thing in his diaries with the repetition of sentences such as: "I have probably already made my last paintings but maybe not the first ones."⁴⁶⁶ Diaries, as well as paintings, reflect the passing of time by giving a spatial and visual dimension of time, drawing the intuitive typology of time that started with self-portraits before the creation of meander and continued throughout his career with

⁴⁶⁵ Maković Z (2002), *Knifer*, (p.86), Zagreb: Meandar

⁴⁶⁶ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.138) Zagreb: MSU

meanders. In that sense, we can notice the difference in the representation but not in the essence and the form. Banal enumeration reveals an extremely complex world, a world without order, in which every value and fact is relativized and turned into its absurd opposite, where the only drive is the flow of time. In *Banal diaries*, Knifer says: “I am something that I am not, and that is why now I am what I am. In addition, I am nothing I am now somewhat limited and fenced in.”⁴⁶⁷

Knifer’s diaries portray his life as an absurd drama as he many times depicts his work as senseless, useless, meaningless: “everything that I do is far away from the real work. Far away. I do not even know myself what in fact I want, Today (then) it is totally senseless to me; I am helpless and I do not want to work, Till madness or till death or till unconsciousness drawings till madness (if it is needed) (if it is possible) have to be done”.⁴⁶⁸ Absurdist playwright story generally ends up where it started. In Knifer’s case this is seen in tautology of meander or in the states he portrays in diaries that do not change through life as he is struggling with same issues, doubt and choices as if nothing has been accomplished and nothing has been gained. By writing *Banal diaries* Knifer was affirming the absurdity of his own life not only in paintings but also in the text while affirming himself as an absurd hero.

As a narrator or a character Knifer can be compared to other absurd heroes such as K from Kafka, Roquentin from Sartre, Meursault of Camus, Malone or Molly from Beckett, since all those characters are sentenced to the continuation and monotonous repetition. Their situation is absurd since they do not have a choice, the only question that exists is whether to continue or not.⁴⁶⁹ In the text, the same problems and atmosphere prevail, but the form of words and the text changes over the course of time. The same occurs with meander that changes inside the same form in the painting.

Through *Banal diaries*, we get an understanding of Knifer’s thinking and his states of consciousness. As in Sartre’s *Nausea* where there is no action, only thoughts on

⁴⁶⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.48) Zagreb: MSU

⁴⁶⁸ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Sve što radim je daleko od pravog rada. Daleko. Ne znam ni sam što zapravo želim, danas (tada) je totalno besmisleno za mene. Ja sam bespomoćan i ne želim raditi. Do ludila ili do smrti ili do gubitka svijesti crteži do ludila (ako je potrebno) (ako je moguće9 moraju biti gotovi.) – Translation mine

⁴⁶⁹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.36) Zagreb: MSU

family life, art, philosophical and essayist parts about the meaning of art and life. In that sense, there are similarities between the existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Knifer's view on the world. Existentialism, mostly in Sartre's interpretation, presented a cynical and ineradicable view of a lost man in an alien universe where no human truth was meaningful, no values were to be found, and where anguish and defeat were the only expectations possible. Most prominently, absurdity comes as the sole way out, the reverse significance of lost hopes, their positive rebirth, since it pronounces irrationality as a sound voice against nothingness.⁴⁷⁰ The rebellion and revolt are primarily a reaction to an intrusion that is considered intolerable according to Camus. This kind of reaction Knifer already exhibited together with the group members of Gorgona and this dissident attitude did not stop even after the dissolution of the group.

Knifer, like Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot*, vacillates between hope and despair when discussing his work, life, family, as he expresses his hope in progress just to contradict himself by sinking into despair and doubt but never giving up the struggle. Another characteristic of Knifer's narration we find in Beckett's *Quadrat* where he presents human life as a constant repetition of monotonous, never changing, life pattern, as humans are committed to an endless unyielding punishment bound to a continuous movement of excruciating sameness. Sameness in Knifer's case makes paintings and text at the same time cyclical and static as the structure of Beckett's plays.⁴⁷¹

Absurd is a fact with which we live but it does not lead Knifer into despair as he accepts the absurd and finds his freedom in it. In that sense in *Banal diaries*, Knifer presents himself as another absurd hero that always struggles with the same work, family, personal problems or same doubts. In the analysis of 10 pages of *Banal diaries* that originate from 1991, we can notice that there is a constant mention of tiredness on the one hand and on the other, the will to keep on working and improve the productivity in spite of it. In that sense *Banal Diaries* or anti-diaries are a combination of logbooks containing psychological purification where Knifer writes

⁴⁷⁰ Vasconcelos, *Absurd Language in the Theatre and Arts in the 20th Century*,

<<http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/4232.pdf>>

⁴⁷¹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.35) Zagreb: MSU

all his inner problems that evolve during working on meanders and a diary containing just fragments of different thoughts from different days or times. In *Banal diaries*, Knifer often mentions his tiredness that gives a certain atmosphere of uneasiness. Knifer presumes that this tiredness comes from some illness he has: "I feel bad and tired. Probably not without reason. I do not know how it is possible to get some rest. I should be working instead of thinking about resting."⁴⁷² This atmosphere described in *Banal diaries* is similar to the one from Sartre's *Nausea* where there is a constant unease, accented with doubt in life choices and work, in a sense of it all: "I should empty my consciousness. My subconsciousness. I should go into a state of non-consciousness. Or my thinking is mere stupidity. Or I am torturing myself or my consciousness without reason."⁴⁷³

Because of this doubt in himself and his work, Knifer wanted to make drastic decisions, as he was unsatisfied with his own behavior and attitude. He found solutions in running away from everything into isolation. As we can notice also the doubt in the chosen form of existence is present: "it is definitely becoming clear that I am nothing and a nobody."⁴⁷⁴ We can feel the sense of desperation with all segments of his life as if he was tired of all the problems that he did not know how to solve while he was just searching for his peace:

I will probably go crazy because of all my insecurities. I cannot be resolute in anything. I cannot make decisions. I cannot take a stand on anything. I do not know how to start anything. I should run away from the world. I should turn my back on everything. I should not respond to any letters. When I think about all my exhibitions (for which I do not have conditions or money) I want to go to the end of the world (and forget everything). I do not have nerves to live in uncertainty.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷² Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Osjećam se loše i umorno. Vjerovatno ne bez razloga. Ne znam kako je moguće dobiti malo odmora. Ja bih trebao raditi umjetno razmišljati o odmoru) – Translation mine

⁴⁷³ Sartre, (2000) *Nausea*, (p.43) Penguin

⁴⁷⁴ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Definitivno postaje jasno da sam ništa i nitko) – Translation mine

⁴⁷⁵ Ibidem. (Ja ću vjerovatno poluditi od svojih vlastitih neodređenosti. Ne mogu biti ni u čemu odlučan. Ne mogu donošati odluke. Ne mogu zauzeti svoj vlastiti stav. Ne znam ništa početi. Teško mi je početi ali morao bih pobjeći od svijeta. Morao bih svemu okrenuti leđa. Ni na kakva pisma ne bih trebao odgovarati. Kada se sjetim na sve te moje izložbe (za koje ja uopćenemam ni uvijete a ni

Work is a constant issue in the diary, as he was constantly writing about when he started working that particular day, what he still needed to do, what impaired him from working, how long he had been working, how intense he was working. We can notice that work is a struggle for him, as there were always things that obstructed him from working, such as family, weather, lunch, drinking, tiredness, motivation, doubt or money preventing him to keep up with the rhythm he had planned. On the other hand these periods interchange with short periods of time when he was working intensively, which brought him great satisfaction as according to him all the days should be like that, working without losing time: “my primary goal is to work as much as possible; Of course, as always, work will save me; I will work to the end, but I doubt that this makes sense at all.”⁴⁷⁶ In the diary Knifer ruminates how to improve the efficiency, which pencils to use; graphite; about his wishes on painting large canvases but the impossibility of it because of the lack of resources. Knifer described his daily work process:

I feel better when I do not have many plans. I want to have peace to work. But how to accomplish this kind of peace (it is a question). I do not want to lose the time anymore. I have to work. Everything that has to do with me starts to get complicated. And I need a clean situation to be able to work; “10:25, I feel bad, physically. Again, I cannot calm down and forget all my worries. I feel miserable. In addition, this right now when I am supposed to work most. 12:00 I feel bad and I feel tired. I must not interrupt my work. These drawings will give me a hard struggle, but I have to make them. I should take a rest, in a special way. Work does not make me tired. Therefore, I do not have to stop working. On the contrary, I must only work to get the rest from everything else. 17:20 I am working patiently. I should be even more patient, but I should also work more. Because of my conscience, but also for my self - assuredness.”⁴⁷⁷

novaca) onda mi dođe da odem nekamo na kraj svijeta (i zaboraviti sve). Nemam živaca živjeti u neizvjesnosti.) – Translation mine

⁴⁷⁶ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Moj primarni cilj je raditi koliko god je moguće. Naravno kao i uvijek posao će me spasiti. Ja ću raditi do kraja, ali sumnjam da ovo sve ima smisao.) – Translation mine

⁴⁷⁷ Ibidem. (Osjećam se bolje kada nemam mnogo planova. Želim imati mir za rad. No kako ostvariti mir (to je pitanje). Ne želim više gubiti vrijeme. Moram raditi. Sve što ima veze samnom postaje

Knifer combined the theme of work with the notion of time that passes. We can compare his problems to Sisyphus' who never reaches his goal: "I console myself by the fact that it is still summer, but fall will come too soon. Time goes fast. I can only mourn about lost time. Maybe I could have lost less time."⁴⁷⁸ We have the feeling that life impairs Knifer from working which also depresses him at the same time. At the same moment he was very strict with himself regarding the work ethic: "it is hot. The drawing is slowly coming together. I do not know when the drawing will be finished. This that I will start in a couple of days has to be the best work I will do. There is no more joking around, I have to go all in or nothing. I'm working carefully but at the same time also intensively."⁴⁷⁹

In *Banal diaries* as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we have the same feeling of a heavy atmosphere as everything seems to be a struggle: a professional and private sphere. Another similarity is when Knifer discusses his struggles to work or his constant tiredness. The same problems continue as there is no solution and everything stays the same. We feel as Knifer is struggling with his existentialist choice, as he often doubts it. In that sense, we can see that Knifer is following the existentialist premise that the individual must create value by affirming it and living it and not by simply talking about it or philosophizing it in the mind. In that sense by the repetition of the same problems we get the feeling that life is cyclical and that what happened before will happen again. Knifer, like two main characters in *Waiting for Godot*, repeated himself as he spoke in circles. Also, the act of waiting in *Waiting for Godot* is similar to the monotony Knifer wanted to present in his meanders and in his text. This waiting in the play introduces boredom as a theme by repetition of a dialogue, a method that Knifer used in diaries and in *Notes* as well.

komplificirano. A ja trebam čistu situaciju da bih mogao raditi. 10:25 Osjećam se loše fizički. Ponovo ne mogu se smiriti i zaboraviti sve moje brige. Osjećam se očajno. Pogotovo sada kada bih trebao najviše raditi. 12:00 Osjećam se loše i umorno. Ne smijem prekinuti svoj rad. Ovi crteži zahtjevaju tešku borbu, ali ja ih moram napraviti. Trebao bi se odmoriti na poseban način. Posao me ne čini umornim. Dakle ne moram prestati raditi. Naprotiv moram raditi da se odmorim od svega ostaloga. 17:20 strpljivo radim. Trebao bi biti još strpljiviji, ali bi također trebao više raditi. Zbog mojeg samopouzdanja ali i zbog vlastitog ubjeđenja.) – Translation mine

⁴⁷⁸ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Tješim se činjenicom da je još uvijek ljeto, ali jesen će ubrzo doći. Vrijeme brzo ide. Mogu samo žaliti zbog izgubljenog vremena. Možda sam mogao izgubiti manje vremena.) – Translation mine

⁴⁷⁹ Ibidem. (Vruće je. Crtež polako nastaje. Ne znam kada će taj crtež već biti dovršen. Ovo što ću raditi za koji dan, što ću početi raditi a koji dan mora biti najbolje što ja mogu napraviti. Šale više nema, ići ću na sve ili ništa. Raditi moram pažljivo ali i isto vrijeme i intenzivno) – Translation mine

In *Waiting for Godot*, nothing worthwhile happens while Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot to appear. We see that their lives are reduced to meaningless repetition, the same that Knifer represents with the infinite meander flow. The same nihilistic atmosphere is present in *Banal diaries* as we get the feeling that nothing will change and that problems will stay unresolved. The work is hard, place of residence is not secured, the family is not stable and everything is insecure. In that sense, Knifer portrayed his life as Beckett portrayed the world, as a hostile and absurd place where a man is alone in his struggle and despair.

