

Experiencing Reigl's Weightlessness

*The basic premise of the creative process is the desperate desire to eliminate all the contradictions and limits of existence—personal, human, and cosmic—and to expand through a permanent revolution.*¹

“Reigl had been working on the abstract series *Mass Writing (Ecriture en masse, 1956-66)* when its jagged zones of paint began to expand and evoke fragments of the deconstructed body. She discerned the start of a new series, *Weightlessness (Expérience d'apesanteur, 1965-66)*, whose abstraction then yielded to the overtly figurative paintings of *Man (Homme, 1966-72)*.”²

Rectangles of roughly 45 by 35 inches, the *Weightlessness* canvases comprise the final subseries of *Mass Writing*. While the paintings of the *Weightlessness* series are readily distinguishable from the rest of her oeuvre by their relatively small size, they are also recognizable by virtue of Reigl's use of a well-respected painter's trick. For her earlier *Mass Writing* paintings, Reigl propped large, stretched canvases against the studio wall and troweled on the paint with upward motions. The ascending movement, preserved as rich texture, is accented by the occasional drip. In making the *Weightlessness* series, to reinforce the effect of the upward flow, Reigl applied thick layers of paint and then turned the wet painting upside down to dry, thereby adding the pull of gravity to the effort her arm would otherwise exert. With the canvas rotated back, the paint, flouting Newton's law of universal gravitation, sags and drips upward.

This sensation of weightlessness derives not only from the texture and the drips; the sharply divided forms of the paintings seem to rise from the canvas, equally defying the gravitational

pull. Escaping the pull of gravity was one of Reigl's main painterly concerns right from the start. The difference here is that until she named this series *Expérience d'apesanteur*, she had never stated it clearly. Why this sudden realization? What made this universally permanent condition an urgent problem to be solved?

Judit Reigl's crossing of the barbed-wire minefield that was the no man's land separating Hungary from "the West" in 1950 was the literal breakthrough that defined the rest of her formative decade. Re-enacting her flight to freedom over every canvas she touched, Reigl's paintings seem to project (*Total Automatic Writing*, 1954), explode (*Outburst*, 1955 – 57), spin (*Center of Dominance*, 1957 – 59), and extend (*Mass Writing*), beyond the border of the stretcher. During most of that period, Reigl lived and worked in tiny places. She spent almost seven years in a 120-square-foot Paris apartment on Parc Montsouris, where she could use half of a wall, which was just big enough for her to paint medium-size canvases. In 1957, she moved to Burg la Reine, a southern suburb of Paris, where she had a 170-square-foot room for her own use, with a wall that accommodated a modest gestural painting—as tall and wide as one can cover in a sweeping gesture of the arm. Six years later, Reigl moved further south to a barn in Marocussis that she transformed into her first real studio. From then on, although her compositions invariably exceeded their fields, she could and, almost exclusively, did work large, just as she had always wanted.

As Reigl's canvases increased in size during the course of the 1960s, her abstract forms incrementally grew anthropomorphic. Initially, her compositions came to resemble skeletons, then the skeletons were fleshed out to evoke the bodies of men. Then came a break—once again

literally—but this time of bones. Reigl’s right elbow had been shattered in a hit-and-run accident.³ Recovering slowly, Reigl was confined to her home. She needed to wear a plaster cast for six weeks and could hardly move her right hand for the better part of the year due to chronic tendinitis. She went on working but her body had to adapt to each specific task and, accordingly, the outcome was different. Home-bound and impaired, doubly limited in motion, in 1965 and 1966 Reigl produced a pair of “limited” series: her *Weightlessness* paintings and *Writing After Music* drawings are all small in scale and uncharacteristically intimate.

