



BRILL

“In Honor of the Soviet Avantgarde”

Elementary Painting in Yugoslavia 1960–1975 and the Renewal of Suprematism

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Abstract

From 1970 until the end of that decade, a series of exhibitions in Yugoslavia was dedicated to a phenomenon called “elementary” or “primary” painting. The works featured in these shows were abstract, often monochromatic, and objectlike. In their comments about their works, the artists—among them Julije Knifer, Raša Todosijević, and Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan—described their approach as an utter reduction. This art would only acknowledge the reality of its physical and spiritual substance. They also laid bare the genealogy in which they inscribed themselves, indicating their affinity for artists such as Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky. This article asks why Suprematism provided such an attractive theoretical and artistic model for young Yugoslav artists of the 1960s and 1970s and how this specific choice can be interpreted as an aesthetic and political gesture.

Keywords

neo-avant-garde – new artistic practice – painting – Yugoslavia – Suprematism

1 Introduction

There is a consensus in scholarship that artists’ involvement with the early avant-garde started late in Yugoslavia, during the 1980s, with artists such as the

collective IRWIN and Goran Đorđević. IRWIN is most famous for its apparent appreciation for and restaging of totalitarian iconography and ritual. Đorđević engaged in playful and confusing performances and exhibitions such as *“The Last Futurist Show”* by Kasimir Malevich (1985) and *Walter Benjamin’s Lecture: “Mondrian 1963–1996”* (1986). Another assertion is that the (scarce) reception during the previous decade is a matter of mere formalism. Masumi Kameda, for example, says that the rediscovery of the early avant-garde in Yugoslavia in the 1970s went along with removing the “political connotation of the works” (Kameda, 2010: 108). Only the 1980s saw a broad and repoliticized engagement with the utopian promise buried in the Soviet avant-garde, according to the author. In a conversation at the Garage Museum in Moscow in 2016, the art historian and curator Zdenka Badovinac claimed that

[t]he post-war avant-garde movements, in fact, discovered their own pre-war traditions predominantly through Western interpretations. It is well known that in the West, throughout the twentieth century, Russian avant-garde art was understood primarily in terms of its formal aspects, while its connection to everyday life was in many interpretations lost or blurred. Less known, however, is how these movements were perceived in Eastern Europe. When it comes to Yugoslavia, we can say that Yugoslav artists encountered the historical avant-gardes of Eastern Europe relatively late—in a more nuanced way only in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

BADOVINAC, 2016

However, the engagement with avant-garde art on an institutional, art historiographical/theoretical, and practical level started much earlier. The reception can be roughly divided into two strands: the engagement with one’s own national art history and the interest in international avant-garde trends. Artists were most interested in international and, above all, Soviet avant-garde. The institutional interest—manifesting in museum exhibitions—was directed towards Yugoslav art history, and art historiography studied both the national and international trends of the early twentieth century. The centerpiece of this article are works from late modernism to the neo-avant-garde—called “new artistic practice” in Yugoslavia—that take up concepts, ideas, and aesthetics from the Soviet avant-garde, specifically Suprematism. The protagonists are Julije Knifer, Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan, and Dragoljub Raša Todosijević. This article also traces the reception of the Soviet avant-garde in art historiography, which preceded the engagement of art practice by some years. Finally, the article reflects on the relationship between art and life, as well as the political reading and reinterpretation of the Soviet avant-garde in the discussed

works. Although most works indeed avoided the quotation of explicitly political symbols—and this is a big contrast to the practices of the 1980s—I would claim that all artists discussed here tried to recuperate and salvage in one way or another a space for a political agency of art, which would be based on a non-affirmative or negative stance towards the ‘objective’ world. Referring to a famous dictum by Karl Marx, one could assert that the common denominator of the early avant-garde and its renewed forms of the 1960s and 1970s was the “ruthless critique of everything existing.” In Malevich’s case, this meant the state, the church, and other pillars of pre-revolutionary society. In the case of the Yugoslav artists presented here, this critique was directed towards the dominant ideologies that constantly tried to instrumentalize art. The artists reacted with an expressed anti-utilitarianism, which was supposed to salvage a space for art’s (self-)critical operations.

Before analyzing this in depth, it is necessary to examine the cultural situation in Yugoslavia after World War II and its relationship with the early avant-garde movements. This overview will enable a tentative explanation of why Yugoslav artists between the late 1960s and the 1980s worked mostly with international avant-garde movements as models.

2 Avant-Garde Art in Yugoslavia and Its Historiography

Like in many European countries—such as Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union—the relationship with the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century was complicated in Yugoslavia after World War II owing to political factors. In the case of Yugoslavia, it was the war itself and a short affiliation with the Soviet world between 1945 and 1948 that interrupted the connection to pre-war culture. Yet, even before the war, the cultural situation in Yugoslavia was not favorable for building a strong scene and fundament for avant-garde practices. In the 1910s, most Yugoslav artists within modernist circles worked in Paris and Munich. Only the 1920s saw a genuine Yugoslav avant-garde movement, so-called Zenitism. The movement was founded by Ljubomir Micić, poet and literary critic, and was centered around the journal *Zenit*. During the five years of the movement’s and journal’s existence, it attracted more than 150 collaborators, including internationally renowned figures such as Vladimir Tatlin and El Lissitzky (Bogdanović, 2016: 302). Emerging parallel to the relatively short-lived Zenit movement, the 1920s saw a flourishing Surrealist literary and artistic scene. Yugoslav Surrealists were radically left. As Dejan Sretenović showed in his monograph *Urnebesni kliker* [Hilarious marble] about the Surrealist movement in Belgrade, the writers and artists decided to dissolve the group in 1932

(Sretenović, 2016: 193).¹ Some dedicated themselves to the cause of the communist movement, which had been illegal in the country since 1921, while others continued the work in the spirit of Surrealism individually. Yugoslav Surrealism thus paid a high price for pursuing its political ideals, according to Sretenović. For Yugoslavia, this meant that there were no organized avant-garde groups in the country after 1932. Together with the cesura of the war and the condemnation of Surrealism as ‘decadent’ during the Stalinist period—even if this was short-lived—this meant a true and deep hiatus in the practice and remembrance of the avant-gardes. However, after World War II, many members of the former Surrealist group made careers in Yugoslav cultural and political life, for example, Marko Ristić, Aleksandar Vučo, and Dušan Matić, to name just a few.

During World War II, cultural production did not stop, but its character changed. The most important expressions were political drawings, prints, and photography by imprisoned and partisan artists and writers, works that could be produced and circulated even under the worst circumstances.² The aesthetic of this period continued to be dominant in the immediate post-war period because it was largely compatible with the cultural policies of the Soviet Union, which the by-then communist Yugoslavia quickly adopted. However, the breakup with the Communist Information Bureau in 1948 caused great confusion. Yugoslavia needed to create a new political and cultural identity. Debates stirred among leading politicians and intellectuals about what this identity might look like. It is common knowledge that the cultural debate reached an end during the writer’s congress in Ljubljana in 1952 with a speech by Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981). Interestingly, he was an avant-gardist writer whom the communist party expelled in the late 1930s due to his opposition to Socialist Realism. Yet, in his speech, Krleža did not argue for avant-garde art as a point of reference for Yugoslavia’s cultural identity in the making. His text is an elaborate apology, rich in art historical detail and dialectical argumentation, of the concept of autonomous art of the nineteenth century, which, according to Krleža, did not serve any other purpose than creating a realism that lies in the artistic means themselves—for example, color in painting. For this reason, it was of no use to the war-mongering capitalist bourgeoisie, nor could it be usurped by Stalin’s and Zhdanov’s “engineers of the soul” (Krleža, 1952: 8–11). His speech defined the official cultural policies of the following decades. Neo-Cézanneist, Neo-Surrealist, and Informel art were the most common and officially supported artistic trends in Yugoslavia in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

1 If not indicated otherwise, all translations in this text are mine. Translations of longer quotes are enhanced with Google Translate.

2 For an overview of art and literature of the Yugoslav resistance, see Kirn, 2020.

This cultural policy is beautifully reflected in the first exhibitions of the Muzej savremene umetnosti Beograd (Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, MSUB hereafter). Immediately after it opened its doors in 1965, the director, Miodrag B. Protić (1922–2014), initiated a series of exhibitions dedicated to Yugoslavia’s art history starting in the late nineteenth century, moving forward chronologically. The first exhibition presented the history of graphic art (1965), and the second showed drawing (1966) (Protić and Pušić, 1965; MSUB, 1966). The third exhibition in the series had the title *The Third Decade: Constructive Painting* (1967), and two years later, they organized a major exhibition about Surrealism and “social art” (MSUB, 1967, 1969).³ The *Constructive Painting* exhibition featured work from the 1910s and 1920s. It was structured along the stylistically most significant trends: Cézanneism, Cubism, Expressionism, and Neoclassicism. Zenitist works were not included in the show, but there were paragraphs about “Dada-Yougo” and “Zenit” in the catalogue (Protić, 1967: 11–17). Protić had not been able to establish a working relationship with Ljubomir Micić, the founder and main protagonist of Zenitism.⁴ Apart from its substantial Surrealist section, the show also featured Post-Surrealism and Socialist Realism—in short, the styles that were dominant between 1929 and 1950.⁵ If we take together the *Constructive Painting* exhibition from 1967 and the Surrealist and Post-Surrealist sections from the 1969 exhibition, we get a mirror image of the trends that had become fashionable again after 1952—and that were still the leading tendencies when these exhibitions happened. Altogether, these exhibitions served the purpose of presenting Yugoslav art history coherently, fixing the ruptures, and establishing a narrative that could explain the present state of the art.