In *Waiting for Godot* Beckett suggested that people pass the time by habit or routine in order to deal with the existentialist dilemma of the anxiety of existence. Habit in Knifer's oeuvre is present in the repetition of the same sign, meander, in the routine work of writing diaries and painting every day. Was this also Knifer's way of alleviation of the pain of living and existence? The name itself, *Banal diaries*, carries the idea of the banality of life depicted by meaningless repetitions in a way that it denies any inherent purpose of life. In all these elements of the absurd, we can see the similarity between Beckett's play and Knifer's diaries. As Knifer explains: "I found my diaries from the year 1956 and started to leaf through them. I also found some quotations that I might copy anew. I can see that then I wrote in the same way as today. Some sentences are identical to my present ones. I keep repeating myself."⁴⁸⁰

Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* discussed the structure of reality, similar to what Knifer demonstrated with the meander. As reality is in constant alteration, the challenge is how to live with changes. In the text, there is a predominant sentiment of uncertainty that is the only certainty in life. Monotony comes from the repetition of the same pattern, words or, in this case, theme. We feel that there is no progress in Knifer's life as he, on the other hand, said that there is no progress in his painting. In a way, Knifer followed the form in the diaries that he created for the paintings through monotony and repetition: "I am just one old beginner that made a lot (but not too

⁴⁸⁰ Knifer J., (January 18th, 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Našao sam moje dnevnikе iz 1958 i počeo sam ih listati. Našao sam neke citate koje bih moga ponovno navesti. Vidim da sam tada pisao isto kao i sada. Neke sadašnje rečenice su identične prošlima. Moram se nastaviti ponavljati.) – Translation mine

many) unimportant things and mostly wasted time. I know to start many things but I do not know if I will ever be able to finish them.”⁴⁸¹

When reading diaries we can also notice the social and economic component of Knifer’s life. Knifer moved from Croatia looking for better conditions of work, and was constantly moving through Dijon, Sète, Nice, finally settling down in Paris where he got a studio in 1990. Constant doubt contributed to the pessimistic atmosphere due to the lack of finances or irregular finances and constant moving in search of the permanent place to work. In *Banal diaries* Knifer wrote:

How my next paintings will look like. That is the big question. Do I even have the strength to make good paintings? We will see. I will try to make an effort. If I do not succeed it is going to be bad for me. I have to be strong and something will come out of everything. Even though I am a pessimist.⁴⁸²

In diary we find philosophical parts where Knifer openly writes about the absurd:

Not to know is better than to know and from here everything can go all the way toward the absurd. Everything starts from the absurd. The absurd is a beginning of everything. And everything finishes in the absurd. And that is the function of the absurd. The absurd is the beginning and the end” or when he is quoting Kafka’s thoughts on the absurd or life “nothing is definite, just suffering.”⁴⁸³

When Knifer started writing diaries time stopped being important as different paragraphs were put together in a colorful collage. In Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* time is an infinite emptiness that stretches without any beginning or end, and therefore the characters cannot differentiate the previous day from today, and memory

⁴⁸¹ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Ja sam samo jedan stari početnik koji je napravio puno (ali ne previše) nevažnih stvari i uglavnom trošio vrijeme. Znam kako započeti mnoge stvari ali ne znam da li ću ikada biti sposoban završiti ih) – Translation mine

⁴⁸² Ibidem. (Kako će izgledati moje sljedeće slike. To je veliko pitanje. Da li ja uopće imam snage napraviti dobre slike? Vidjet ćemo. Probat ću potruditi se. Ako ne uspijem to će biti loše za mene. Moram biti jak i nešto će izaći iz ničega. Iako sam pesimist) – Translation mine

⁴⁸³ Ibidem. (Ne znati je bolje nego znati i odavdje sve može ići prema apsurd. Sve počinje od apsurd. Apsurd je početak svega. I sve završava u apsurd. I to je funkcija apsurd. Apsurd je početak i kraj ili citirajući Kafkine misli o apsurdnosti života: “ništa nije definitivno, samo patnja.”) – Translation mine

fails them since time is composed out of days almost identical with each other. Knifer was trying to present the same feeling of time through segments of different texts put together, where we cannot differentiate the chronological order and where in most cases, there is no exact beginning or end of the sentences. Knifer, like Beckett, replaced customary structure and language with fragmentary and nonsensical dialogue in order to present the world of chaos that mocks established institutions and conformity. The language that both writers use in text became representation of stagnant life and meaninglessness, as it relates to life without action. In that sense when reading *Banal diaries* we can feel the nihilistic atmosphere as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:

Again I am thrown out of the peace that I need the most. I need to start form myself. Nobody is to blame that I am like I am. I am unfit to live and to work. I started from somewhere. I am disappearing slowly. I am immobilized and less and less active. Like I am disappearing.⁴⁸⁴

Repetition in *Waiting for Godot* serves to remind us how monotonous, repetitive and tedious life is, as the play is replete with repetition without variety and with no resolution. Repetitions also serve not only to show the repetitious circle of life but to make characters appear busy with banalities so that they pass the painful time less consciously. In the play language becomes a meaningless buzzing as Beckett wants to show that the world has lost its meaning.⁴⁸⁵ This disintegration of language Knifer uses when he creates meanders out of the text of different color, meaning and shape appearing like a collage. In that sense when we try to read the meanders made out of text we notice that there is no order, no sense and meaning.

⁴⁸⁴ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Opet sam izbačen iz mira koji mi je najviše potreban. Moram početi od sebe. Nitko nije kriv što sam takav kakav sam. Nesposoban sam za život i za rad. Počeo sam odnekud. Polako nestaje. Nepokretan sam i sve manje i manje aktivan. Kao da nestajem) - Translation mine

⁴⁸⁵ Migernier, E (2007) *Beckett and French Theory: The Narration of Transgression* (p. 7), Peter Lang New York

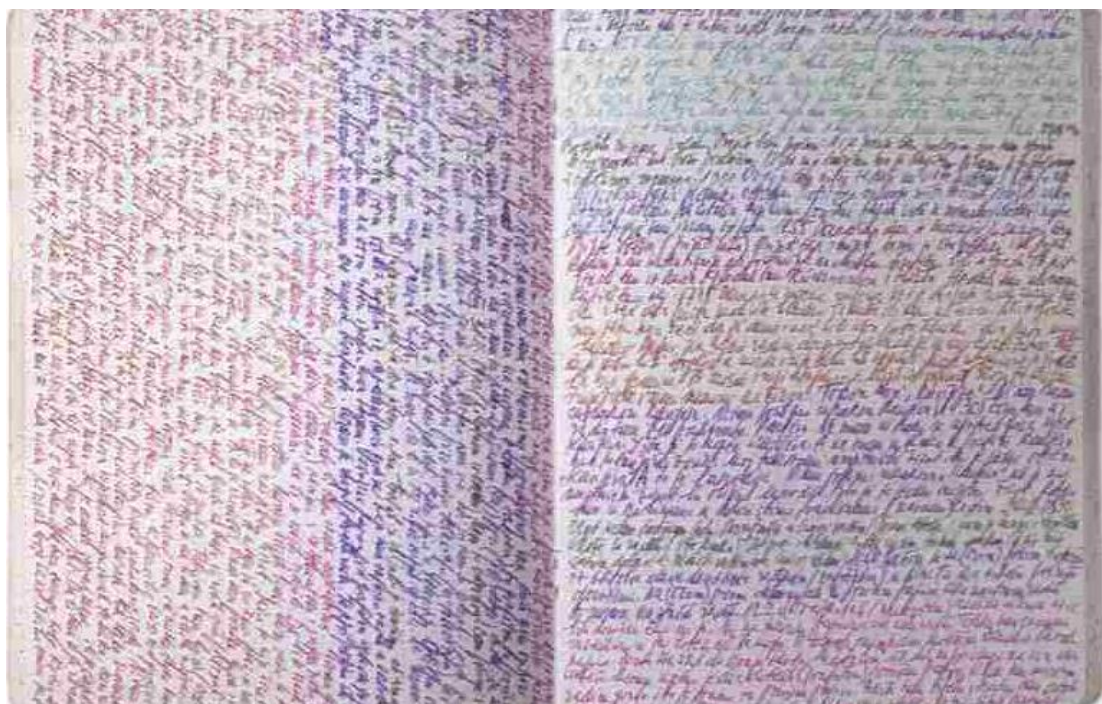


Figure 42. Julije Knifer, *Banal diaries*, 1975-2003

Source: *Uncompromising*, MSU, 2014, p.277

Knifer discusses his writing of *Banal diaries* in the journal saying that he cannot invest much time in it because of the work he needs to invest in his paintings. As we know, Knifer used to write his diary sporadically during the day when he would take short breaks from painting:

Over me, there is a pressure of written and unwritten texts. Meaning the text I should write. Maybe I have already found some keys to start writing. Maybe I overwork on my drawings so I cannot so easily orient myself on starting to write. In texts there should be something present from my own spirit. I cannot ask something from myself that I do not know if it belongs to one of the keys.⁴⁸⁶

Another way to analyze *Banal diaries* is according to the first paragraph of *Notes* where Knifer said: “my text needs to be neutral and clear, in other words simple and

⁴⁸⁶ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Nadamnom stalno prijeti pritisak mojih napisanih i ne napisanih tekstova. To jest tekstova koje bi ja morao napisati. Možda sam već našao neke ključeve za početak pisanja. Možda malo prenaporno radim na crtežima pa se ne mogu tek tako jednostavno orijentirati na tekstov. U tekstovima mora nešto postojati od mojeg duha (ako imam ikakav duh). Ne mogu od sebe tražiti nešto što ne znam ili je jedan od ključeva upravo to.) – Translation mine

direct.”⁴⁸⁷ This statement was not valid for the diaries as Knifer played with the clearness of meaning that was repeating itself and was getting more fragmented, sometimes resembling the fragments of meanders he was painting from the 1970s onwards. Also in *Notes* we find the reason why Knifer started writing diary without any order: “continuity lasts from painting to painting or in and out of a painting. Continuity exists, but the order is unimportant. The sequence has no importance. Times and circumstances change people and only in this aspect my paintings change.”⁴⁸⁸

If we compare diaries to other texts that Knifer wrote we can see that the form is different as other texts were more consisted and organized, but diaries were increasing confusion creating a certain atmosphere around the author since we can feel his despair, his existentialist crisis that never leaves him alone, the doubt, the incertitude: “I do not know how I am supposed to live. Often something comes in a way of my programmed way of life. I believe less and less in my paintings on the wall. I think they are not fully finished.”⁴⁸⁹

Diaries of the last phase of writing leave the impression of visual artworks, as they represent meanders made out of the text. These collages of colorful text make reading an investigating process of finding the meaning and deciphering the text. Meander in written works becomes in this way a dominant form of dissolving syntax, creating a narration shape, breaking it into shards that later did not connect into a meaningful whole. In that sense in Knifer’s text, we can also trace the meaning of meander because his texts are not just about painting and his thoughts on art, they are something more, they affirm the absurd of life, as meanders do as well. Like the conversations in *Waiting for Godot*, text as a whole does not have a meaning anymore, life becomes meaningless and the world has no apparent meaning. Words become inadequate to pierce the essence of reality so Knifer uses text as a form to create meanders and at the same time text becomes more abstract as his paintings, and also language becomes devaluated as a vehicle of conceptual thought.