Confined to her home for much of the day, Reigl listened to the remarkably varied programs of France Musique, her favorite radio station. With her plaster cast and, later, her still-healing elbow resting on the only table in the house, she “transcribed” the music she heard in a neume-like, notational system of her own devising using a pen on sheets of letter-size paper. She also painted, the best way she could manage, crouching on the floor over the canvas. But this was nothing unusual: Reigl was adept at finding a new method for every series she painted. The *Weightlessness* canvases are about the size that Reigl could cover with a single swipe of her injured hand. Before asking her, I assumed that after her accident Reigl resumed working by drawing, and only over time, as her bones were mending, found her way back to painting. But she says that it was the other way around. For her, the act of painting is immediate and external, even explosive, whereas drawing—which she rarely did—remained an internal process. What eventually was to flow out of her, needed first to settle inside her.

Reigl had created much controversy by switching from abstraction to figuration in 1966 in her *Men torsos*. We know that there was no meaningful switch of any kind since Reigl made no

dogmatic distinction between abstraction and figuration. But were we to call orderly progress a switch, that nominal switch to figuration had already taken place in 1965. Seeing the work today, I would propose that on looking into her canvases Reigl caught and painted her own would-be reflections. In her *Man* series, Reigl painted—mostly—male versions of her own body as if she were looking into a dressing mirror. I think of the canvases of her “limited” series as vanity mirrors. Just big enough for closeups, we can see in them our face or, if we move, segments of our body. Framed by thickly applied dark colors, a bright moon-face seems to shine in the center of most *Weightlessness* paintings. My view is that for about a year before regaining full mobility and painting the controversial, oversize bodies of her *Men*, Reigl—without being aware of it—painted their heads.

Spending time with Reigl in the Marcoussis studio where the *Weightlessness* series was painted led me to try to reconstruct the manner in which they were done. We propped a stretched 45 by 35 inch canvas against the wall at the same spot where Reigl would have placed it fifty years ago. Putting myself in the uncomfortable kneeling position she had had to take to paint with her hand in the cast, I saw what she must have seen, and somehow felt the extreme discomfort she must have been so sensitive to back then. On viewing the canvas from close up, I asked Reigl whether she could see paintings as mirrors. Her reply was, “Perhaps, but not every painting.” Next, I asked her when she had started to think about her abstract *Weightlessness* paintings as heads, and furthermore, being her own reflections. She responded by stating that she had never looked at a canvas as if it were a mirror, or anything else apart from being the support on which to paint, and had never thought of her *Weightlessness* paintings as her own reflections. But then she continued by saying that nonetheless my question made perfect sense to her, because in describing paintings from the series, she often compared them to heads, and one canvas she particularly liked she always referred to as a “laughing skull.” Moreover, one distinctive *Weightlessness* painting clearly

depicts a human skull. While bending over her canvas in her studio in 1965, what would have made Reigl conjure a skull? Was it the still-fresh memory of her visit to the Marville ossuary with its famous open-air shed filled with thousands of skulls?⁴ Or was it her then-recent, potentially fatal accident?

Reigl wrote about the sudden appearance of the human body in an abstract canvas she painted in February, 1966.⁵ When looking at the ensemble of the *Weightlessness* series, I realized that this appearance was the result of a protracted process. To me, the canvases prove beyond any doubt that Reigl's first anthropomorphic series grew out of her repeatedly painting, albeit instinctively, her own reflections. Reigl, who didn't set out to paint body fragments or heads, may refer to them as such without having to see them in that way. They are not actually body fragments or heads, if not to the same extent as her *Man* paintings are not actually bodies—they are paintings. And if they are about anything which they were not explicitly until Reigl titled them as a group *Expérience d'apesanteur*, they are about the physical experience of the state of being weightless. Reigl had recently told me that in naming the series, her emphasis was on the first word; she was emphatically referring to her genuine experience of that incomparable, euphoric state.⁶ Because of her shattered elbow, Reigl—who since the early 1940's did not use standard painter's tools such as a brush or an easel—had to get down on the floor to paint her now smaller canvases; she then had contort herself for every motion of her right hand, assisted by the left. The immediacy, the uncomfortable proximity of the ground while painting, made mankind's Newtonian fix painfully manifest to Reigl, and she could no longer take the law of gravity to be an abstract notion. Her crouching position, augmented by the added weight of the plaster cast and the discomfort due to her broken elbow, and the explosive urge of being released from all that, is what must have sparked Reigl's acute awareness of the most fundamental impediment of our earth-bound species.