3 Surrealism was the “beloved child” of museum director Miodrag B. Protić, according to Aleksandra Mirčić, the head archivist of the Museum of Modern Art in Belgrade.

4 This is the explanation Aleksandra Mirčić gave me for the absence of Zenitism in exhibitions and the MSUB’s collection. After Micić’s death, a good part of his works went to the National Museum instead of the MSUB.

5 The exact list comprises a set of precisely distinguished movements: nadrealizam, post-nadrealizam, socijalna umetnost, umetnost NOR-a, socijalistički realizam [surrealism, post-surrealism, social art, art of the Resistance (Narodnooslobodilački rat (NOR)/National Liberation War), socialist realism].

3 The Art Historical Reception of Soviet Avant-Garde of the 1950s and 1960s

Parallel to these Neo-Cézanneist, Neo-Cubist, and Neo-Surrealist trends, however, there were always other tendencies. And some of these relied on the engagement with the historical avant-garde. Both on a theoretical and a practical level, this engagement had already started in the late 1950s. Although it is not guaranteed that the artists were (only) informed about the avant-garde through the channels I present here, they were likely aware of these debates. Masumi Kameda states that the reception of the avant-garde among the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde started in 1954 with the Zagreb-based Slavacist Aleksandar Flaker (1924–2010), who translated and wrote about Russian literature after the October Revolution in a book titled *Heretici i sanjari* [Heretics and dreamers] (Kameda, 2010: 107). She also asserts that the rediscovery of avant-garde art “was parallel to the neo-avant-garde movement.” The author describes this reception as depoliticized. Neo-avant-garde artists—except for filmmakers—“tried to remove the political connotation and ideological symbols from the works completely, so that they could show that there was still a sphere into which political powers or ideologies couldn’t reach” (Kameda, 2010: 108). However, this account is not accurate. The art historical engagement with the Soviet avant-garde started only shortly after the publication of Flaker’s book about early Soviet literature, with an essay by Belgrade-based art historian Lazar Trifunović (1929–1983) titled “Levo krilo ruskog modernog slikarstva” [The left wing of Russian modern painting]. It was published in the literary journal *Izraz* [Expression] (Trifunović, 1957). Trifunović published a new version of the article 11 years later, in 1968, in *Umetnost* [Art], one of the most important and advanced art magazines of the time. Very likely, this article was more widely read in art circles than the previous one. It was titled “Umetnost Oktobra” [Art of the October] and portrayed the most important movements and artists before, during, and in the immediate years after the October Revolution of 1917 (Trifunović, 1968). Whereas the text from 1957 offers very few footnotes that declare the author’s sources, the 1968 essay gives precise insight into that. Trifunović mentions Camilla Gray’s landmark book *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1862–1922* as one of his most important sources (Gray, 1986[1962]). However, he also read texts in German, French, and Russian. Most of these sources were written in the 1920s by (exiled) Soviet artists, critics, and journalists. The Bauhaus played a very important role, as it made seminal texts by Wassily Kandinsky (*Punkt und Linie zur Fläche*, 1926) and Kazimir Malevich (*Die gegenstandslose Welt*, 1927) accessible to the international community.⁶

⁶ Trifunović explicitly mentions Kandinsky, a Bauhaus teacher, and Malevich.

Trifunović’s texts make another important point clear. The Yugoslav reception of the Soviet avant-garde was not depoliticized or formalistic. The titles of his two essays already indicate that the author acknowledges the political interest and ideological engagement for the Bolshevik revolution of the Soviet avant-garde artists. Even though the author does not explain the political interest of the artists in great depth, the texts portray the general tendency:

Immediately before the First World War and the Revolution, there was a clear polarization of forces in the fine arts of Russia: on the one hand, there were the ‘left’ tendencies of futurist ideology—Cubo-Futurism, Suprematism, Constructivism—and on the other, the folkloric realism of the Peredvizhniki, the Secession of *Mir iskusstva*, and the impressionism of *Blue Rose* and *Golden Fleece*. These two strong forces projected themselves into the artistic life of the October [Revolution]. In the first years of the Revolution, the victory was won by the ‘left front,’ but after 1925 and definitely in 1932, it retreated in defeat [...] The October Revolution was welcomed by ‘leftist’ artists as the realization of their great futurist dream about industrialization, machines, war, and street life [...] Neither before nor later, there was more excitement on the streets in Russia than then. Recitals, meetings, exhibitions on fences, public games, concerts in squares, life in cafés, free communes in art schools, all of this fit adequately into the general landscape of the Revolution, which was shaken by hunger, war with the Whites, anarchist demonstrations, assassinations, etc. This was the milieu in which, with burning eyes and starving, the ‘Lefovci’ [artists later associated with the journal *LEF*] moved, those most heartfelt and ardent fighters for modern art that Europe had in the 20th century.⁷

TRIFUNOVIĆ, 1968: 9

7 “Neposredno pred prvi svetski rat i Revoluciju, u likovnoj umetnosti Rusije izvršena je jasna polarizacija snaga: s jedne strane, nalazile su se ‘leve’ tendencije futurističke ideologije—kubofuturizam, suprematizam, konstruktivizam—a s druge, folklorni realizam peredvizhnika, secesija *Mir iskusstva* i impresionizam *Plave ruže* i *Zlatnog runa*. Ove dve jake sile projektovale su se u umetnički život Oktobra. U prvim godinama Revolucije pobeđu je odneo ‘levi front,’ da bi se posle 1925. i definitivno 1932. povukao poražen [...] Oktobarsku revoluciju dočekali su ‘levi’ umetnici kao ostvarenje svog velikog futurističkog sna o industrijalizaciji, mašini, ratu, životu ulice [...] Ni pre, ni kasnije, u Rusiji se nije više živelo na ulici nego tada. Recitali, mitinzi, izložbe po tarabama, javne igre, koncerti po trgovima, život kafea, slobodne komune po umetničkim školama, sve se to adekvatno uklapalo u opšti pejzaž Revolucije, koji su potresali glad, rat sa belima, demonstracije anarhista, atentati itd. To je bio milje u kome su se, užarenih očiju izgladneli, kretali ‘lefovci,’ ti najsrčaniji i najvatreniji borci za modernu umetnost koje je Evropa imala u 20. veku.”

Trifunović's essays make the point very clear: Already in 1957, he was very well informed about the "art of October," its fate, and its political agenda. There was no attempt to present it exclusively as a formal novelty. It is, therefore, impossible to maintain the claim that Yugoslav artists and critics before the 1980s, firstly, were hardly informed, and secondly, received the avant-garde in a mainly formalistic manner.

I have no information about the initial trigger for the interest in Soviet avant-garde among Yugoslav intellectuals such as Flaker and Trifunović. Was it sparked by the death of Stalin in 1953 and the beginning of the thaw in the Soviet Union, or, rather, by the change mentioned above in cultural policies in Yugoslavia in 1952? Both scenarios are possible. However, it is historically confirmed that Trifunović's first essay about Soviet avant-garde preceded an actual encounter with the art of that period by almost three decades. The first possibility for the Yugoslav audience to engage with originals from the Soviet avant-garde was in 1983 with the show *Umetnost Oktobarske Epohe* [Art of the October epoch].⁸ Exhibitions of Soviet art always happened as a form of official diplomatic exchange. Since the breakup with the Soviet Union, the diplomatic relationship between the two countries had been very difficult.⁹ Nonetheless, there were major exhibitions of Soviet contemporary art in 1958 and 1968 in Yugoslavia, although they did not feature works from the avant-garde. Only in the 1980s did Soviet culture begin to recognize this part of its art history and present it abroad.¹⁰ This exhibition was likely the cause of the renewed interest and intense reception of avant-garde art in Yugoslavia by Goran Đorđević and IRWIN in the 1980s—apart from the activities of critics and artists in the previous two decades, of which they were undoubtedly well aware.

8 It was featured in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade in May 1983 and in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in June 1983.