⁴⁸⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.137) Zagreb: MSU

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p.137

⁴⁸⁹ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Ne znam kako bih trebao živjeti. Često nešto uznemiri moje programirani način života. Sve manje i manje vjerujem svojim slikama na zidu. Minisl da nisu u potpunosti završene) – Translation mine

In *Banal diary* we find monologues similar to Beckett's anti-heroes as if Knifer is stuck and he cannot be what he needs or wants to be to finish his paintings: "something that I am not. And that is why I am what I am now. And I am nothing. I am something very limited and cramped. I was everything but what I was supposed to be."⁴⁹⁰ In that sense we can say that Knifer's problems can be identified in general with the ending line from Beckett's *Unnamable*: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.35) Zagreb: MSU

⁴⁹¹ Beckett (1997), *Unnamable*, (p.460) London: Kopf

6.3. NOTES

Notes (Zapisi) were written in 1976/77 and published in *Život umjetnosti No.35* in 1983. *Notes* are theoretically the most important text because in it Knifer reflects on principles of his paintings as he explains the development of the idea behind meander. The central focus is on the years 1959/60 when the concept of meander began. At the time when the text was written, in the late 1970s, Knifer was working on his black meander paintings that represented a more abstract version of the meanders from 1959/60. For that reason, we can sometimes notice the theoretical distance from the original idea to which he stays faithful on the spiritual level even though his priorities in the art have changed. As Knifer explained:

Today it is purposeless to create an anti-painting and I do not know if my present compositions must suggest an anti-painting formula, although they are of the same spiritual origin and the same spiritual and physical structure as in those years- 1959 and 1960. It is important to continue the logic of a course commenced then.⁴⁹²

The text can be divided into three parts. In the beginning of *Notes* Knifer writes about the structure of the text in general, in second part about painting and in third part about his personal thoughts on art. In the first part, Knifer is stating the rules that should apply to the written text and that also serve as an introduction to the second part about painting as it indirectly applies to the painting as well. In the beginning Knifer is paradoxical in his attempt to give facts; he confuses the reader as he wants to be logical and ends being a-logical. Knifer says: “text must be pure and direct”⁴⁹³, but it is everything except that, as he repeats this statement a couple of times. Knifer wants to be clear, simple and direct while the text seems to be everything but clear. By repeating and explaining same notions, as for example the word “facts”, the text becomes more redundant, abstract, absurd and confusing which is not in the line with his instruction that the text must be clear and neutral: “it is not that everything has to be logical at all costs, since I do not describe events but only want to record certain facts.”⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146) Zagreb: MSU

⁴⁹³ *Ibidem.*, p.146

⁴⁹⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146) Zagreb: MSU

In the text repetition slows the flow of the narration and takes away its meaning. Repeated phrases, lines and words are used to signify the senseless repetition and relentless flow of time inherent to human existence. In the language that Knifer uses, we can see the resemblance to the language Beckett uses in his works. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, characters repeat what they themselves have already said or each other's utterances and actions in quite a circular way. They keep on repeating words for many times to show that man's life does not exceed anywhere beyond a certain number of endlessly repeated habitual deeds.⁴⁹⁵

At the beginning text reminds of absurd plays where there is no logical exposition or resolution, as Knifer writes: "the text must consist of facts, The entire text will be just listing of facts, Definitions are but the simplest description of facts, I do not describe events but only want to record certain facts, I want to list facts."⁴⁹⁶ Beside "facts", monotony is also important to Knifer in work: "the text should have its flow and rhythm, if only entirely monotonous (even better)."⁴⁹⁷ Knifer repeats terms but does not explain anything. In that sense, nothing changes and nothing is solved, as everything seems static from the beginning until the end of the text.

From the beginning, we notice that time is not linear in Knifer's written works nor in his paintings: "one should literary start from the end right away"⁴⁹⁸ or as later in the text he said: "I might have already done my last paintings, and have not done the first ones."⁴⁹⁹ From the second sentence, we can understand that time is cyclical for Knifer, indefinite as everything repeats itself and there is no orderly sequence of events. Time is meaningless, a direct result of chance being the underlying factor of existence, one reason why this beginning of the text does not seem a beginning: "perhaps this text should not have a traditional beginning. One should literary start from the end right away"⁵⁰⁰, while in the same time he contradicts himself as well: "regardless of my opinion that a text should begin without an introduction and rather in the midst of the matter, there must be some sort of beginning."⁵⁰¹ We see that the

⁴⁹⁵ *Language in Waiting for Godot*, <<http://www.iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&aId=63045>>

⁴⁹⁶ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.147) Zagreb: MSU

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.147

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibidem.*, p.147

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.147

⁵⁰⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁰¹ *Ibidem.*, p.147

concept of time is also similar to Beckett's. Instead of a moving stream it had become something like a stagnant mush, like the world of "*Waiting for Godot*", one without any meaningful pattern, which symbolizes chaos as the dominating force in the world.

In the second part of *Notes* Knifer writes about his anti-paintings together with mentioning some personal revelations that intertwine without any order. As Knifer mixes facts with personal thoughts in the same paragraph he is creating a discontinuity of thought, reminding us of *Banal diaries* where he was putting together fragments of different text into one unity. In these revelations we discover that the absurd is the most important thing for him in his work: "to me, absurdity is a very important component in my actions, Absurdity is a form of freedom."⁵⁰² Once again Knifer confirmed that for him time is irrelevant:

Chronology and continuity had no meaning for me. Temporal continuity did not exist then, because there were justified pauses and ones without a reason. The explanation comes to mind that I move from the end to the beginning. My way is neither progressive nor regressive. With me there is no development or progress.⁵⁰³

In the last sentence Knifer mentions that with him there is no progress or development as he is taking a role of a Beckett or Camus' absurd hero who does not give up after all: "I have reserved the realm of doing this work for my freedom and I have always actually considered this a form of my only freedom. Or the only form of my freedom. The only real form of my freedom."⁵⁰⁴

With his persistence to keep on working on the same idea that was reached in 1959 Knifer shares similar life view to Camus who wrote in *Myth of Sisyphus*:

What I believe to be the truth I must therefore preserve. What seems to me so obvious, even against me, I must support. And what constitutes the basis of that conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness

⁵⁰² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.147) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁰³ *Ibidem.*, p.148

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibidem.*, p.148

of it? If therefore I want to preserve it, I can through constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert. That is what I must remember for the moment. At this moment, the absurd, so obvious and yet so hard to win, returns to a man's life and finds its home there. At this moment, too, the mind can leave the arid, dried up the path of lucid effort. That path now emerges in daily life. It encounters the world of the anonymous impersonal pronoun one, but henceforth man enters with his revolt and his lucidity. He has forgotten how to hope. This hell of the present is his Kingdom at last.⁵⁰⁵

The third part of the text is more autobiographical and in that way it resembles more *Plead*, *Notes* and *Banal diaries*. In this self-reflexive approach, there is again an existentialist note that is characteristic of Knifer's written texts. This focus on Existentialism is visible through the feeling and expressions of nihilism, melancholy and the absurd that he reaches with paradox, reduction and omission. Knifer puts himself in a position of a subject as in his other introspective texts like *Plead* or *Banal diaries*. As an author he becomes a subject in the text as he does in his paintings. In this way, Knifer acknowledges his mental and physical existence.

Many times in different sentences Knifer repeats the words reduction, monotony, repetition and rhythm making these terms most important elements of his artworks: "monotony and repetition are a rhythm which is actually the external form of content".⁵⁰⁶ Following, Knifer repeats in different sentences the importance of the years 1959/60, anti-painting, extreme contrast, and radical reduction. In *Notes* Knifer gave a definition of his art:

My aim was to create some form of anti-painting with minimal means, in utmost contrasts, to obtain a monotonous rhythm. I tried to achieve an overlapping between the spiritual and the physical in painting because in its physical form my painting is exhausted spiritually as well.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ Ed. Marion G, (2004) *Basic Writings on Existentialism*, (p. 478), Modern Library

⁵⁰⁶ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.148) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.146

Knifer finished the second part of the text by stating the importance of the planes: "I finally reached the insight that also surfaces can only have a meaning in the definition of a painting without identity."⁵⁰⁸ He defines his paintings as planes: "in my work plane surfaces, which are supposed to be the final product of a continuous process and are considered painting have the meaning of a definite document."⁵⁰⁹ Knifer's thinking is similar to Malevich whose planes had a specific relationship with each other and also with the white background. Following, he defines his oeuvre saying that meander is just part of the larger cycle: "definitive surfaces (paintings) are only the final form of a sub-process, which is part of the whole flow process called meander."⁵¹⁰

In the late 1970s when *Notes* were written Knifer was creating black meander paintings where he was more interested in the work process and endless repetition of black color graphite saturation of the canvas. In the *Notes* Knifer mostly reminiscences of the times of 1959 and 1960 when the idea of meander appeared but still we can notice the appearance of new interests that he tries to connect with the original idea. Knifer manages to do that by confirming that all his paintings carry the same spiritual idea from 1959:

The physical form of "painting" at the same time meant the ultimate spiritual state of the initial idea. My current compositions contain the same spiritual origin and the same spiritual structure from those years - fifty-nine and sixty. In its physical form, my "painting" is exhausted also spiritually.⁵¹¹

The third autobiographical part of the text starts with the date 27th of February 1977. Knifer begins the paragraph with a question: "why have I decided to become a painter?"⁵¹² The answer to that will remain the main theme of the last part. The second line is already full of doubt as are the sentences from *Banal diaries*, where Knifer questions his own ability to give the appropriate answer. Knifer continues the

⁵⁰⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.150) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.149

⁵¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, p.149

⁵¹¹ *Ibidem.*, p.149

⁵¹² *Ibidem.*, p.150

paragraph giving us some details from his past while trying to define himself. To Knifer as to Beckett individual self-awareness is important.

