

« Knifer. Lines. Self-portraits » is the third exhibition of the work of Julije Knifer at galerie frank elbaz since 1999. Born in Osijek, Croatia in 1924, Knifer died in Paris in 2004 after a career embracing Zagreb, Germany, Italy and – from the early 1990s – France. In 2001 he represented his homeland at the Venice Biennale, even though, temperamentally stateless, he had always rejected geographic and national affiliations: "Art has been my sole refuge," he said shortly after moving to France. « I worked in Yugoslavia as a dissident, then as an exile in Germany, Italy and now France. But I have to say that because of my concerns as an artist, place has never meant very much to me."

This indifference to place is inversely proportional to the significance he accords time. The meander, which first appeared in 1960 and went on to become virtually the sole motif of the Knifer oeuvre, is for him a figure whose modulations seem to render the rhythm of an inner duration. The meander is the concrete imprint of a temporal phenomenon precipitating through the filter of a subjective consciousness: that of the artist. Each of its repetitions over more than four decades leads back, via the tasks and acts that art and life are made of, to the everyday. A timeline, yes, but a lifeline too.

The temporal/autobiographical aspect of Knifer's output becomes evident when we look at the oeuvre's beginnings. This we are able to do via the three self-portraits in the exhibition, originally part of a series of some two hundred similar works dating from 1949-52. A succession of paintings already inscribed in duration and which, in its own way, is beating time: each sheet is marked with the day and month of its execution, together with a serial number. « I discovered then, » Knifer said, « that the crux was not a self- portrait, but a monotonous rhythm. » The rhythm of the meander, already. Knifer, who was a member of the Neo-Dada group Gorgona in Zagreb in 1960–65, also made this monotony a token of the absurd and the mark of an anti-painting not solely defined by its affiliation with geometric abstraction.

As Arnauld Pierre puts it in *Julije Knifer, me?andres* (Paris, Adam Biro, 2001), « Knifer's art is not what it appears to be. Out of his preferred form, the meander, and its obsessional repetition, Knifer has created the sign of a mute art – one indifferent and monotonous to the point of absurdity – and by extension an all- encompassing conception of existence. An existence entirely devoted to attempting to give time a spatial, visual dimension and so outline its intuitive topology. Time of perception and time of creation, celebrated principally in the evolution of the graphic oeuvre; and the everyday, autobiographical time of the Self- portraits and the "banal diary" scrupulously kept by the artist for decades. Every component of Knifer's art attests to a mode of conscious existence in time, an intentional, freely chosen way of dwelling in duration. »

Arnauld Pierre

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