9 This had consequences on every level of cultural exchange. Yugoslav artists and curators were more oriented towards Western Europe than the Soviet sphere. To my knowledge, there was no contact between the Yugoslav cultural scene and the Soviet unofficial culture. It is possible that no one in Yugoslavia knew about its existence. This is in contrast to Czechoslovakia, for example, where the curator Jindřich Chalupěcký was in contact with the artistic underground.

10 Earlier exhibitions that featured works from the avant-garde abroad usually came from collections of private collectors or exiled artists.

4 The Artistic Reception of the Avant-Garde

4.1 *Introduction: The Exhibition Slike/Paintings 1974*

The gallery of the Studentski kulturni centar (student cultural center, SKC hereafter) in Belgrade organized an exhibition titled *Slike/Paintings* in 1974. The SKC was the focal point for performance art in Yugoslavia, featuring prominent figures such as Marina Abramović and Raša Todosijević. Ješa Denegri (b. 1936), the curator of the exhibition and author of the catalogue essay, asserted right from the first sentence that the exhibition did not aim at “a restoration of painting” during an era characterized by non-painting or anti-painting sentiment. Nevertheless, he and the artists did not wish to dismiss the possibility that painting could still possess significance (Denegri, 1974).

The exhibition is relevant to our context as it can be interpreted as a small retrospective on a specific type of painting—abstract painting—created from the late 1950s onwards. It is clearly a show curated by an art historian interested in developments and genealogies, whereas the program of the self-managed SKC was typically curated ‘bottom-up’ by the artists. Denegri served as a curator at the MSUB from 1965 to 1989 and closely followed the latest developments in Yugoslav art. No one has written more catalogue texts and reflections on what was termed “nova umetnička praksa” [new artistic practice] in Yugoslavia and what Denegri himself referred to as “druga linija” [another/second line]. In an interview from 2007, he remarks that at the beginning of the 1970s, conflicts and misunderstandings arose between the young artists and the larger environment in which they were active (Vuković, 2007: 44). The aspiring artists struggled to comprehend why their work was not recognized or understood. For Denegri, the explanation lay in the absence of art-historical predecessors: “In the former Yugoslavia, there were no developed, historical avant-gardes that artists could utilise as orientation, and even what did exist was not researched until the 1970s” (Vuković, 2007: 45). However, to understand an artistic position—no matter how unconventional it may be—a plausible art-historical lineage is required, similar to what he could observe in Italy with the example of Arte Povera, which was linked in genealogy to Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, and Futurism. “What I wanted to do was provide the artists of the 1970s with a timeline like this” (Vuković, 2007: 47). This concern characterizes the texts Denegri wrote about what was referred to as “new,” “elementary,” “primary,” or “post-conceptual” painting at the time.

Although research about the avant-garde started slightly earlier than the 1970s (with the 1967 exhibition *Constructive Painting* at the MSUB), Denegri’s complaint about the belated reception of a minor, domestic avant-garde scene is understandable, especially when considering the counterexample he had in

mind, the situation in Italy. He does not mention the ruptures and ambivalences towards Futurism in post-war Italy due to Futurism's compromising relationship with fascism. However, the mediation of knowledge about Futurism was uninterrupted, and its importance (despite the ideological compromise) was undisputed—a situation quite different from the one in Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, Yugoslav artists did not work in historical oblivion, and just like Denegri, I would like to point out what they referred to and how they did so. If Denegri mainly contextualized Yugoslav artists within international post-war tendencies, I aim to elaborate on the genealogy with the early avant-garde, Suprematism, and the work of Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) above all.

The show *Slike/Paintings* featured seven artists, of whom I would like to present three: Julije Knifer, Radomir Damjanović Damjan, and Dragoljub Raša Todosijević. All three of them were engaging with Suprematism in their work. While Denegri unfolds his arguments in the catalogue, he connects the Yugoslav positions with international post-war tendencies such as minimal and conceptual art more than with early twentieth-century art. Yet at one point he traces the phenomenon of “post-conceptual painting”—one of the many terms that were circulating to capture the phenomenon—back to Malevich:

Observed from the aspect of a presently very simplified historical retro-spection, painting devoid of all allusive reflexes—reached through direct interventions in the pictorial matter itself—is consciously manifested for the first time in the work of Kazimir Malevich. It reappeared with different premises, but in the same radical way, in the practice and theory of Ad Reinhardt. Eventually, the foundations of these assumptions formed the base of numerous individual orientations of artists who participated in profiling [...] minimal and conceptual art [... forming] the current phenomenon of new, post-conceptual painting.¹¹

DENEGRİ, 1974: n.p.

11 English translation (by Aleksandar Petrović) of catalogue text slightly revised. “Posmatrano iz aspekta jedne u ovom trenutku vrlo simplificirane istorijske retrospekcije, slikarstvo lišeno svih aluzivnih refleksa ispoljenih posredstvom neposrednih intervencija u samoj pikturalnoj materiji po prvi put se svesno manifestira u delu Kazimira Malevića, da bi se sa drukčijim premisama ali na isto tako radikalnan način još jednom javilo u praksi i teoriji Ed Rajnharta, a na temeljima ovih pretpostavki bila su zatim zasnovana mnogobrojna individualna opredeljenja autora koji su učestvovali u profiliranju pojava minimalne i konceptualne umetnosti, kao i u formiranju danas aktualnog fenomena novog, postkonceptualnog slikarstva.”

However, Denegri does not say much about the character of Malevich’s art and which aspects of his work might have interested Yugoslav artists 60 years later. The absence of allusive reflexes is a common feature of all abstract art. I would like to offer a deeper insight into the avant-garde’s reception, which can be analyzed from three perspectives: firstly, the formal conception of the artworks; secondly, the use of political signifiers; and thirdly, the political and societal implications of the avant-gardist aesthetic. These three perspectives are, of course, intertwined and mutually dependent on each other. Before I analyze them, I will introduce the artists and the works they presented at the *Slike/Paintings* exhibition.

4.2 *Julije Knifer’s, Radomir Damnjan Damnjanović’s, and Raša Todoršević’s Late Modernist Abstract Art*

Julije Knifer (1924–2004) is the oldest of the three artists. He studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb from 1950 to 1956. He was a founding member of Gorgona [Gorgon], a group of artists indebted to the spirit of DADA and engaging in proto happenings. Apart from the collective activities, all of its members maintained their distinct individual artistic practices. A rather unique consistency characterizes Knifer’s work: From 1959 onwards, he painted nothing but black-and-white meanders until the end of his life.

At the *Slike/Paintings* exhibitions, he was also present with a meander painting. The constitutive elements of his meander paintings are, firstly, a black surface interrupted by a more or less thick white line that may be angular or round at the point of the turn. Secondly, the meander in one painting will continue with another meander in the next painting. Each meander is part of another meander. Together, they form a virtually infinitely continuing, moving form. According to Ljerka Mifka, an early critic of his work, the horizontal and the vertical are two directions in which Knifer accommodates the whole world—the growing and the fading. Black and white function as counterpoints. Knifer integrates all the mass into the black, whereas the white opens the space, expands it beyond the frame of the single painting, and draws a trajectory towards the infinite (Mifka, 1969: 34).

Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan was born in 1936 in Mostar and finished his studies in painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade in 1959. His primary genre has been painting; however, a conceptual understanding of this genre drew him early towards abstraction. Gorgona, which was co-founded by Knifer and recognized Damnjan as a kindred spirit, invited him in 1962 for an exhibition. By 1965, Damnjan had made his first completely abstract work after he had inserted pure, geometrical forms already in his earlier, more figurative paintings. The three paintings, titled *Krug* [Circle], were of the

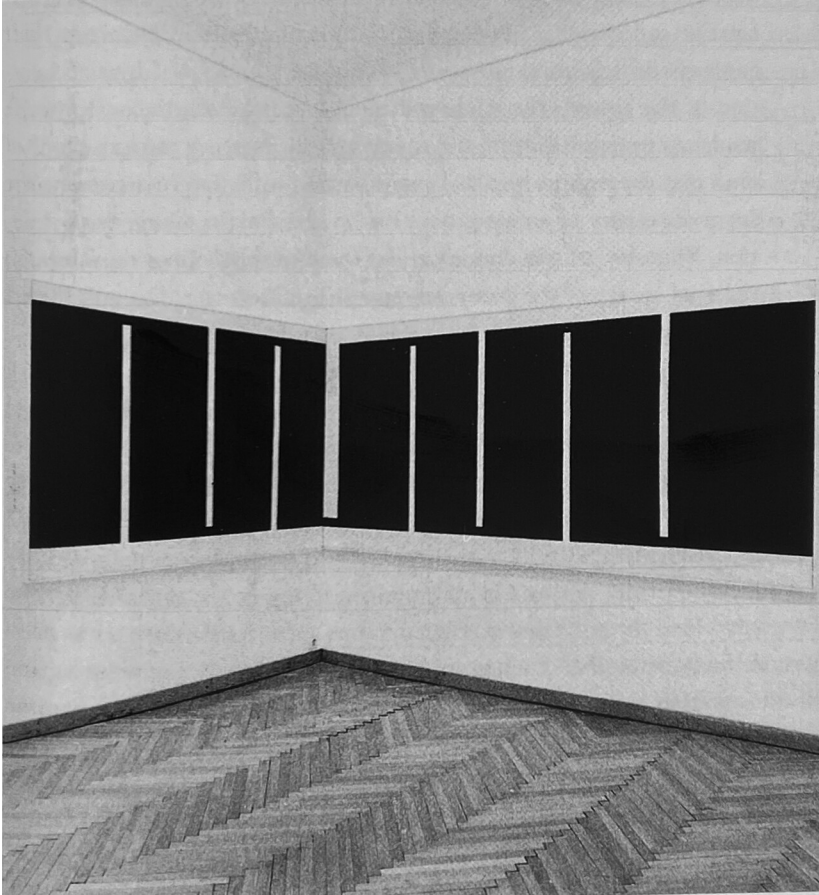


FIGURE 1 Julije Knifer: *Meandar u kut* [Meander in Angle], 1961, oil on canvas, 143x308 cm and 143x199 cm

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same square format, showing a blue, red, and gray circle with a square in the middle.