In the last paragraphs, we encounter Knifer's thoughts on absurd and freedom, which are at the core of his art and his existence: "my relation to art was a relation of a person to art and not of an artist to art. In this way, I developed an almost total feeling of freedom."⁵¹³ Knifer identifies himself with his paintings: "my painting is in a way a mode of my behavior...I don't know if I have liberated something in the painting, but I know that I have liberated myself with the help of painting."⁵¹⁴ We can understand that painting helped Knifer to overcome circumstances of the war and post-war period.

In the last part, Knifer goes back to the repetition of facts he stated in the second part sometimes explaining it with biographical information: "because absurdity is for me a very definite form of freedom, in that process towards a certain form of anti-painting I undertook steps to absurdity."⁵¹⁵ Soon after that, in the final part, he summarizes clearly the whole concept of his paintings with a focus on the absurd and monotony and chronology of anti-painting: "my primary aim was to make an anti-painting by means of reduction of form and content."⁵¹⁶ In that way, he gives us clear information on his art while including an absurd element creating confusion as he does in his other texts.

⁵¹³ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.150) Zagreb: MSU

⁵¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, p.151

⁵¹⁵ *Ibidem.*, p.151

⁵¹⁶ *Ibidem.*, p.151

6.4. A PETITIONARY LETTER TO THE ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES IN ZAGREB

A Petitionary Letter to the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb or *Plead* was published in *Život umjetnosti* 35 in 1983. Art critic Zvonko Maković suggests that we should perceive all Knifer's written works as poetic text, in the context of the absurdist fiction.⁵¹⁷ This fact can be applied to *A Petition Letter to the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb*, as Knifer draws us into absurd situations with existential impact. The text is written as an ironic letter to the Academy of Arts and Sciences, the highest intellectual institution in Croatia, which is presented as a constraining institution in the letter. It is presented as one that decides on tastes and opinions, one that governs lives of artists and public against whose domination Knifer was revolting. *Plead* reminds of Gorgona group's revolt against art institutions as they, from the beginning of their mutual collaboration, have distanced themselves from the mainstream art production and functioned independently through anti-magazine *Gorgona*, and self-financed gallery Studio G. The name of the text *Plead* or *Petitionary letter to the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb* also refers to bureaucratic language of Austrian-Hungarian Empire and exaggerated politeness used in Gorgona's mail art that group members exchanged between themselves.

Knifer once said that he was lucky because he studied after the end of socialist realism and thus was not obliged to make art according to the state dictate. On the other hand even after the end of socialist realism in the 1960s the state kept its influence in arts as they were financing all artistic projects and exhibitions in Yugoslavia. This oppression and demands for liberalization of art from the institutions had a big influence on the artist scene and probably influenced Knifer to write *Plead*. Knifer and other Gorgona members demanded the freedom of arts and expression and did not want the state to influence artists or public as art should have freedom of expression.⁵¹⁸

In magazine *ČIP*, Knifer commented on *Plead to the Academy of Arts and Sciences* saying that he was a dilettante for writing and that the real writer would write it differently. In *Plead*, Knifer is explaining that to succeed one needs to accept the rules

⁵¹⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.35) Zagreb: MSU

⁵¹⁸ *ČIP*, No.44, (1997) (p.17) Zagreb

of Academy of Arts and Sciences including its system of hierarchy. In that sense, in *Plead* all the values are relativized and there is an accent on the meaninglessness:

I was grateful to the Academy of Arts and Sciences, in fact to the police, the regime. I have identified Academy with police and wrote that I am grateful that I can walk through the streets of this city during day and night. And I beg them that they take over my identity because I do not need it anymore, I am secure enough and I enjoy this city so much that I do not need my own identity.⁵¹⁹

Due to the fact that in *Plead* Knifer wanted to surrender his life to the Academy, the mockery and irony in the letter can be also through the fact that the Academy is presented as opposite to what it should represent, a closed institution. Gorgona members and Knifer had found provisional and ambiguous freedom in private and not in the public sphere. They were not political activists and they did not oppose the institutions, as they created their free artistic space outside the institutional reach. *Plead* in that sense could be seen as an answer to the question of an escape from structures of authority.

In *Plead* Knifer wants to renounce his freedom and consciousness that appear when he awakes during the night. This awakening is a problem to Knifer because it creates the dissonance with the Academy:

However, there is a problem (of purely existential nature), which brings uneasiness and plagues the signee. It is the problem of day and night. For the sake of clarity and comprehensibility, I want to point out that the day (without night) is divided into two parts. This means that the signee spends the first part of the day in a kind of a lethargic sleep and the second part of the day in an allergic doze. But the situation changes with the arrival of the night. The signee wakes up from his half-sleep and begins to sail through the night, awake...thanks to everybody, the signee states under a moral obligation that

⁵¹⁹ *ČIP, No.44, (1997), (p.18) Zagreb (Bio sam zahvalan Akademiji Znanosti i Umjetnosti, zapravo policiji, režimu. Identificirao sam Akadmeiju s policijom i napisao sam da sam zahvalan što mogu hodati ulicama ovog grada tijekom dana i noći. I jai h molim da preuzmu moj identitet jer mi više ne treba. Dovoljno sam siguran i uživam u tom gradu da ne trebam identitet). – Translation mine*

with the onset of the night he is ready to do everything because the night brings awakening and consciousness, which is unworthy of a real man. A man can be allowed a lethargic semi-sleep at most.⁵²⁰

We could say that *Plead* is Knifer's revolt against institutions since Knifer feels the alienation from the society and people. The institutions and bureaucracy are in his opinion treating and shaping people into uniformed masses and not giving them freedom to develop individually to form their own opinions. Knifer mocked this kind of behavior by emphasizing the gratitude toward the Academy:

The petition form has been set with the aim to once again manifest the real feeling of gratitude in this way. The feeling of fear has remained only in novels. In human souls still exists only the feeling of deep gratitude and the feeling of greatness and depth of other people's mercy.⁵²¹

In Knifer's opinion arts should be free and not connected with the state and the state should not dictate who is an artist or not or which taste should predominate in art. In that sense Academy as an institution which should promote arts and sciences is presented as a totalitarian institution dictating taste:

As the signee of this letter I have not found a good reason not to address you directly as follows: 1) because I consider the addressed institution the only competent one to solve the problems of other people's existences, both a) successful existences and b) unsuccessful existences.⁵²²

The dystopian society Knifer proposes in *Plead* would be composed of people without identity, dead people that will stay asleep not only as now during the day but also during the night. This is how Knifer sees the society under the authority of institutions:

⁵²⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.95) Zagreb: MSU

⁵²¹ *Ibidem.*, p.99

⁵²² *Ibidem.*, p.99

Note: under b) concentration camps. Sounds ugly, but in fact, it is noble. The issue of concentration camps is simple. Instead of identity people are offered the possibility of simple and attractive joys....The question of death is not discussed because people without identity don't die. They have no reason for that.⁵²³

Following, Knifer writes his own petition to renounce his identity that also serves as a model for others. Knifer proclaims the process of writing petitions science and a main task of people without identity as a way to show gratitude to the institution:

In order to immediately proceed to current tasks, I am enclosing the following text for a petition that my identity be taken away from me. For example the signee, for the last time in the possession of his personal identity, kindly asks the addressee, i.e. the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb to accept my petition, which I am submitting out of deep gratitude with the aim of being liberated from my own identity.⁵²⁴

We can notice similarities between *Plead* and *Notes* where Knifer is talking about himself before and after death, and now when he is describing his identity in the same manner: "I am returning to you with full gratitude. For easier handling of my former personality, now already without it, I would like to mention that some inclinations have been left over from my previous life."⁵²⁵ Death again in *Plead* serves as point zero from which Knifer regards his past or present self and, on the other hand, a place where he can experience freedom, as Camus writes:

Likewise, completely turned toward death (taken here as the most obvious absurdity), the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys freedom with regard to common rules. It can be seen at this point that the initial themes of existential

⁵²³ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.95) Zagreb: MSU

⁵²⁴ *Ibidem.*, p.95

⁵²⁵ *Ibidem.*, p.95

philosophy keep their entire value. The return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep, represent the first steps of absurd freedom.⁵²⁶

In the last part of the *Plead* Knifer suggests the second model for his dystopia, the return to feudal relations which would lead to the further humanization of people since the communication between people now is critical and bad. In this new system the process of sending petitions would be reversed:

I propose a reverse order of petitions, meaning that the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences should send a petition to everyone interested, especially the signee, with a lot of gratitude, to become members or, at least, corresponding members of the renowned institution. Moreover, from now on only institutions would have the right to petitions. The signee proposes that by means of different petitions everyone could thank him for making them happy with his existence. This is especially obligatory for institutions of the administrative, intellectual and spiritual profile.⁵²⁷

With his wish to belong to the society represented by Academy Knifer reminds of Camus who wrote in *Myth of Sisyphus*:

If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning; or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should be this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation.⁵²⁸

In the last sentence, Knifer writes the date of the letter, the night between 4th and 5th February of 1962, saying that his passport is valid until 14th February 1962. In the sentence, he is showing his indifference by saying: “however, if even that is not possible, then everything should remain as it is in waiting for the night before

⁵²⁶ Ed. MacDonald P, (2001) *The Existentialist Reader: An Anthology of Key Texts*, (p.179), Routledge, New York

⁵²⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.95) Zagreb: MSU

⁵²⁸ Austin, N (1990), *Meaning and Being in Myth*, (p.64), Pennsylvania State University

between the 4th and 5th of February 1962.”⁵²⁹ Once again he is accepting that the world is absurd and likewise accepting indifference of the world toward human life as well.

Plead is written and signed by “the signee” which is very impersonal, similar to the impersonal name of the character K in Kafka’s *Castle* for example. Another kafkaesque element can be seen in the description of Knifer’s struggle with institutions that is similar to K’s battle with institutions in *Castle*. Kafka was fascinated by institutions and often referred to them in his novels, which reminds us of the activities of the Gorgona group. On the one hand, members of the Gorgona group were feeling oppressed by institutions, especially institutions in charge of the arts that were regulated by the state. This situation was against all the principles that they had toward art that in their opinion should be free from the state dictate. Their common dissatisfaction served as a basis for the beginning of the mail art where they were mocking bureaucracy and its official language of communication.⁵³⁰

Kafka and Knifer wrote about similar dystopias in which main characters are rebelling against institutions as if they were among a few individuals seeing their dysfunctionality. In contrast to Kafka, who in *Castle* presents surreal and dark atmosphere and man’s frustration against attempts to stand against the system in a futile and hopeless pursuit of an unobtainable goal, Knifer wrote a satirical response knowing the uselessness of this attempt to portray the absurd of the complete authority of art institutions. In his opinion, they repressed arts and defined public taste instead of liberating arts and providing the freedom of choice.

