

László Lakner

Zahlen

28 January – 7 March 2025

Numbers and letters are recurring motifs in the art of László Lakner. Numbers may allude to phases or states, to successive visual montage elements recalling film sequences, to enigmatic narratives, to cause-and-effect relationships, to the ontological question of the identity/non-identity of corresponding picture fields, or to the paradox of the depictability/non-depictability of time. Numbers may be graphic marks and associative motifs typical of the forms used in pop art, but besides all this they may also be metaphors of being. In the figurative works Lakner made in the 1960s and 1970s, numbers are mostly incidental elements: components of narrative sequences, of formula-like visual structures built on motif repetition (diptychs, triptychs), of texts or text excerpts paired with figurative images, of archive manuscripts and postcards. In the 1980s they became independent motifs, initially in the *Zodiac* series, as enigmatic ciphers of cosmic interconnections and of the fates they may foretell. Lakner first painted *Numbers* on a large scale between 1982 and 1987. The white numbers lined up on a black US army bedsheet are partly covered with sand. The painting, in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, references Paul Celan's poem *The Numbers (Die Zahlen)*, and forms part of Lakner's series of paraphrases on Celan. The verse begins: "The numbers, in league / with the images' doom / and counter- / doom." (trans. Pierre Joris). Numbers are mysteriously intertwined with images, with fates, and with counter-fates. In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Here too it is about the experiencing of time. The poem *The Numbers (Die Zahlen)* encompasses the counting (das Zählen) of time." Moreover, the traumatic associations attached to the numbers are unavoidable if we consider, later in the verse, the skull "clapped-on" to the numbers and the "will-of-the-wisping hammer" at the "sleepless temple". Lakner's number series have no beginning and no end; they either flare up like a will-of-the-wisp or appear worn and frayed; they conjure up the most tragic of notions, and also allude to the identification numbers tattooed on the arms of prisoners at Auschwitz, the most brutal and inhumane form of registering and destroying people.

Numerous further paintings at the end of the 1980s and again in the 1990s featured *Numbers*, which, similarly to the small *Splitterbilder* (Shard Pictures) Lakner produced around the same time, seem to be parts or details of an unfathomable whole. Lakner's series of numbers written on red, white, pink, blue, or blue-yellow-and-green grounds (*Untitled*, 1989; *Die Zukunft [The Future]*, 1992-98; *Zahlen [Numbers]*, 1995) are no longer primarily paraphrases on Celan, but codes, ciphers or series of symbols that are difficult to decipher and which have broad horizons of associations, akin to the palindromes (*Sator-Arepo*) and imaginary writing (*Lettre Imaginaire*) conjured up by the artist in those years. His singular painterly interpretations of the motif of numbers fit into a thread of art history that stretches from Jasper Johns to Roman Opałka. In a universe of post-conceptual painting, whose various motifs are uniquely interwoven, they refer to visual dilemmas of the relationships between the measurable and the immeasurable, the repeatable and the unrepeatable, the individualised and the reproduced, the digital and the analogue.

Numbers also appear in other groups of works in Lakner's oeuvre, such as in paintings scratched into an impasto ground, among other things, a stylised head covered in a grid of lines (*Zahlenkopf [Numberhead]*, 1994), referring not only to the poetic image in Celan's poem, but also to the artist's series entitled *Heads and Skulls*, and thus layering on top of one another the various motifs from his life's work.

Dávid Fehér

László Lakner (1936) is among the foremost of Hungary's neo-avantgarde artists. In 1968 and 1969 he participated in the landmark "Iparterv" exhibitions in Budapest; he exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1972, 1976 and 1990, at documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977, and at the 3rd Biennale of Sydney in 1979. Solo shows were held in 1974 at the Neue Galerie – Sammlung Ludwig in Aachen, and in 1975 at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. He is the recipient of a grant to the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program in 1974, the German Critics' Prize of 1976, a PS1 grant to New York in 1981, and Hungary's prestigious Kossuth Prize in 1998. Retrospectives of his art have been held at the Ludwig Museum, Budapest (2004-2005), at Modem in Debrecen (2022), and at the Olomouc Museum of Art, Czechia (2024). Works by Lakner are held by the main public art collections in Hungary (including, among others, the Museum of Fine Arts – Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest; Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest; Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs; King St. Stephen Museum, Székesfehérvár) and by major global art institutions, among them: Centre Pompidou, Paris; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; Museum Folkwang, Essen; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; and Hara Museum, Tokyo.

Dávid Fehér

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Zahlenkopf / Numberhead, 1994

oil, canvas, 200x150 cm

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Die Zukunft / Future, 1992-1998

oil, canvas, 200x150 cm

Zahlen / Numbers, 1995

oil, canvas, 200x150 cm

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Untitled, 1989

oil, canvas, 230x170 cm