He continued to paint and draw circles with slight variations in color, material, and format until 1975. Around this time, he also started to engage with other art forms, such as conceptual and performance art. These new genres subsequently also permeated and changed his painterly work. In the *Slike/ Paintings* exhibition, he presented a canvas with a gray foundation. It was covered with fine lines, consisting of small dots in color and distributed at a regular distance from each other.

Dragoljub Raša Todosijević (1945–2024) is the youngest of the three artists. He also studied art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, where he received

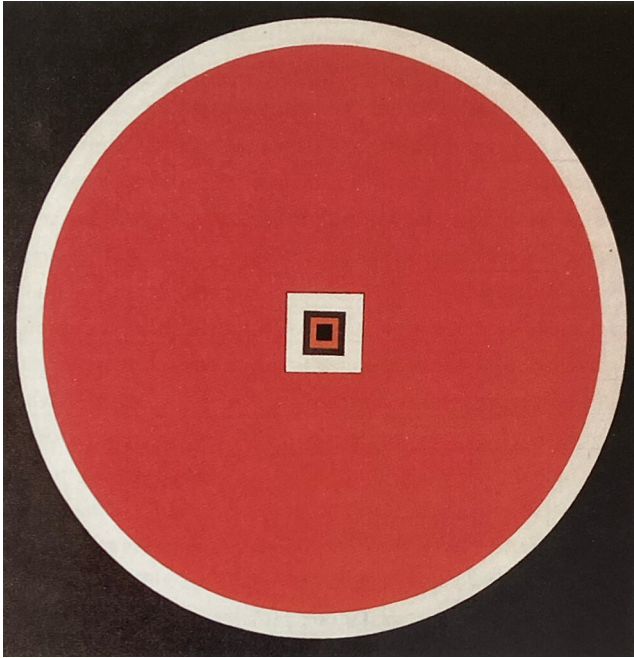


FIGURE 2 Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan: *Crveni krug* [Red circle], 1965, oil on canvas, 145x145 cm
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an education that he denounced as conservative. Interested in international developments and inspired by various avant-garde movements, he worked in a variety of media. He contributed significantly to the development of conceptual and performance art in Yugoslavia, and he also worked with video and installation. In the 1970s, when the diversity of his artistic experiments and his theoretical reflections on art peaked, he also engaged with the genre of painting. As a shorter and seemingly “minor” occupation, his radically abstract painting has not received scholarly attention. However, he presented these works in several exhibitions during the 1970s and provided a theoretical framework to ensure their proper understanding. The paintings he presented at the *Slike/Paintings* exhibition are reduced to the bare minimum. The artist applied a gray square on a non-primed, unframed black canvas. He ensured the brush stroke did not leave a pattern on the surface. Avoiding frame, color, and pattern, his paintings are even more basic and reduced than Damnjan’s and Knifer’s.

The connection between these artists and avant-garde art unfolds on different levels and varies in character from artist to artist. Only Damnjan made his interest in avant-garde art explicit on a symbolic level, not in the paintings

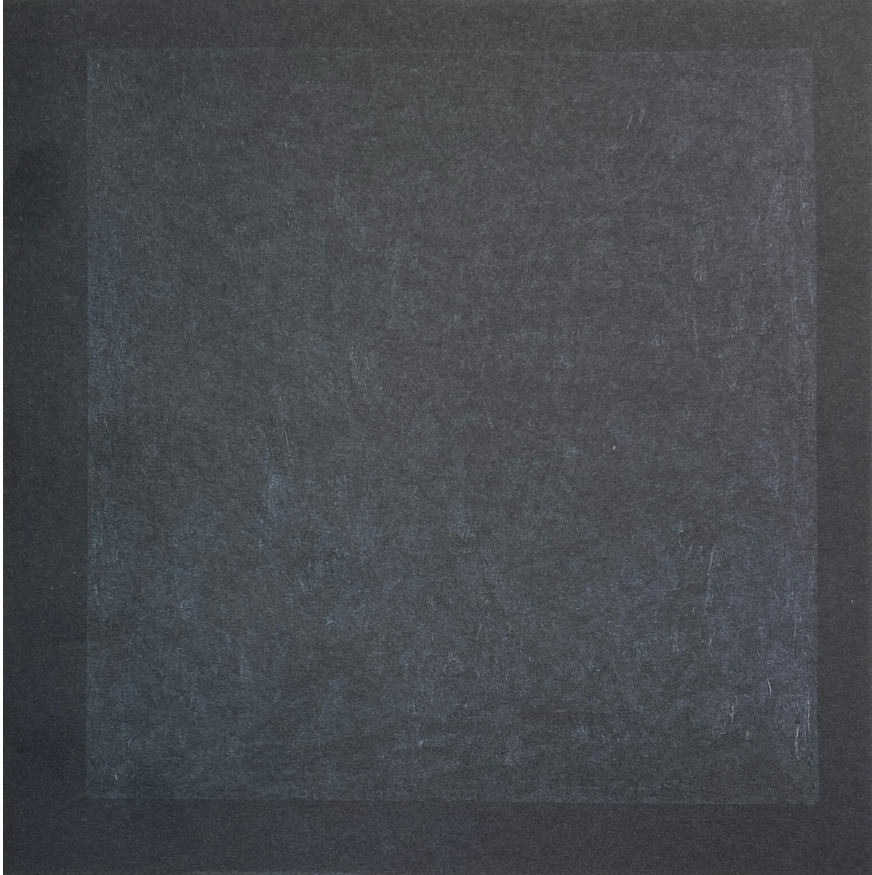


FIGURE 3 Raša Todosijević: *Untitled (Gray Square on Black Canvas)*, 1974, oil on canvas, 43 x 43 cm
© THE ARTIST / MARINELA KOŽELJ

mentioned above but in other works. His outspoken reverence for avant-garde art—quoted in the title of this article—also allows us to draw conclusions regarding his abstract paintings.

4.3 *Political Signifiers in the Reception of the Soviet Avant-Garde*

In 1971, Damnjan went to the US for several months. Upon his return, he presented two work cycles at the SKC, one titled *U čast sovjetske avangarde* [In honor of the Soviet avant-garde] (1972–1973). It was one of the artist's earliest non-painterly works. It consisted of eight photographs and five prints. In the photos, we see the artist's face. The names of seven artists and one critic are written on his forehead. They read in original spelling and form: I. Puni,