In *Plead*, Knifer as Kafka in his novels *Castle* or *The Trial* shows how institutions have become alienated from the society. When we look at the text we can notice that Knifer mocks the institutionalized way of communication, which is also seen in the title of the work *Plead* that refers to a letter that all men and women have to write for Knifer’s dystopia, ruled by the Academy of Arts and Sciences:

⁵²⁹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.95) Zagreb: MSU

⁵³⁰ Gattin, M. (2002), *Gorgona*, (pp. 41-42) Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti

Because of the vital problem that arises due to the existence of the difference between day and night, i.e. sleep, doze, and awakening, the signee kindly asks (first of all thanking) and then asks and thanks again that he can propose the following: 1. I propose that the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts be given the chance of taking over the entire spiritual and physical power over all spiritual and physical fates of people and animals – I especially mention animals for their humane relation to people. 2. With the aim of easier implementing of the described action of taking over people's and animals' fates it is necessary to: a) invite all men and women between the first and the last year of life to present their petitions for the return of identity to the above mentioned institution. b) found concentration camps for disidentitized fates. Note: petitions are obligatory.⁵³¹

The similarity between Kafka's characters K. and Joseph K and Knifer is in the self-awareness. Joseph K progresses to a will capable of differentiation, through the assault to the system where the will is literally forced upon him as he realizes that he must defend individuality and not just his own. On the other hand, K. acts on basis of a will which is his own, as the conflict between individual and society is introduced by no other than himself as he aims to change the social order, similar to what Knifer wrote in *Plead*:

And so, because of this sin of mine that I wake up at all, I feel the obligation to warn the above petitioned institution as the most competent one for the suppression of all kinds of awareness to the need of most realistic approach in the assessment of the signee's present spiritual situation.⁵³²

Sartre believed that human beings must make their own choices, reach their own decisions, think for themselves and establish their own standards of living. Sartre distinguished between being in itself that is depicted without consciousness and thus has no freedom and being for itself, a conscious being. Sartre believed that humans are condemned to be free and if we make excuses for not having this freedom or not doing something we desire, we are living in bad faith. As beings for themselves, we

⁵³¹ Ed. O'Neil, (2014) *Great World Writers: Twentieth Century*, (p.134), Marshall Cavendish

⁵³² Kraft, (1991) *Someone like K; Kafka's Novels*, (p.9)Taschenbuch

are fundamentally free to make our own choices to chart our own course in life. On the other hand, if we blindly follow the dictates of social custom or the commands of others and refuse to take responsibility for our actions we are once again living in bad faith. So the wake-up call here is freedom to accept being for itself that is not enchained by the grimy materialism of the body or by the slightly less grimy socialization of our economic and social roles.⁵³³

Because of the fact that Academy was dictating taste in Yugoslavia following the socialist regime many artists were neglected and it was hard for them to work in the given circumstances. In *Banal diaries* and interviews Knifer said that he had to leave Zagreb because he did not have possibilities and resources to live and work which was in a way also related to the art politics of the state. Even after he left Zagreb for Paris where he had a studio to work, money issues always bothered him and sometimes constrained him in his artistic vision: “at the end one needs to say that my artistic life is very expensive.”⁵³⁴

Knifer presented the relationship between himself and Academy as an institution similar to Hannah Arendt’s definition of power as the purpose of this *Plead* in that sense is to renounce one’s own identity and to subordinate himself to “world order”. Hannah Arendt in that way described institutions as:

The power of the machine...is nothing other than the appearance of necessity, which can realize itself through people’s admiration of necessity. The machine gets started because necessity is considered something elevated and because its automatism, which is interrupted only momentarily, is considered the symbol of necessity. The machine is kept in motion by lies on behalf of necessity, so that a man who does not want to subordinate himself to this “world order” is regarded in all its consequences as a sinner against some kind of divine order.⁵³⁵

⁵³³ Wardman (1992) *Jean-Paul Sartre, the evolution of his thought and art*, (pp.106-108), Edwin Mellen Press

⁵³⁴ Knifer, (January 1991) *Banal diaries*, private collection (Na kraju treba reći da je moj umjetnički život jako skup) – Translation mine

⁵³⁵ Heins, Veiskel, (2005) *Kafka*, (p.92) Chelsea house

Foucault, on the other hand, sees institutions as a way of freezing particular relations of power so that a certain number of people can be advantaged. In the *Plead* Academy is portrayed as the center of the power whereas Foucault says individuals do not simply exercise power or are the recipients of power but they become “vehicles” of power application.⁵³⁶ *Plead* in this sense needs to be viewed as a critique of the situation in the society in the 1960s.

Knifer refers to Foucault once again in the text talking about progress: “progress is not always going forward and going forward is not always progress and always going forward is not necessarily progress. Progress means to go back progressively.”⁵³⁷ In this case Knifer is referring to history in Foucaultian manner as the present is just as strange as past and histories never stop; they cannot be said to stop because they cannot be said to be going anywhere, as progress for Foucault is not necessary for the better.⁵³⁸ Further on, Knifer follows Foucault’s idea that truth is produced by the dominant political and economic apparatus in society and through different institutions truth becomes an object of constant diffusion and consumption. Power no longer needs to be violent, and cultural truths become a way of propagating hegemony in society. This, as we can see is also an end result that Knifer looks for in the *Plead*, to renounce one’s identity in the name of the institution:

I propose that the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts be given the chance of taking over the entire spiritual and physical power over all spiritual and physical fates of people and animals – I especially mention animals for their humane relation to people. In order to immediately proceed to current tasks, I am enclosing the following text for a petition that my identity be taken away from me; the signee, for the last time in the possession of his personal identity, kindly asks the address, i.e. the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb to accept my petition, which I am out of deep gratitude submitting with the aim of being liberated from my own identity.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁶ Mills, (2003) *Michel Foucault*, (p.78) Routledge

⁵³⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.99) Zagreb: MSU

⁵³⁸ Mills, (2003) *Michel Foucault*, (p.78) Routledge

⁵³⁹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.99) Zagreb: MSU

Authority that is represented by the Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb finds its complete expression only in the institution. In Sartre's mind authority relations are coercive, they leave individuals no choice but obedience. This obedience of the institutionalized individual is something like an acceptance of sovereign authority. This is why Sartre can claim that obedience legitimates the sovereignty of the exploiters in the eyes of exploited. Its illegitimacy, on the other hand, is revealed only by acts of disobedience.⁵⁴⁰

Foucault and Camus agree that power structures in society inevitably lead to the condition of absurd where the process of revolt against the same absurd is only possible by admitting its inevitability. In that way resistance of power begins with a seemingly simple act of refusal. For Camus rebel is a man who refuses, says no but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. The refusal in this context becomes a central idea of liberalization in the context of Foucault's power and Camus's absurd. It is through refusal and negation that Sisyphus revolts. In *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* Camus argues that: "the world in itself is not reasonable...but what is absurd is the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world."⁵⁴¹

⁵⁴⁰ Flynn, (1984) *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility*, (p.122), University of Chicago Press

⁵⁴¹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.95) Zagreb: MSU

6.5. NOTES

Notes (Bilješke) were published in *Postgorgona 3* in 1986, a magazine that was edited by Josip Vaništa and that kept Gorgona alive even after the group's dissolution. *Notes* refer mostly to the existentialist works of Camus and Sartre, such as *Stranger* and *Nausea*. The narrator of the text is Knifer that after death is looking upon Knifer before death and judging his previous life and values according to the norms of society. He is viewing himself as an unsuccessful person as he is looking upon himself from the perspective of others and through the prism of the dominant values of the society that qualify somebody as successful. From the start, the text is absurd as Knifer contemplates about his death and the day he died. He qualifies the day of his death as an important day even though there were other important days in his life but he does not mention which.⁵⁴²

In this first paragraph, we can notice detachment of the narrator from himself and his experiences as he is observing his life and death without getting too involved with emotions. Following, in the second paragraph, Knifer describes his thoughts on life after dying and memories of the past. He calls this phase the post-mortem phase where a human is insensitive and full of experience. In that sense, he feels tranquil and indifferent. Opposite to post mortem phase he qualifies pre mortem phase as full of bitter experiences. These bitter experiences he attributes to his own personality:

Before death I was impatient, unjust, pedantic, rash, envious, malicious, bad-mannered, unreliable, irresponsible, incompetent, stupid, unintelligent and so on, which is enough to consider myself unsuccessful and we all know how difficult it is to survive in such a situation. For that reason, I haven't survived. However, even now after my death, they don't consider me more successful. What saves me is my inborn indifference. Thus, I cannot say that I am not satisfied.⁵⁴³

In the third paragraph Knifer renounces the possibility that he is happy, which we would expect following the transition from life to death and leaving bitter experiences behind: "but that I am happy I also cannot say, and the ones who are still alive keep

⁵⁴² *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.35) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁴³ *Ibidem*, p.211

pestering me with some special demands or pieces of advice, persistently and in the most vulgar way.”⁵⁴⁴ We find the reason for the unhappiness in the fact that people are still interfering in his life and even after his death he does not have long calm phases that he was expecting to have. Knifer adds that the problem he encountered after dying was the molestation of his dead conscience. In the text, we can find the similar problematic like in *Banal diaries* or *Plead* where he struggles with other people and the society in a quest to find peace.

Moreover, in the fourth paragraph, we get to know that conscience bothers Knifer since he still has the same bad habits like before that are regarded as bad or useless by the society. In the same paragraph, Knifer talks about death that made him more alive. We can conclude that the death Knifer is talking about is not a physical one but more connected to consciousness that created his new ethical, moral state. It seems Knifer is describing a new phase in his life in which he is not happy since he is still bothered by the remnants, habits and people from the past that probably did not realize that he changed: “clearer than during my lifetime, because in death I somehow became livelier. Of course, with all the remains of the past, although I always tried to live in the future. Still, only after death I began, we could say, to live in the right way. In relation to life I am dead, but in relation to death, I am alive.”⁵⁴⁵

Notes from these aspects seem like a psychological description of Knifer’s being. They represent this moment of change we can see on meander paintings when line turns. In the text, the change came quickly and he did not expect it. Now he is just noting the facts as he does in anti-paintings: “facts are important because my work consists almost entirely of facts. I must start with time when facts became definitive.”⁵⁴⁶

The fifth paragraph, which is also the last one, is in the biggest contradiction to the whole text. In the last paragraph, the monotony and indifference for a moment change places with short sentences that add up to the rhythm of the narration, which ends again in indifference: “I cannot move. I have the feeling that I am stuck, which means

⁵⁴⁴ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.36) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibidem.*, p.211

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*, p.146

that I don't have to move. I don't have to move in any direction. I'll stay right where I am. Not bad. I don't have to move. I like movement, but I don't know where to go. I can find neither an aim nor the way to that aim. I stay put. This is my status."⁵⁴⁷

This indifference is one more characteristic that connects Knifer to absurd heroes like Meursault from Camus' *Stranger* as life to both of them has no grand importance or meaning and their actions have no effect on the world. Knifer as Meursault is indifferent about life as if death made him even more indifferent and as if that was something he was striving for: "I feel somehow tranquil and indifferent; before death I was impatient, unjust, pedantic, rash....what saves me is my inborn indifference."⁵⁴⁸ This comparison is evident in Knifer's psychological detachment from the world noticed especially when he is talking about his death: "I have faced death calmly, although I did neither know nor suppose that I would die. But that is also not important."⁵⁴⁹ By accepting this indifference of the world and renouncing to find a meaning Knifer is accepting the absurd as a form of freedom.