Given enough time, people get used to worse things than gravity. But there are accidents in life which can bring us face to face with what under routine conditions is just too obvious to realize. As means to countermanding her oppressive limitations and be able to paint, Reigl had to enter and make full use of the state of—at least virtual—weightlessness. Bending low, pulled by her own weight towards the ground, breaking free became essential. Uncomfortable as she must have been, and in spite of the acute pain she had to endure while painting, painting made her feel astonishingly light. The closer she bent to the ground, the more immune she felt to its gravitational pull. The *Weightlessness* canvases are portals to what Reigl experienced when painting them.

In writing this text, an old memory came back to me. In the fall of 1978 my friend, the painter Dado (Miograd Djurić, 1933 – 2010) explained why his favorite work of art was Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Dado said that every time he entered the Sistine Chapel, he could relive the elated terror Michelangelo must have experienced while painting a summit of Western art under the constant menace of falling off the scaffold. The human fleece with the purported Michelangelo head was the least of the horrors animating the painting. In every falling body depicted on the wall it was the painter himself who fell screaming into the darkest pits of hell, so convincingly rendered right beneath the scaffold by his own hand. Reigl once told me that the sight of a black and white reproduction of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* as a child was what made her decide to become an artist. Personally speaking, I see the *Weightlessness* canvases as if they mirrored ecstatic faces from the scene of some parallel Last Judgement of uniformly positive outcome, because my sharing in Reigl's experience of weightlessness reverses the fall. No more prospect of Hell, only Paradise; everything rises; freed from the pull of gravity the paint keeps sagging and dripping happily ever upward, and "people begin to fly."⁷

—Janos Gat, September 2018

¹ Judit Reigl interviewed by Claude Schweisguth, Paris, *Artabsolument* No. 4, Spring, 2003

² Marcia E. Vetrocq, "...between two states but belonging to none: The Paintings of Judit Reigl," in Judit Reigl: *Entrée–Sortie*, exh. cat. (Vienna: W&K Editions, 2013)

³ In the fall of 1965, Reigl and her companion proudly took their new Citroën 3CV vehicle on its maiden voyage. Near the town of Clermont-Ferrand (in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region), their car, that time driven by a friend, was blindsided by a speeding Mercedes Sedan. Their 3CV slid across the road with its rear smashing into a wall. The driver escaped with only a few scratches. Reigl, who was sitting in the passenger seat, had her right elbow broken. Her companion in the back, suffered a serious head injury and appeared to be almost dead by the time the ambulance had arrived. Their car was so utterly wrecked that it seemed miraculous that they survived. But because of how it caused her work to evolve, with hindsight and in jest, Reigl says that the breaking of her elbow was her "one lucky break."

⁴ A few years earlier Reigl visited the cemetery of the 12th-century Church of St. Hilaire in the town of Marville, where she encountered the haunting sight of a n enormous stack of skulls in a cage-like shed.

⁵ "Exclusively abstract painting. For 13 years. A certain mass writing against white background. From February 1966, this very same writing took, independently of or even against my will, an increasingly anthropomorphic form, producing human torsos. Imperceptibly at first, then more consciously after 1970, I tried to intervene, to underline the emergent aspect of these rising bodies." In *Judit Reigl*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Rencontres, 1974). The painting referred to is *Mass Writing*, 1966, 68 x 53.5 in.

⁶ In 2007, when a canvas from the series was exhibited for the first time in the USA, writing the captions for the catalogue that my gallery published—without asking Reigl first—I translated *Expérience d'apesanteur*, as *Weightlessness* because I thought that that idea was already conveyed in the shorter title.

⁷ As in Yves Klein's (1928 – 1962), *People Begin to Fly*, 1961.