FIGURE 4
Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan:
U čast sovjetske avangarde [In
honor of the Soviet avant-garde],
1972–1973, black-and-white pho-
tographs, 40 x 30 cm, I–VIII
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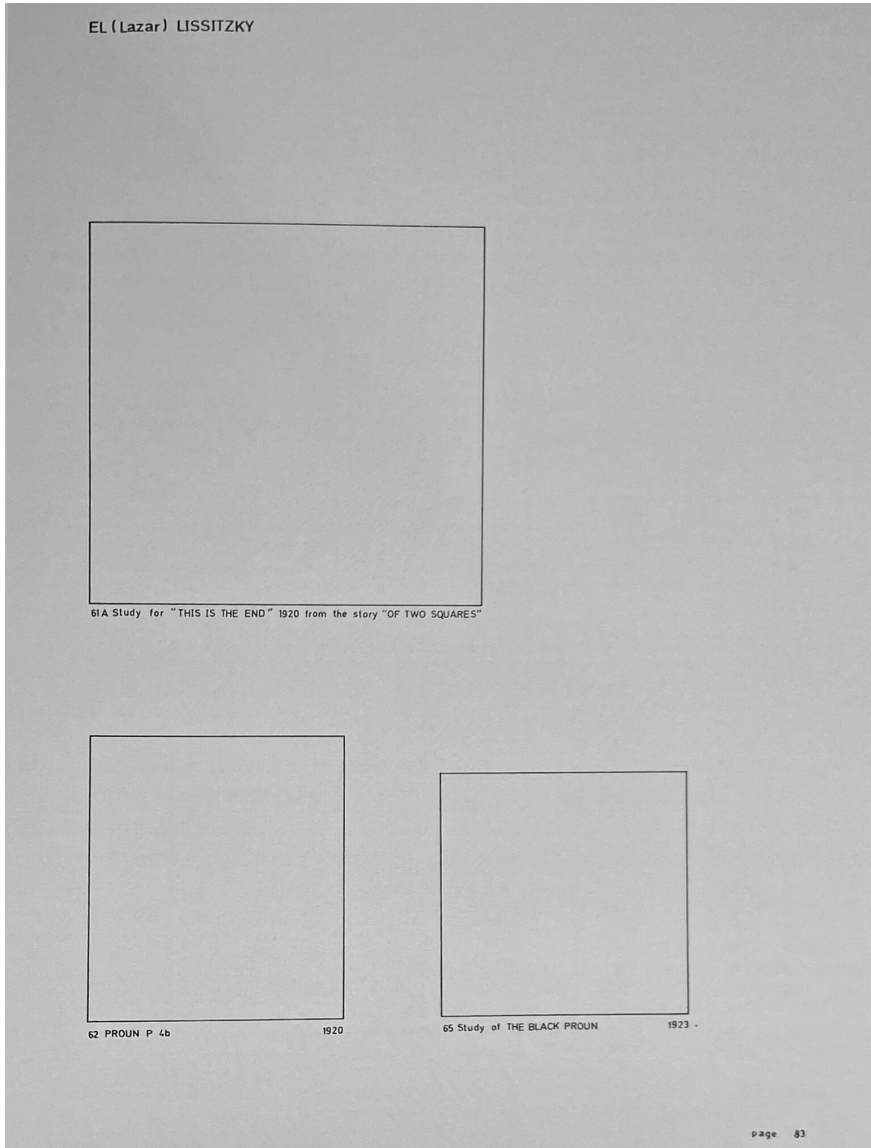


FIGURE 5 Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan: *U čast sovjetske avangarde* [In honor of the Soviet avant-garde], 1972–1973
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V. Hlebnikov, D. Burljuk, L. Lisicki, J. Knifer, Manconi, J. Denegri, 7.1.1973. R.D. Five of the artists belong to the Soviet avant-garde. The rest are his contemporaries and himself. His eyes are closed in all the photographs except the one with the date and his own initials.

The work's second part consists of five prints dedicated to the five Soviet artists. Each sheet mimics the page of an exhibition catalogue. It contains the artist's name, a caption, sometimes a short description, and a placeholder for the reproduction of an artwork in the shape of a drawn rectangle, plus the supposedly original page number of the reference.

The language of the sheets is English—as must have been the template therefore. One last sheet consists of Damnjan's short statement about the work (in Serbo-Croatian).

The reasons for the realization of the work, which consists of a series of photographs and drawings, are moral, ethical, and socio-political. By choosing the names of these personalities, I wanted to point out their exceptional importance, the indelible mark they left behind, and their living presence in the time we live and create. By writing their names on my forehead, I tried to reactivate our awareness of the renewed need to revalue certain creators who contributed to the development of human consciousness and pointed to new spiritual-creative possibilities. Anyway, for similar reasons, this circle of personalities was expanded with several creators who do not belong to the cultural area of Soviet artists. Often biased interpreters of that period looked at these creators exclusively formally, consciously diminishing their value with a superficial approach, separating them from the real historical-social context. R.D., Belgrade, December 1972.¹²

DENEGRI, 2018a: 51

Damnjan's text not only gives information about the work but also conveys a certain urgency. Denegri rightly observed that Damnjan announced which artists he considered to be his spiritual and intellectual sources (Denegri, 2018a: 43). However, the urgency of the text concerns two aspects: the genealogical

12 “Razlozi za realizaciju dela koje se sastoji od serije fotografija i crteža su moralne, etičke i društveno-političke prirode. Izborom imena ovih ličnosti želeo sam da ukažem na njihov izuzetan značaj i neizbrisiv trag koji su ostavili za sobom, te njihovo živo prisustvo u vremenu koje živimo i stvaramo. Ispisivanjem njihovih imena na svom čelu pokušao sam da iznova aktiviram našu svest o ponovnoj potrebi revalorizacije pojedinih stvaralaca koji su doprineli razvoju ljudske svesti i ukazali na nove duhovno-stvaralačke mogućnosti. Svakako, zbog sličnih razloga ovaj krug ličnosti je proširen sa nekoliko stvaralaca koji ne pripadaju kulturnom području sovjetskih umetnika. Često pristrasni interpretatori toga perioda posmatrali su ove stvaraoce isključivo formalno, svesno im umanjujući vrednost površnim pristupom, izdvajajući ih iz stvarnog istorijsko-socijalnog konteksta. R.D., Beograd, decembar 1972.”

inscription and the necessity of a contextualized, political interpretation of the Soviet avant-garde. I have no information on which catalogue Damnjan used as the template. However, there was an exhibition titled *Russian Art of the Revolution* from June 15 to July 25, 1971, at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, accompanied by an “illustrated catalogue.”¹³ Damnjan may have seen the exhibition in Brooklyn or its catalogue upon his arrival in the US. Whatever source he used prompted him to immediately come forward with a work that demonstrated not only his awareness of the Soviet avant-garde but also his sense of belonging. One of the pages from the catalogue he had chosen for “reproduction” was dedicated to Naum Gabo. It was the only one that consisted of a text instead of a work of visual art. The text—an excerpt from a lecture Gabo gave at Princeton in 1959—claimed the universality of avant-gardist work in terms of time and geography. Its roots are always historically deeper and geographically broader than its attribution to a certain time and place implies. It seems that Damnjan tried to bring some of the universal impact of the avant-garde to Yugoslavia, maybe even reclaiming it from the depoliticized appropriation of US art historiography. It is unclear which “interpreters” Damnjan accused of a solely formal reading of the Soviet avant-garde. Was this his experience in Yugoslavia or the US? Generally, a reading of the Soviet avant-garde that did not emphasize its political aspect came from the formalist and structuralist schools. Where the Yugoslav context is concerned, the above-mentioned Aleksandar Flaker is a possible suspect since he stood in this tradition, engaging with the works of Juri Lotman and Roman Jakobson (Oraić Tolić, 2014). In any case, Damnjan addresses his dissent in a purely formalistic reading of the figures to whom he pays tribute.

Moreover, several works from the same period hint at Damnjan's leftist and anti-capitalist political convictions. A good example is *Madre, salva i tuoi figli dal capitalismo* [Mother, save your children from capitalism]. This work features a historical document, a photo by Jevgenij Chaldej of a soldier waving the Soviet flag over the liberated and bombed Berlin.

The eponymous slogan is an inversion of a political manifesto from the late 1940s of the Italian Christian Democrats: “Madre! Salva i tuoi figli dal bolscevismo!” [Mother! Save your children from Bolshevism!].¹⁴ In Damnjan's

13 <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/939>. According to Denegri, Damnjan left for the US shortly after participating in the show *Drangularijum* at the SKC in Belgrade (Denegri 2018a, 43). *Drangularijum* opened in June 1971, so Damnjan could have seen the exhibition in New York in summer 1971.

14 This work ought to be analyzed in the context of the “anni di piombo” [years of lead] in the 1970s, the time of anti-communist repression in Italy, where Damnjan lived at the time. Yet this goes beyond the scope of this text.



FIGURE 6 Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan: *Madre, salva i tuoi figli dal capitalismo*, 1976, black-and-white photography, 98x96.5 cm
© TRAJKOVIĆ COLLECTION

Super-8 silent film from 1974, titled *Bandiera* [Flag], an American flag undergoes a series of interventions, from zooming in and out on it, to covering and uncovering it with a piece of cloth, to the application of a drawn hammer and sickle, until a dead bird—that resembles an eagle with white feathers—is stretched out on it. Looking at his abstract paintings in isolation, one might think of them as a formalist exercise. But against the background of the works that use political signifiers, and considering his comment on *In Honor of the Soviet Avant-Garde*, one can only agree with Denegri’s claim that the seemingly neutral and autonomous abstract paintings acquire a political meaning (Denegri, 2018b: 61).

4.4 *The Reception and Renewal of Suprematism's Formal Language*

Speaking of formal traits should not lead to the mistaken conclusion that formal qualities should and could be isolated. On the contrary, they have broader implications, be it in the early avant-garde and Suprematism or in the works of the Yugoslav artists presented here. Indeed, these broader implications of the “non-objective” in avant-garde art appear to be specifically received and renewed by later generations. However, it is worth pointing out the formal ground on which other aesthetic values could play out.