Knifer ends the *Notes* by: "these notes were written in the last month of the year 1995"⁵⁵⁰ even though the text was published in 1986, again showing that chronology for him is not important: "chronology and continuity had no meaning for me."⁵⁵¹ Knifer's view on life is similar to Camus' as they both think that we humans are searching for the meaning where it does not exist, which is also a component of the absurd: "I can find neither an aim nor the way to that aim. I stay put. This is my status."⁵⁵² At the same time, Knifer is deeply aware of meaninglessness and absurd.

In *Notes* from 1976 Knifer discusses more his view on art and method in difference to the *Plead* where he is describing the status of the arts and taste in the society. Opposite to *Plead*, in *Notes* from 1986 Knifer is more introspective depicting his own psychological state and his moral values similar to the introspections we can find in *Banal diaries*. Again in all his texts, Knifer affirms the absurd, indifference,

⁵⁴⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.211) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*, p.211

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.211

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*, p.213

⁵⁵¹ *Ibidem.*, p.213

⁵⁵² *Ibidem.*, p.213

existentialism: "in relation to life I am dead, but in relation to death I am alive"⁵⁵³ portraying himself once again as an absurd hero who found his freedom in the absurd.

Merleau-Ponty says that temporal existence is both a condition for and an obstacle to our self-comprehension. Temporality contains an internal fracture that permits us to return to our past experiences in order to investigate them reflectively, but this very fracture also prevents us from fully coinciding with ourselves. There will always remain a difference between the lived and the understood.⁵⁵⁴ Knifer solves this phenomenological problem in *Notes* by putting death as a zero point of reflection, a point from which he reflects upon himself.

In *Notes* Knifer talks about his memories of past life most of the time, since there is a moral lesson he wants to teach us while he depicts his old self in negative attributes such as unreliable, envious, irresponsible, stupid and unintelligent. This past still haunts him from time to time but now he sees the difference and is changed as he died. Death is the main point around which the text is oriented, as time is divided before and after it. Since Knifer feels like he had failed in life there is still a possibility of better life after "death" and the result is not in happiness or success but in tranquillity and indifference, as if the acceptance of absurd brought him peace which is described at the end of the paragraph: "I stay put. This is my status."⁵⁵⁵

The prevailing atmosphere of indifference in *Notes* is similar to the one we find in Camus' *Stranger*: "I have faced death calmly, although I did neither know nor suppose that I would die. But that is also not so important"; "I feel somehow tranquil and indifferent."⁵⁵⁶ Knifer presents himself in the text as an absurd hero, a one that lives his truth no matter what, as Camus describes it:

The hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game. In this sense he is a stranger to the society in which he lives; he drifts in the margin, in the suburb of private, solitary, sensual life. This is why some readers are

⁵⁵³ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.213) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁵⁴ Romdenh-Romluc (2011) *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception* (p.12), Routledge

⁵⁵⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.213) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*, p.213

tempted to consider him a waif; Meursault doesn't play the game. The answer is simple: He refuses to lie. Lying is not only saying what is not true. It is also and especially saying more than is true and, as far as the human heart is concerned, saying more than one feels; He says what is true. He refuses to disguise his feelings and the society feels threatened immediately.⁵⁵⁷

Consciousness is an extrinsic or relational property of a mental state. It is mentioned in the text several times, especially when Knifer talks about complications of moral nature that he encountered after "death". On the other hand, Knifer was reflecting upon himself to understand why he feels the way he does. This action can be defined as an act of self-consciousness, which as Sartre said, is only possible when one is compelled to self-awareness with the reflective activity forced upon him by the look of the other.⁵⁵⁸

In *Notes*, the person that is observed and that is observing is the same, as Knifer is looking upon himself before death and comparing it to his new state. The difference is that he is now a different person. In that sense, Knifer was reflecting upon memories that he encountered after his death. This process is identical to Sartre's pre-reflective self-consciousness, meaning awareness we have before we do any reflecting on our experience. The notion of pre-reflective self-awareness is related to the idea that experiences have a subjective "feel" to them, a certain phenomenal quality of "what it is like" or what it "feels" like to have them. All these experiences are characterized by a quality of mineness or for-me-ness, the fact that it is I who am having these experiences. All this suggests that the first-person experience presents an immediate and non-observational access to myself and that phenomenal consciousness consequently entails a minimal form of self-consciousness. To be aware of oneself is not to capture a pure self that exists separately from the stream of experience. It is rather being conscious of one's experience in its implicit first-person mode of givenness.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁷ Solomon, (1981) *Introducing the Existentialists: Imaginary Interviews with Sartre, Heidegger*, (p.68) Hackett Publishing

⁵⁵⁸ *On Sartre and Self-Consciousness*, <<http://www.janushead.org/JHSummer98/HulyaGuney.cfm>>

⁵⁵⁹ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-consciousness-phenomenological/>>

Knifer recognized his experience as his own only because he had been pre-reflectively aware of it, living through it. Consequently, when we reflect, we reflect on something with which we are already experientially familiar.⁵⁶⁰ In that sense memory and past appear something as our own, despite the fact that in this case Knifer had become estranged from his past experiences. Memory in the text affirmed his identity, despite the temporal difference and in spite of that difference, it appears therefore as a privileged context for an inquiry into subjective life.

In *Notes* Knifer was looking upon himself as Sartre described in *Being and Nothingness* where he wrote about a man who looks through a keyhole, symbolizing consciousness as well. According to Sartre, all people exist as a self that perceives a spectacle but as well as a self that lose themselves in a world. The self is split between what the peeping Tom sees with his eyes and the mental image of the other person approaching. For a moment, a person becomes aware of himself as an object of the Other's gaze, who he presumes to be looking over his shoulder. He is conscious of himself through the consciousness of the Other and is looking at himself through the Other's eyes and is shameful, all the while remaining to look through the keyhole. While his physical eye looks through the keyhole he is looking at himself looking. The moment when peeping Tom thought he was alone he became his look and there was no strong separation between him as a viewing subject and what he was watching. But when he heard the Other's footsteps and began to think about what he was looking at, he became a viewer of himself through the keyhole of Other's eye. This Other's consciousness is internalized in him, which creates a frame in a frame situation.⁵⁶¹

The notion of self-observation through another point of view is accented by the last paragraph where Knifer described himself as static, not able to move as he was fixated by the observation of others. Knifer thought that after death his dead consciousness would not bother him, which was not the case as described in *Notes*. As the text refers to the first-person experience Knifer was talking in the text about seeing himself separated from himself as Sartre defines in *The Transcendence of the*

⁵⁶⁰ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-consciousness-phenomenological/>>

⁵⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

Ego: “consciousness, seems to constitute the ego as a false representation of itself”.⁵⁶²
In that sense, the self is an illusion, a mask that hinders the spontaneity of consciousness: “there are also phases within this phase after death when I am completely calm, but this is only apparent, same as my life has been.”⁵⁶³ Knifer was therefore beyond his ego.

⁵⁶² Sartre (1957) *The Transcendence of Ego*, (p.24) Farrar Straus and Giroux

⁵⁶³ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.211) Zagreb: MSU

7. CONCLUSION

There are two important historical moments that define meander. First is connected to the period when Knifer was living when socialism dictated the way of life as well as an art practice in the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Freedom, a term that Knifer explored, was a relative term in Yugoslavia. Curiously enough the socialism in art did not last long and modern art movements started to gain importance as many international expositions and biennales were taking place in Zagreb, such as New Tendencies and Music Biennale.⁵⁶⁴

Members of Gorgona and Exat'51 created art on the basis of the avant-garde movements of the 1920s such as Suprematism and Constructivism. The reason for this late avant-garde appropriation was due to the First and Second World War that isolated the Yugoslav artists from the international artistic movements. Members of Gorgona, as well as members of Exat'51, started creating art with a goal to achieve freedom. In contrast to Exat'51 that was more present on the art scene in Yugoslavia, Knifer and the Gorgona group seemed to be outsiders on the Yugoslav art since they kept away from the dominant mainstream in art approved by the state regime.

The second historical moment is connected to the spiritual climate of the 1960s when Existentialism and philosophy of the Absurd gained importance with the focus on the themes of freedom, boredom, anxiety, existence, will and subjectivity. Knifer, as well as others members of Gorgona, focused on the same themes of existence, individualism and freedom that were in contradiction to the Yugoslav society of the time. In that sense, Gorgona as a neo-avant-garde group combined the legacy of Dadaism with their existentialist explorations in art. Since Gorgona was not a formal group, Knifer's artwork did not differentiate either before or after the group's dissolution. Unlike the Gorgona group members, Knifer started his explorations in art through Suprematism, which was evident through geometrical forms, choice of non-colors and reduction. In that way, Knifer combined the visual language of Suprematism through which he expressed his absurdist view on life.

⁵⁶⁴ Denegri, J. (2000) *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat '51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p. 283) Zagreb: Horetzky

In the artworks of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian and Knifer we can notice the attempt to present their own worldviews. Each of these artists was representing his own truth, as all four of them were looking for a new kind of correlation between the viewer and the images. Furthermore, what connects Knifer to these three painters is the need for the truth in art as all of them wanted to present the essence of the world through abstraction: “I wish to approach the truth as closely as possible, and, therefore I abstract everything until I arrive at the fundamental quality of objects.”⁵⁶⁵

What they wanted to present in art can be found in this quotation: “to experience a person is to experience the mystery of this specific incarnation, which transcends the reach of our reason, which inevitably does violence to the individual and particular. Meaning has to be discovered in matter, in that sense, abstract art promised a substitute for lost transcendence.”⁵⁶⁶ The way this worldview is transferred through art lays in the fact that art is not a speech but a form of consciousness, which can escape logocentrism. In that sense between aesthetics and semiotics, the phenomenology of consciousness as art intervenes. If visual art is a form of consciousness becoming aware of itself, speech may be dispensed with.⁵⁶⁷

When we look at artwork we notice that it is the gaze that joins the artwork and the viewer. The difference lies in the point that there is something extremely personal about how one sees an artwork from another one’s point of view. In the intersubjective art experience, consciousness can and often does emerge beyond the duality of mind and world. It emerges not as a form of communication but as a form of instant identification when art and consciousness are one.⁵⁶⁸

Knifer said that art was a profession by which we wanted to keep something that other people claimed to be irrelevant alive. Art is a fight for the right to life, your own space and tools.⁵⁶⁹ Knifer’s approach towards the representation of the truth in art is similar to Kandinsky’s point of view who believed that artist sought to portray: “only internal

⁵⁶⁵ Alston, (2014) *Mondrian*, (p.13) TAJ Books

⁵⁶⁶ Ed. Crowther, Wunsche, (2012) *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory*, (p. 25), Routledge

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.25

⁵⁶⁸ Minissale, (2012) *Framing Consciousness in Art: Transcultural Perspectives*, (p.93) Volume 7, Issue 4

⁵⁶⁹ Radaković, Ž. (1994), *Knifer*, (p.34) Beograd: Radio 92

truths, renouncing, in consequence, all consideration of external form.”⁵⁷⁰ On the other hand, the element of truth in Knifer’s case is important because meanders and all his works are very personal and present his own worldview, his own truth. In that sense Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian and Knifer reduced art to the function of universal human communication. Art became the mouthpiece for rational communication, embedded in matter. It became the figure of signifying structure common both to semiotics and aesthetics.