Knifer, Damnjan, and Todosijević may have been familiar with at least some of Malevich's writings, such as *The Non-Objective World*, a book also mentioned by Trifunović as one of his sources. The book was published in German (*Die gegenstandslose Welt*) in 1927 in a famous series of Bauhaus books and was one of the first sources of Malevich's thinking available for an international readership. It is richly illustrated with the artist's black-and-white pencil drawings. Yugoslav artists were likely well informed about Suprematism's aesthetic program but did not know the full color spectrum of Malevich's Suprematist work because they knew it through black-and-white reproductions rather than through originals.

Formal references to the early avant-garde and especially Suprematism are present in the works of all three artists. In the case of Damnjan, they appear most strongly in the circle paintings of the mid-1960s. The move to kick off his abstract art with a painting in square format, a very reduced color palette, and basic geometric shapes of square and circle strongly recalls Malevich's *Black Square*, which simultaneously marked the beginning and the culmination of Malevich's abstract art. In the works of both artists, abstract or non-objective paintings did not “suddenly” appear but came out of earlier work that was still grounded in figuration. In Malevich's case, Cubo-Futurist paintings preceded his “invention” of Suprematism for a short time. His Cubo-Futurist art is characterized by strong colors—a reverence for folk art and icon painting—and a geometrical abstraction of natural forms. In the subsequent Suprematist work, the link to the mimetic principle—still present in Cubo-Futurism—was cut. Malevich traced the origins of his famous *Black Square* to a theatre curtain he designed for the opera *Victory over the Sun*, performed in 1913 in St. Petersburg (Dalrymple Henderson, 1983: 278). In 1915, he presented the *Black Square* for the first time as a painting in the show *The Last Futurist Exhibition, 0,10*. In addition to the *Black Square*, he created a series of works based on the same principle for the exhibition: a single or a few basic geometric forms in a reduced palette of colors on a white ground.

Todosijević's elementary paintings also rely heavily on these early Suprematist forms, especially on the *Black Square*. Unlike Malevich, he does not use

other geometrical forms, and his color palette is reduced to dark shades. His elementary paintings are not direct copies of the *Black Square* but use enough of its iconic features (a square on a square in two different colors, a smaller format) to evoke the Suprematist spirit.

Knifer's paintings recall Suprematism much less visually, apart from the black-and-white scheme that occasionally occurred in Suprematism. But Malevich was central to Knifer. In a letter, he asked: “How to approach Malevich? Am I on the right way towards Malevich?” (Radaković, 1994, cited in Stefanovski, 2016: 72). Apparently, Knifer had even chosen Đuro Tiljak as his teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb because he had studied with Wassily Kandinsky in Moscow in 1919 and therefore knew the Soviet avant-garde first-hand (Stefanovski, 2016: 1).

The formal and ‘spiritual’ proximity of Knifer to Malevich is often mentioned in the literature about him but rarely explored in real depth.¹⁵ Among the many qualities of Knifer's Malevich reception, I would like to focus on two: the concept of spatiality in the works of the two artists and their shared anti-utilitarian attitude (in section 4.5). The sense of space or spatiality in the works of Malevich and Knifer has nothing in common with the classical dispositive of painterly perspective. In this classical dispositive, the painting is a window that offers the possibility to “hole through it for realistic perspectival space” (Greenberg, 1986[1940]: 34). Their images (or non-images, Malevich would have said) have no depth in this sense. But their point is not flatness either, as a cliché of modernist art would have it. His paintings' geometric elements do not suggest that they are stuck to the picture's surface but rather that they float in a space no longer defined by perspective and three-dimensionality. The protagonists of Cubo-Futurism and, subsequently, Suprematism had a great interest in contemporary theories of four-dimensional space (Dalrymple Henderson, 1983: 274–294). The artists sought to find a visual language that adequately represents a novel idea simultaneously informed by contemporary physics and philosophy (Malloy, 2018: 2). The movement of three-dimensional objects in space was often used to illustrate the concept of four-dimensionality—hence the ‘floating’ appearance of Malevich's shapes (Dalrymple Henderson, 1983: 282). Although the geometrical shapes do not represent objects outside the world, they establish relationships between themselves. These relationships are spatial, not flat, because the space in which they are arranged was, in all probability, conceived as a non-Euclidean, four-dimensional space.

15 For more insights, see Stefanovski, 2016; Gnamuš, 2017; and Rukavina, 2017.

Knifer's paintings, for their part, are dominated by the horizontal and the vertical, which are discriminated through the black and white color scheme. It is, therefore, tempting to perceive them as conforming to the cliché of flatness of modernist paintings. As Katarina Rukavina showed, one could think that Knifer's meanders, in their strictly horizontal and vertical organization, reflect the flatness of the painting (Rukavina, 2017: 145–146). However, their second main feature is the repetition of the motive of the meander. According to Rukavina, the medium specificity of painting is transcended by the fact that one meander is always already part of another meander or that all meanders together form one meander across the borders of the picture frames (Rukavina, 2017: 149). This is an aspect of Knifer's specific spatiality. The seriality forms a continuum that is temporal and spatial. The temporality that underlies Knifer's procedure is intuitive. However, the concrete order in which Knifer produced his meanders has no meaning to him. He said it could be that he had already painted the last meander but not the first (Paulus, 2017: 283). Therefore, the temporality of the meanders is not linear. Similarly, the spatial order of the meanders is hardly imaginable as a linear sequence that unfolds only on a plane surface. Knifer accentuated this with meanders across corners, such as the *Meander u kut* [Meander in angle] from 1961 or the *Tü E (Tuebingen Ecke)* from 1973. The meanders are partaking in space as much as they are organized by the horizontal and the vertical. Although the meanders were primarily painted on the flat surface of a canvas, they sometimes left the two-dimensionality not only when considered as a virtually indefinite number of single meanders scattered across time and space. Sometimes, Knifer painted meanders on walls (with an uneven profile) and produced folding books and sculptures. Last but not least, the materiality of the color itself could acquire a quality of depth, as Sutton had observed: In later works, he used graphite that allowed him to build up a shimmering, "near sculptural density" (Sutton, 2015: 299). Thus, in some instances, spatiality is part of the single pictorial unity, but mostly it comes into play when considering the meanders as a collective that inhabits a (non-linear) time and space. Suprematist paintings, where the space in which the geometrical elements float and hover is always undecided, do not directly correspond with Knifer's meanders. However, what Knifer has in common with Malevich is a non-conventional notion of space and spatiality specific to painting that has decisively left the representation of the 'objective world' behind. Abolishing the representation of the 'objective world' came with spiritual, ideological, and political implications—for the Yugoslav artists as much as for Malevich.

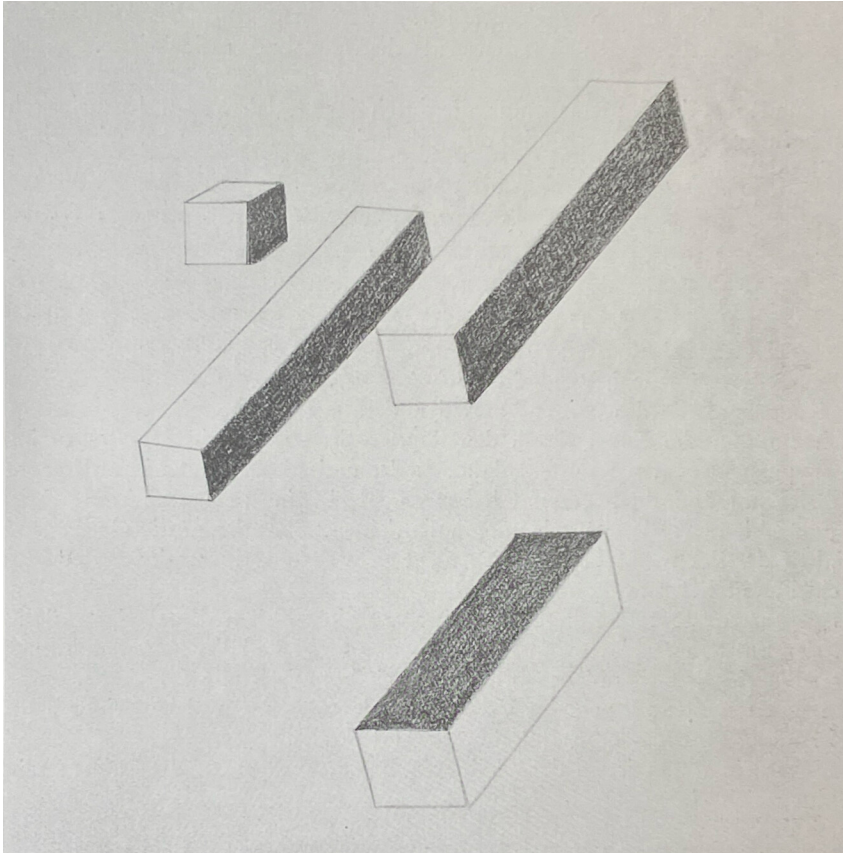


FIGURE 7 Kazimir Malevich: *Suprematist Elements in Space*.1915. (*Brought to Full Development in the Year 1923*). Drawing in *The Non-Objective World* 1927, p.97