Derrida said that this truth was in the domain of painting and the subject of it. The truth was found to be both internal and external to the artwork. Derrida argued that this divisibility of truth meant that the question of the border or framework separating the internal from the external was vulnerable since it was not possible to keep the truth on the inside and the outside from parasitizing on each other.⁵⁷¹ In essay *Parergon* Derrida mentioned the discursive figure of the frame. He discussed that when we look at a painting we take the frame to be part of the wall, yet when we look at the wall the frame is taken to be part of the painting. In that sense, the parergonal frame stands out against two grounds and merges into the other. The split is made because what lies outside the parergon is a supplement and shows the lack of what lies inside: “there is always a form on a ground, but the parergon is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy.”⁵⁷² In the text, Derrida defined parergon neither as a part of work nor as a part outside of the work, as it disconcerted any opposition but did not remain indeterminate and gave rise to the work.⁵⁷³

We can notice that Malevich and Knifer were avoiding framing and the split Derrida was theorizing about, even using white color so that the painting would merge with the whiteness of the wall and transcendent into space. This is especially visible in Malevich’s suprematist white phase, in Knifer’s *Meander in the Corner* and white meanders. In that sense, white color had a special meaning for both artists. For Knifer, it signified the spiritual beginning of painting and for Malevich the infinite space, as

⁵⁷⁰ Kandinsky W. (1999), *Duh apstrakcije*, (p.200) Zagreb: IPU

⁵⁷¹ Rapaport, (1997) *Is there Truth in art*, (p.37), Cornell University

⁵⁷² Ibidem, p.39

⁵⁷³ Ibidem, p.39

Malevich explained: “I retained the classic instruments of painting, but purified it to utmost whiteness and took this whiteness as my point of departure.”⁵⁷⁴

For Knifer painting was a way out of the moral crisis as he said in *Notes*: “at that time I was really drowning, morally and almost physically.”⁵⁷⁵ Painting made him live only in the present. Even though there were variations and variations of one meander it seemed that every meander shares Sartre’s idea: “nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addiction.”⁵⁷⁶

In painting, Knifer goes so far that in the black meander phase he even tried to inscribe his time and consciousness onto the canvas. Consciousness was an integral part of a meander that was not composed out of imaginary shapes but represented the extreme rhythms of events on the surface. As Knifer said: “the material shape of a painting also meant the utmost spiritual state of the primary idea.”⁵⁷⁷ In his paintings, Knifer did not just try to “inscribe his consciousness” but also to present his moral views. Meander in that sense becomes an existentialist choice expressed in the medium of painting. In his views, Knifer is close to existentialist and absurd philosophies saying that his meanders are: “consequences of belief that unlike the defeat or the victory are definite but they carry inside themselves a deep relief of the existence of sacrifice.”⁵⁷⁸ These moral views were characteristic for Gorgona group as well, and we can relate it to Knifer’s Gorgonic spirit.

Through his artworks Knifer was rebelling against the meaninglessness which absurdity proposed upon our lives, and found fulfillment in continuing on, guided by free will, rising above the essential meaningless of life presented by the concept of the absurd. In that sense, Camus described revolt as:

⁵⁷⁴ Crone, Moss (1991) *Kazimir Malevich The Climax of Disclosure* (p.165), Reaktion Books

⁵⁷⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.151) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁷⁶ Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, p. 68

⁵⁷⁷ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.147) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁷⁸ Denegri, J. (2000) *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat '51 i Nove Tendencije*, (p. 283) Zagreb: Horetzky

That revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of life, it restores its majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it. The sight of human pride is unequalled. No disparagement is of any use. A discipline that the mind imposes on itself, which will conjure up out of nothing, that face-to-face struggle has something exceptional.⁵⁷⁹

If we regard meander paintings as an ethical complex and each canvas as the peak of moral catharsis, where a crisis engraves maximums and minimums on the sharp edges of existence and non-existence, we could say that Knifer's paintings represent the ethical before the visual.⁵⁸⁰ The radical undoing of the moral aura of the truth becomes important in Camus' idea of the absurd as he said that man faced a choice between a description that was sure but that taught him nothing, and the hypothesis that claimed to teach him something but that was not sure. In the absurd world, the scientific hypothesis is a description since it is subject to change. Truths change nature as one hypothesis replaces another, or alternatively, one description takes the place of the previous one. Camus recognized the fact that truths, especially scientific truths, get their aura of incontestability due to a generally accepted notion that scientific propositions could be empirically verified to prove their true value. Here we find that it is the loss of transcendental truth that leads to the metaphysical condition of absurdity, the reason why humans are forced to accept simulated ignorance, which allows us to live with ideas which, if we truly put them to test, ought to upset our whole life.

According to Camus, the condition of absurdity is a direct consequence of this ignorance which exists under the façade of knowledge. Ideas that are accepted as "truths" can never be put to the test by the absurd man, as the absurd man is innately aware of their falsity. Camus added that because of that the absurd a man is faced by nostalgia for unity and search for absolute, which illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama, which is the result of the desire to organize the world through the obscuring lens of an absolute truth and the knowledge that such absolutes do not exist. For Camus, the world could no longer be explained through doctrines, since the

⁵⁷⁹ Camus, (1991), *Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Essays* (p.55), First Vintage International Edition

⁵⁸⁰ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.88) Zagreb: MSU

feeling of absurdity was the knowledge that the world was filled with illusions and constructions. In that sense we could feel the nostalgia for the absolute truth, a transcendental meaning as Camus described it:

The world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested with illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger...the divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.⁵⁸¹

Kant was right to insist that all art speaks to us of maker's intention and thus has meaning. The art of Malevich and Knifer strikes us just as it is meant to be. Malevich's art was meant to silence all meaning, all words, as it goes in the last phase of Suprematism toward whiteness, toward the void. In the beginning, suprematist compositions were painted as icons that seek to establish "zero" as the new holy. Following, Malevich said that *Black Square* was supposed to represent the icon of a new time. Square for Malevich represented the most abstract form and black and white represented most abstract colors.⁵⁸²

In that sense abstract in connection with Suprematism means not only non-representational, it means free of all associations, feelings, emotions and interests that tie us to the world. In opposition to Malevich Knifer chose meander, or we could say that meander had chosen him. Meander first appeared in *Compositions* beneath color planes until it purified itself through reduction and became independent on the canvas creating the maximum and minimum of contrast at the same time. Furthermore, by identifying himself with meander Knifer freed it from all its historical meanings and connotations which allowed its meaning to constantly escape while its essence would stay the same.

What caused this fascination with the presence and this attempt to get away from meaning? Malevich thought that the conflict exists between the human demand for meaning and the silence of the world, as the disintegration of the old value system has

⁵⁸¹ Ed. Lahav, de Venza Tillmanns, (1995) *Essays on Philosophical Counseling* (p.112), University Press of America

⁵⁸² Crowther, Wunsche, (1945) *Meandings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory*, (p.251) Routledge

left us an oppressive silence. While we as humans constantly demand the meaning of the world, Malevich dreamt of an existence that was no longer burdened by the demand for meaning. Malevich knew that to pursue this dream we had to leave the familiar world. We had to learn to let things be encountered as forms without asking anything from them. Since we were so used to our world, so used to questions and answers, Malevich saw it necessary to transport humans by art into a stranger environment, into the world of Suprematism. In this process of breaking the silence, black on white compositions represent the first step, which later Knifer took over to establish an extreme contrast to create the rhythm of the endless meander flow.⁵⁸³

Malevich painted the absence of the objective world to catch the spiritual view and the feeling of the metaphysical world, and with *Black Square*, the first suprematist painting, he even tried to create a passage into infinity. Knifer on the other hand elaborated Malevich's idea even further by establishing order in the spiritual state by introducing the infinite rhythm that included real, physical world. From the start, Knifer wanted to paint absurd paintings since the absurd was the feeling of his time. The absurd was also the reason why he joined the Gorgona group, to explore it in collective actions. He wanted to show that even untalented person could do art, which consequently led to the idea of anti-painting.⁵⁸⁴

In his artworks Knifer combined the visual characteristics of Suprematism reflected through the choice of color and form together with his philosophical views. In the extreme contrasts, especially in color contrast that reflects boundary situations, we can find the ground for Existentialism in Knifer's painting. As we can see, the rhythm of the meander is inner, bearing essence of this entire existence, since meander is not just repeated but continued in a logical progression of the same rhythm. Another evidence of existentialist influence is seen in the persistence and repetition of the same sign. This persistence led Knifer, as well as it did Malevich, to identify their moral views with their art.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸³ Crone, Moss (1991) *Kazimir Malevich The Climax of Disclosure* (p.175), Reaktion Books

⁵⁸⁴ Blagus,(1994) Kroz apsurd uništavam umjetnost, *Kontura*, no.5 (p.11), Zagreb

⁵⁸⁵ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.82) Zagreb: MSU

In that sense meander is an ethical choice, a symbol of revolt and a metaphor of life. Through Knifer's determination and strength there is a way to cope with the absurd and to find personal freedom in everyday struggle. We can say that in his paintings Knifer was establishing the order in spite of absurd, as well as concretizing the infinite. Knifer, from the beginning until the end of his career as an artist, was trying to affirm the absurd, monotony and time, as can be seen on his paintings from self-portraits to endless variations of one sign meander.⁵⁸⁶ In the process of creation, Knifer transformed himself into the function of a sign, as he himself said that meander was the flow of his consciousness. In the paintings, all the traces of existence were erased so that all that remained were depersonalized notes of artist's persistence as well as a universal suggestion about life that will go on even after we die.⁵⁸⁷

When we look at the whole oeuvre of Knifer from 1960 to 2000, we can notice that meander is at the same time a part of the whole system of meanders and a single system inside its own structure. Meander is not just a visual form; it is also Knifer's form of seeing the world, thinking, feeling and reaction. In this simple geometrical structure, Knifer shows the biggest complexity of existence and the flow of thought. Moreover, Knifer did not want to give meaning to meander and left its interpretation open. We could say that meander is Knifer's truth in which he presents the flow of life, the flow of consciousness and his own moral standpoint.

The thesis started with the presentation of historical circumstances and movements that continued with the presentation of Knifer's life through the chronology of his work, focused on the analysis of meander, especially its form and color with most references to Suprematism and Malevich. But to prove the argument of the thesis, found also in the title of the thesis, stating that Knifer was trying to present the absurd in his paintings, it was important to concentrate on his written texts and interviews to find facts that could confirm it.

Even if we focus more on Knifer's paintings we can notice existentialist elements that can be attributed to Knifer's own philosophy, such as the use of non-colors or the

⁵⁸⁶ *Apsurd kao apsolut slobode*, Vijenac 537

<<http://www.matica.hr/vijenac/537/Apsurd%20kao%20apsolut%20slobode/>>

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

mere nature of meander as a sign that always changes with monotonous rhythm with the essence staying the same. Time, another element of the absurd, also becomes a subject of meander paintings especially in the black phase at the point when it is inscribed in the darkness of the black and contained in the title of the painting. We can see the importance of time also in the diaries and in the daily work process as Knifer, as an absurd hero does not give up the struggle but continues to paint the same sign no matter what circumstances surround him. Finally, time is reduced to the monotony of repetition of the same sign and becomes an integral part of the absurd. The endless flow of meander reminds us of it as well.

The choice of the sign Knifer decided to identify himself with and present the absurd was also important since it had to be abstract and not correlated to any meaning and one that offers the possibilities of infinity in expression or in duration. We can notice that Knifer was following Suprematism through the choice of color and reduction, but the meaning of his works was close to Existentialism and Absurd. Meander in that sense is a passive sign of contemplation only during the white and black meander phase, but usually, it is an active sign, a fragment of eternal extensibility as it has no beginning or end. In that sense meander is an abstraction of movement as Suprematism is an abstraction of an object. From that point, we can understand the movement to represent Knifer's truth in art, since meander can be seen as a constant in a world of incessant change. On the other hand, meander interprets Camus' vision of the absurd world as one where the mind can never truly attain the transcendental meaning it desires. Instead, it only arrives at a frustrating array of mindless constructed and convoluted truths which could be the reason why Knifer never explained the meaning behind his works or created his own philosophy or theory like Kandinsky, Malevich or Mondrian did but he left it open for interpretation.

Since meander is the representation of Knifer's inner truth, through it, we can understand the meaning of the absurd for Knifer and define him as a painter of the absurd. Knifer went in his representation of the absurd to the end as he went with everything in his life to the end. In art Knifer used extremes in every way possible; from black and white contrast, vertical and horizontal, the opposition of being and nonbeing, fullness and emptiness, creating monotonous rhythm referring to monotony theme constantly present in an absurd literature that urged us to find the meaning

behind daily motions of life. On the other hand meander also represents the border of Knifer's freedom and the reason why Knifer persisted with it no matter which circumstances surrounded him. Knifer's freedom was based on absurd, hence, in painting he presented absurd too: "I have reserved the realm of doing this work for my freedom and I have always actually considered this a form of my only freedom. The only realm of my freedom."⁵⁸⁸

The lack of chronology that is present in Knifer's oeuvre is also a consequence of the absurd since there is no future: "henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom."⁵⁸⁹ In *Banal diaries*, we can notice that Knifer struggled with doubts and willpower to work, but he always continued despite all problems. In a way, *Banal diaries* offer an illustration of what Nietzsche wrote in *The Genealogy of Morals*: "man would rather will nothingness than not will."⁵⁹⁰ In that sense, Knifer's need for a reason is why he suffers, why we live and why we would rather accept a perspective that makes life itself a bad thing, something to be accepted until something better comes our way, than live a life without meaning, without purpose. Giving up on the meander for Knifer would mean to surrender and to give up on his life as well.

From Knifer's moral values we can see that his personal views are close to existentialist philosophy and especially to the philosophy of the Absurd. Unlike Malevich, Knifer did not try to create his own philosophy and he did not want to give an explanation for his works. He just wanted to present the feeling of absurdity, evolved from tension or disproportion between what we desire from the world and what the world itself can offer, as Camus said: "a divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints".⁵⁹¹ Camus defined life that Knifer was persistent to live as:

The living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is above all contemplating it. Unlike, Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent positions is thus revolt. It is a constant

⁵⁸⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146) Zagreb: MSU

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.146

⁵⁹⁰ Schacht R, (1994) *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Mortality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals*, (p.422), University of California Press

⁵⁹¹ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.146) Zagreb: MSU

confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence on an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second...It is not an aspiration for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is certainty of crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.⁵⁹²

Knifer considered that life cannot be lived well without an understanding of the absurd, because any understanding of existence or life absent or in denial of the notion of the absurd would innately be false and all other aspects of life would be perceived incompletely, falsely. That is why the rebellion against the absurd must be attained and employed if one is to fully exercise his/her own existence to find intrinsic value and meaning in life. Camus drew three consequences from the absurd: revolt, freedom and passion:

Thus, I ask from absurd creation what I required from thought – revolt, freedom and diversity. Later on, it will manifest its utter futility. In that daily effort in which intelligence and passion mingle and delight each other, the absurd man discovers a discipline that will make up the greatest of his strengths. The required diligence, the doggedness and lucidity thus resemble the conqueror's attitude. To create is likewise to give a shape to one's fate.⁵⁹³

In that sense, the question was posed in the thesis whether we can compare Knifer with Sisyphus since Knifer as a painter decided to repeat the same task every day of his life. Or is Knifer just following the absurd in his work with meander as a sign of the absurdness of life? Is Knifer revolting and the sign of revolt is meander? In a way, through repetition in writing, in painting, Knifer like Sisyphus, gave his life meaning, which was found in the rhythm of his paintings, through the infinite meander flow. Knifer identified himself with a meander and because of that fact through the understanding of his life we can understand his art since it is based on individual experiences and philosophy. Furthermore, *Banal diaries* are an important source to grasp Knifer's identity even though in it he introduces other elements to present the absurd such as monotony, repetition, discontinuity and doubt. From that point sometimes it was difficult to distinguish facts from fiction.

⁵⁹² Camus, (1991), *Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Essays* (p.54), First Vintage International Edition

⁵⁹³ *Ibidem.*, (p.117)

Camus described the absurd man as:

The absurd man will not commit a suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusions and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. He experiences the divine irresponsibility of the condemned man. In that way, Camus and Sartre embrace absurdity as a way of conceptualizing one's commitment to living.⁵⁹⁴

During his career, Knifer appropriated Camus's character of an absurd hero who stares in the face of this pointlessness in life and laughs. He proved this identification through his written works *Notes*, *Plead* where he was describing his fictional revolting against enforced society values. In that way, Knifer was following the fate of the absurd man, one that does not give up and sticks to the idea until the end. This is most evident through the continuation of the spiritual idea of the meander that he started in 1960, one more proof of his uncompromising ethical standpoint. We could describe Knifer's life with Camus' description:

Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience.⁵⁹⁵

Knifer was constantly challenging himself even in the face of a certain defeat since this was the only way to confront the absurd in a world devoid of a higher meaning or judicial afterlife when a man would become absolutely free. Through his freedom Knifer took a role of absurd hero while his refusal to hope became his singular ability to live in the present with passion, as the absurd and happiness were intrinsically linked to one another, as the revolt, as Camus said: "the struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart", "It is through this struggle that one recognizes the ways in which

⁵⁹⁴ Ed. Bloom H, (2001), *The Stranger – Albert Camus* (p.6), Yale university

⁵⁹⁵ Camus, (1991), *Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Essays* (p.53), First Vintage International Edition

power operates in the society, and understands the way in which power creates universe where contradiction, antinomy, anguish or impotence reign.”⁵⁹⁶

We could say that Knifer as Camus saw the ultimate point of life in a possibility to live and to be happy in the face of the absurdity which is possible only through revolt. Happiness, on the other hand, is only possible through freedom, which for Camus is absurd freedom: “the only conception of freedom is freedom of thought and action.”⁵⁹⁷ In that way, we understand that Knifer was painting the absurd in order to achieve his own freedom that he was not able to exercise anywhere else. Following, meander is a sign of freedom as well as of Knifer’s revolt and a representation of life in its most simple minimalist form. Knifer wrote about freedom in *Notes* where he said:

For me, the most important element in my work is to be completely focused, and also to enjoy full spiritual freedom. To me, absurdity is a very important component in my actions. Absurdity is a form of freedom; my way is neither progressive nor regressive. With me there is no development or progress. I have reserved the realm of doing this work for my freedom and I have always considered this a form of my only freedom. Or the only form of my freedom. The only realm of my freedom; since for me absurdity is a very definite form of freedom, in that process I reached for absurdity.⁵⁹⁸

If we look deeper into Sisyphus’ characterization we can find answers to Knifer’s moral views and justification for the endless repetition and the variations of one sign, meander. In *Banal diaries*, Knifer described everyday struggles of repetition and revolt in which he as Sisyphus ultimately finds his freedom. Knifer like Sisyphus invests himself fully in the task under his own free will through which he found intrinsic value in his life. This process Camus described as:

The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by

⁵⁹⁶ Camus, (1991), *Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Essays* (p.123), First Vintage International Edition

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.56

⁵⁹⁸ *Uncompromising*, (2014) (p.137-144) Zagreb: MSU

solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance.⁵⁹⁹

Camus showed through Sisyphus the importance of self-investment in the performance of life in order to find intrinsic meaning, despite the incomprehensibility of the world. In *Myth of Sisyphus* Camus defined absurd man as a man that:

Recognizes the struggle, does not absolutely scorn reason, and admits the irrational. He makes of the absurd the criterion of the other world, whereas it is simply a residue of the experience of this world. What he demands of himself is to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is and to bring in nothing that is not certain.⁶⁰⁰

Moreover, Kierkegaard said: “in his failure the believer finds his triumph.”⁶⁰¹ In that sense absurd is unavoidable as an irreducible element of our existence: “now if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action.”⁶⁰²

In the thesis, the absurd literature and philosophy served as a tool to sustain the given argument of meander being the representation of absurd and Knifer being the painter of the absurd. Since Knifer transformed himself into a meander sign to understand meanders means to understand Knifer. This unity of artist and his work but also of art and philosophy is explained by Camus:

The idea of an art detached from its creator is not only outmoded; it is false. For the work of art likewise is a construction and everyone knows how monotonous the great creators can be. For the same reason as the thinker, the artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work.⁶⁰³

⁵⁹⁹ Camus, (1991), *Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Essays* (p.55), First Vintage International Edition

⁶⁰⁰ Ibidem., p.37

⁶⁰¹ *Myth of Sisyphus*

<<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil360/16.%20Myth%20of%20Sisyphus.pdf>>

⁶⁰² Ibidem.

⁶⁰³ Camus, (1991), *Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Essays* (p.97), First Vintage International Edition

Camus described absurd work in the sense we see it with Knifer:

For an absurd work of art to be possible, though in its most lucid form must be involved in it. But at the same time thought must not be apparent except as the regulating intelligence. The work of art embodies a drama of the intelligence, but it proves this only indirectly. The absurd work requires an artist conscious of these limitations and an art in which the concrete signifies nothing more than itself. It cannot be the end, the meaning, and the consolation of life.⁶⁰⁴

In that sense Knifer's work is absurd since it did not provide hope, as Camus said:

It wants to liberate his universe of its phantoms and to people it solely with flesh-and-blood truths whose presence he cannot deny. So it is with the work of art. If the commandments of the absurd are not respected, if the work does not illustrate divorce and revolt, if it sacrifices to illusions and arouses hope it ceases to be gratuitous.⁶⁰⁵

If we characterize Knifer as an absurd painter we should take into consideration the amount of things he had to rebel against to keep up with the absurd and not surrender. The most difficult one was his struggle with work where he was representing the same absurd he was living. Knifer's art was personal and individualistic as he was analyzing his own self through it. This process also implied self-doubt that we encounter both in his *Banal diaries* or interviews. As he dedicated all his life to one idea that he did not change over 40 years, the doubt was more existentialist since this doubt in work meant doubt in the correctness of his choice. The exhibition dedicated to Knifer in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 2014 was named *Uncompromising*, also referring to Knifer's character and his values without which he would not be able to persist in an endless repetition of one sign and one spiritual idea. In that sense, Knifer was a painter of absurd who represented absurd both in his artworks and in his texts. Even his interviews or letters have a dose of absurd, as he was obliged to produce the absurd all the time to make it visible and to remind us that the absurd is constantly present.

⁶⁰⁴ Camus, (1991), *Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Essays* (p.97), First Vintage International Edition

⁶⁰⁵ *The Western Humanities Review* (1958) (p.35), Utah Humanities Foundation

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