4.5 *The “Non-Objective” as Aesthetic Resistance, or the Critique of Everything Existing*

Malevich formulated his opposition to the mimetic principle in *The Non-Objective World*. As mentioned before, this Bauhaus publication—originally published in German—was a likely source for Yugoslav artists.¹⁶ The book’s

16 While the text had been ready for publication in Russian in 1922, it could not appear in its entirety back then. The German edition of 1927 was the first available for international readership. During his stay in Germany, Malevich handed over a substantial part of his writings to his interpreters Hans von Riesen and his brother. This legacy was acquired in 1971 by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and made public. I refer to the 1927 Bauhaus-Edition made accessible through https://monoskop.org/images/a/ab/Malewitsch_Kasimir_Die_gegenstandslose_Welt_1927.pdf and its English translation/facsimile from 2021 (Malevich, 2021[1927]).

second part analyzes the idea and concept of Suprematism. Its main aim is to express “pure feeling.” It should be noted that by “feeling,” Malevich never refers to emotional affect (Clark, 2001: 274). Another aim is the abolishment of the “objective” (Malevich, 2021[1927]: 65). The black square on a white background was the first expression of a non-objective feeling. The square equals feeling; the white field equals the nothingness outside the feeling (Malevich, 2021[1927]: 74). Suprematism means representing the world of feelings. It is strictly non-utilitarian: It does not serve the church, the state, or any other institution (Malevich, 2021[1927]: 72). Malevich opposes the idea of usefulness or purposefulness. A table, bed, and chair are not functionalities but the form of a plastic feeling. Even the aircraft was not designed out of a material need but because the feelings of speed and flight sought a form. These feelings let the shape of the plane finally emerge. Similarly, based on the visual vocabulary of a composition of basic geometrical forms (cubes, rectangles, circles, triangles, lines, crosses, etc.), Suprematist paintings express a range of feelings, such as “speed,” “electricity and telegraphy,” “metallic sounds,” or “outer space” (Malevich, 2021[1927]: 80–81, 91). Many examples relate to the world of technology and the cosmos, but some are more abstract, such as the “feeling of mystical will: unwelcome” or “feeling of non-objectivity.”

However, Malevich was deeply involved in and supportive of the Bolshevik revolution. Immediately before and during the revolutionary period (between 1915 and 1920), when Bolshevik power was not yet constituted, Malevich wrote political texts and created propaganda posters. He was convinced that individual interests had to be subordinated to the collective (Clark, 2001: 226). In *The Non-Objective World*, Malevich states that if only the objects would finally become useful, humanity could be freed as much as possible from the need to work. They could dedicate themselves to creative activities, the only activities worthwhile for humanity (Malevich, 2021[1927]: 82). Suprematist artists were supposed to take the lead in creating this new “non-objective world” (Malevich, 2021[1927]: 98). After fulfilling this purpose, Suprematism would become obsolete. Its refusal to serve a purpose is thus directed towards the *existing* society and institutions. But the Suprematist movement sought an active role in constructing a better future for the human collective and was, thus, teleological.

Formal choices are also intertwined with a “philosophy” of painting in Knifer’s meanders. The earliest substantial texts about his work already stress that it is not a formalist experiment. Ljerka Mifka writes in an essay from 1969 that Knifer was not guided by interests in pure form but that a philosophy of life and art materialized in the meanders. She describes the connection between life and art in Knifer’s work as follows:

Denying the limits of painting, he asserted himself in it to the utmost extent possible: his art is created where every fable ends, where a complete union with the space that is life itself is revealed. The space of the artist and the space of the painting become identical. This is the painter's final share. It seems that Knifer fully understood the possibilities that such a position opens up. Therefore, we may not be wrong to call Knifer's painting a border situation (Jaspers). The subject matter, which encompasses it [the painting], gradually loses its original meaning and its external characteristics under the pressure of continuous contemplation. On this path of continuous shedding of the apparent reality, an inner image is crystallized and sharpened, which hardly has a common outline with the previous one.¹⁷

MIFKA, 1969: 32

Two characteristics stand out in this description: the meanders shed what appears to be reality—creating a new one in the eye of the beholder—and they form a union with the artist's life. If we compare this with Suprematism, we see that he shared the conviction with Malevich that art should neither depict nor serve the “objective world.” His paintings refuse to affirm the outer reality as strictly as Malevich's. Yet his anti-utilitarianism is not exhausted in the refusal to support any idea or purpose outside of art. Knifer's painterly method itself is anti-utilitarian. The flow of painterly activity, creating one meander after another, is non-linear for Knifer and not aimed at reaching a goal, making progress, or improving. Optimization is unnecessary because no goal outside artistic activity would motivate or drive it in the background. Knifer was aware of the absurdity—if looked at from a utilitarian perspective—of such an undertaking and embraced it. “The absurd is a very important component of my work. The absurd is the form of freedom”¹⁸ (Knifer, 1983: 29). Knifer's approach

17 “Negirajući granice slikarstva, on se do krajnje moguće mjere u njemu potvrdio: njegova umjetnost nastaje tamo gdje prestaje svaka faubla, gdje se ukazuje potpuno sjedinjenje s prostorom koji je sam život. Prostor umjetnika i prostor slike identificiraju se. To je konačni udio slikara. Čini se da je Knifer do kraja shvatio mogućnosti koje otvara takva pozicija. Zato možda nećemo pogriješiti nazovemo li Kniferovo slikarstvo graničnom situacijom (Jaspers.) Predmet što ga obuhvaća pod pritiskom neprekidne kontemplacije gubi postupno svoje prvotno značenje i svoje vanjske karakteristike. Na tom putu neprekidnog osipanja pojave stvarnosti kristalizira se i izoštava unutrašnja slika, koja s prethodnom jedva da ima zajednički obris.”

18 “Meni je apsurd veoma važna komponenta u mojem djelovanju. Apsurd je oblik slobode.” Knifer's “notes” from 1976 and 1977, published in an issue of *Život umjetnosti*, have a very interesting beginning. The artist writes the texts like he is producing meanders. He writes:

is personal and individual, the absurd, paradoxically, being the ultimate form of freedom.

Herein lies the most fundamental difference between Knifer and Malevich. Knifer's work decidedly takes part in the world, attaining a "complete union with the space that is life itself" (Mifka, 1969: 32) and creating a new reality on its own. Yet it does not aim to transform society, nor does it offer a vision for a future new collective human life. Suprematism, at least in the revolutionary period, saw itself leading the project of collective liberation in the "non-objective world." The—in hindsight—utopian project of human emancipation through Suprematist art has changed in the post-revolutionary cultural environment into a project of radical subjective freedom in the work of Knifer. As the following analysis of Todosijević's elementary paintings and their theorization will show, a similar caution regarding grand fantasies of liberation through art is also at play in his case.

Unlike Knifer and Damnjan, Todosijević turned to painting only briefly (1973–1975). It almost seems as if painting was a means for theoretical reflection in the form of artistic practice for him. He regularly wrote and published theoretical manifestos and art essays (Todosijević, 1973, 1974a, 1975a, 1975b, 1977). He also translated texts, for example by Ad Reinhardt, into Serbo-Croatian (Todosijević, 1974b). Although the paintings seem to embody the theory already, Todosijević wanted to ensure that his theory of painting was understood. So, he published a short manifesto. It appeared in the catalogue accompanying an exhibition titled *Damnjanović, Todosijević, Urkom*, held at the MSUB Salon in 1975. This exhibition also featured primary or elementary painting. Todosijević's manifesto says that elementary painting is "the moment of a radical demonstration of the character" of painting. Ultimately, this analysis can lead to exposure, unmasking, and even "negation—if it becomes apparent that its existence is justified solely by inertia" (Todosijević, 1975a). He further describes the operation of elementary art, specifically elementary painting, as follows:

If we are talking about [elementary] painting, then the character of the painting process in general, the physical and spiritual status of the painting is considered. The objective factors of its composition cease to be

"The text must be neutral and clear, i.e. simple and direct. I would like to start with the essentials. Like my paintings that I started in the 50s, made in the 60s, and still do. The text must be clean and direct. Of course, the text must have content, but the content must not be descriptive. The text must be a sequence of facts. [...] The text should almost not have a classical beginning. It immediately needs to start literally at the end."

mediators in the expression of some literary or emotional record and become the subject of research. [...] This art recognizes only the reality of its own spiritual or physical substance, without allusions or evocations of the external ‘real world.’ Whatever the language of art may be, it is absolutely non-objective compared to the ‘real world’ and absolutely concrete in its role as an indicator of abstract thought.¹⁹

TODOSIJEVIĆ, 1975a: n.p.

The historical vanguardist concept of the “non-objective” reappears in the idea of elementary painting in full affirmation. However, there is significant divergence concerning the ideological and aesthetic precursors, as we have also seen in the case of Knifer’s recourse to Suprematism. Suprematist paintings were dedicated to certain “feelings” as the motor and cause of the shape of outer reality. Suprematist artists saw their art as a revolutionary force, contributing to forming a new society. In Todosijević’s elementary painting, the “content” of the work is radical self-analysis. This analysis is not tautological and necessarily self-affirmative, as the artist makes clear in his text. The “negation” of painting is a possible outcome of the analytical process or “exposure” of its character. This tendency towards an idea of final obsolescence is again akin to Malevich’s artistic ideology. However, whereas Suprematism is teleological, elementary painting might simply prove that “non-objective” art had served its purpose for good and should be discarded. But what might be the purpose, the usefulness of such a “self-analysis”? Can it play a role in a context that transcends the narrow limits of the canvas? Certainly, Todosijević’s contemporaries thought so.

In the *Damnjanović, Todosijević, Urkom* catalogue, there is an interview between Irina Subotić and Ješa Denegri—both curators at the MSUB—in which the latter explains the claims for autonomy in elementary painting starting with a quote by Malevich:

From Malevich, who talks about the fact that “the function of art is not to serve religion and the state,” to Ad Reinhardt, who pleads for art to be freed from all for its real nature, irrelevant aesthetic or expressive deposits, not only the awareness of the internal structure of art itself has deepened, but also awareness of its ideological, social and political relations with the concrete historical context. This persistent struggle of art

19 “Ako je reč o slikarstvu, onda se razmatra karakter slikarskog postupka uopšte, fizički i duhovni status slike, a objektivni činoci njene građe prestaju da budu posrednici u iskazivanju nekog literarnog ili emocionalnog zapisa već postaju predmet istraživanja. [...] Ova

to preserve its own identity cannot be understood otherwise than as its organic reaction to the pressures exerted on it, from the time of the liquidation of the historical avant-gardes until today, by the dominant ideologies that do not want to give up the right to see in its existence only one of the instruments of its global strategy.²⁰

DENEGRI, 2015: n.p.

Denegri refers to Malevich as stating that art should be autonomous—although this is only a part of the story since Suprematist artists (like the other avant-gardist groups) served the Bolshevik regime with conviction on its march towards power. However, Malevich *did* write that the contemporary state and society should be smashed. Yet Denegri mentions almost *en passant* that the historical avant-gardes were “liquidated.” Is insisting on autonomy a historical lesson to be learned from this liquidation? Denegri presents radical and self-conscious autonomy as an “organic” defense mechanism against the abuse and trespass of the “dominant ideologies.” He compares elementary painting with the new developments in performance and body art, film, and photography. The difference between them is the latest media’s a priori confidence in civilizational progress. This goes hand in hand with the risk of an opportunistic integration into the dominant culture. Primary painting is immune to any idealization of the present and aware that progress is a relative category. Self-analysis and self-criticism of one’s working attitudes are, according to Denegri, the most substantial basis for preserving individual dignity in the context of constantly changing social and moral norms (Denegri, 1975). This interpretation of elementary painting, relying on critical theory, is not out of place. However, it fails to consider and integrate that both Damnjan and Todosijević engaged a great deal with new media, especially with performance art. As Georg Schöllhammer said about Todosijević, these new artistic practices ran against a self-sufficient auto-referentiality and opened art up to the social. And at the same time, Todosijević always insisted that the aesthetic as a difference cannot be dissolved (Schöllhammer, 2011: 39). This is true also for Damnjan. Both artists use different means of expression to insist that neither the sociopolitical nor the “aesthetic as difference” can be abolished or collapsed into each other. They are two sides of the same coin. With its insistence on the

umetnost priznaje jedino realnost sopstvene duhovne ili fizičke supstancije, bez aluzija ili evokacija na spoljašnji realni svet. Ma kakav bio jezik umetnosti, on je apsolutno neobjektivan naspram realnog sveta i apsolutno konkretan u ulozi indikatora apstraktno misli.”

20 “Od Malevića koji govori o tome da funkcija umetnosti nije ‘služenje religiji i državi’, do

“non-objective,” elementary painting articulates a “negative” or at least non-affirmative relation to “everything existing.” This is not ignorance of “reality” and retreat into lofty climes. It is a stance of active resistance that acknowledges that “objective world” as much as it renounces being put into its service. This thought is rooted in the early avant-garde.

5 Conclusions

From the end of the 1950s onwards, there was a great interest in Yugoslavia in the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. This interest concerned the domestic avant-garde as well as international movements. It manifested on the level of art historiography—both through big museum retrospectives and art-historical publications—and artistic production. This text focuses on the reception of the Soviet avant-garde, especially Suprematism, because it was the subject of art-historical and artistic scrutiny from late modernist positions of the 1960s to new artistic practices of the 1970s, up until the playful, ironic, postmodern approaches of the 1980s. Whereas the artistic interest of the 1980s is relatively well researched, the earlier period has received hardly any attention. This is surprising since some of the most famous Yugoslav artists explicitly revered the historical avant-garde and laid the ground for the developments of the 1980s. Even less attention has been given to the political reinterpretation of the avant-garde in the 1960s and 1970s, the underlying assumption being that the reception was focused solely on formal aspects. However, as the art-historical publications by Lazar Trifunović and Ješa Denegri, as well as the artistic practice of Julije Knifer, Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan, and Raša Todosijević, have shown, the intellectual and artistic engagement started long before the 1980s and took the political aspect into account.

The primary aspect of Suprematism they took up was the insistence on the non-objective and anti-utilitarian. This important feature is not only a formal quality—anti-mimetic, anti-narrative—but is also intertwined with a specific vision of life and politics in art. Knifer’s meanders take from Malevich, whom

Ad Reinhardta koji pledira za umetnost oslobođenu od svih dodatnih i za njenu stvarnu prirodu nebitnih estetskih ili ekspresivnih naslaga, produbljivana je ne samo svest o internoj strukturi same umetnosti već isto tako i svest o njenim idejnim, socijalnim i političkim relacijama sa konkretnim istorijskom kontekstom. Ta uporna borba umetnosti za očuvanje svoje vlastitosti ne može se shvatiti drukčije nego kao njena organska reakcija pritiscima koji se, od vremena likvidacije istorijskih avangardi do danas, nad njom vrše od strane dominantnih ideologija koje nikako na žele odustati od prava da u njenom postojanju vide samo jedan od instrumenata svoje globalne strategije.”

he calls a great inspiration, the utmost reduction to a very restricted formal and coloristic vocabulary. We can also see a new interpretation of the specific spatiality of these seemingly flat, abstract paintings. Suprematist paintings partake in space decisively, albeit in space conceived as non-Euclidian. The abolition of the traditional spatial and perspectival organization of a painting relates to the abolition of traditional political and societal organization with the October Revolution that Suprematist artists whole-heartedly supported. Knifer adopts this treatment of spatiality that looks undetermined at first glance, implying depth without insisting on it. However, the spatiality of the meander unfolds when the continuum of meanders is considered, which is one of the most essential features of Knifer's art. Seen in this continuum—or when applied to surfaces outside the museum—the meander's participation in the space of "life" becomes evident. This is the ambivalence of Knifer's meander: it is, on the one hand, non-objective and insists on autonomy, but on the other hand, it is not confined and self-centered but always moves, wanders, and projects itself over its limits. It is an artistic practice that engages with the absurd instead of the "useful" and provides the artist with the ultimate freedom of thought.

Damnjan's and Todosijević's elementary paintings are—on a strictly visual level—even closer to Malevich's iconic early Suprematist works. They use the square format, the utmost reduced color palette, and few geometric forms. Yet both artists also use additional means to demonstrate their sense of belonging to the avant-gardist project. Damnjan performs integration into a vanguardist genealogy very outspokenly in his work *In Honor of the Soviet Avant-Garde*. In this and other works, he also expresses his affirmative view on the politics of the avant-garde, even using communist symbols. Todosijević keeps his distance from political iconography. However, he affirmatively refers to the concept of non-objectivity in painting to criticize the existing. It is a stance that Malevich has already taken. However, none of the three artists discussed in this text offer a vision for a great collective social project. Herein lies the most significant difference between them and their predecessor and model movement Suprematism. This is not because of ignorance but because they doubt the agency of art on that level—not least because of the "liquidation" (Denegri) of the avant-garde. The political aspect is nonetheless there. This is true not only in works like some of Damnjan's that employ a leftist political iconography, but also in seemingly "neutral" or detached elementary paintings and meanders. It lies in the performance of autonomy as a non-affirmative or negative aesthetic that criticizes the existing.

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