

# Drape Decoded (A Fritz Kocher Essay)<sup>1</sup>

by Janos Gat

Judit Reigl has always regarded abstraction and figuration as one and the same. Her 1973 series *Drape/Decoding (Drap/décodage)* is pointedly both. Reigl fixed flux in monumental—130-by-95 inch—yet essentially weightless works that are not exactly paintings nor exactly prints. The artist made transfers from the deeply textured surfaces of the final twenty or so canvases of her just-abandoned *Man* series. Draping the paintings with thin fabric, she applied minute amounts of pigment that corresponded—as she later realized—to the muted palette of Cézanne’s *Bathers* and *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*. The uneven surfaces of the *Man* paintings imprinted an image on the draped cloth. The resulting *Drapes* also acquired something of Cézanne’s irregular, even warped perspectives.<sup>2</sup> As one writer describes it, “The decoding occurs when Reigl lifts the drape and finds the image, in reverse, carried through the cloth by the tempera. The emergent bodies of *Drape/Decoding* are incomplete, transparent in areas where bare fabric is exposed. Suspended unstretched, the figures appear to drift upward.”<sup>3</sup>

We could liken the *Drapes* to the Shroud of Turin, for they are identical in character—i.e. all shrouds—comparable in size if not shape, and painted from the back. The divinely diffused tempera of the shroud is matched by the expertly infused tempera of the *Drapes*. As a work of art, the venerable shroud stands on its own as well as apart: a true stroke of genius by a radical 14th-century master, who, in exhibiting a *readymade* avant le lettre, forecast the photographic process. While the shroud was most likely created as an ingenious fake—using a length of linen cloth already a century old—Reigl’s *Drapes* are indubitably authentic. She bought a full roll of long-staple Egyptian cotton from a wholesale supplier and cut the fabric to size with her own hand. As soon as the *Drapes* were completed, she exhibited the lot at the Galerie Rencontres in Paris and documented the process in a catalogue printed for the occasion.

Looking for another notable precedent for the *Drapes*, we might also make a case for St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin’s enchanting and justly adored mantle in Mexico City—with its miraculous imprint of Our Lady of Guadalupe—because of its matching technique and visual impact. The works resemble each other in immediacy and share the same uplifting aspect and color scheme. The figures depicted levitate in similar fashions: Reigl’s floating in cloudlike formations, those on the mantle encased in clouds. But Reigl’s *Drape/Decoding* series has no

religious connotations. Her works evince a secular miracle. Here the uncanny feat is not an act of fate; Reigl achieved the heavenly appearance in a workmanly manner, using an ordinary, heavy-duty housepainter's brush meant for applying whitewash.

Judit Reigl's text for her 1973 Drape/Decoding exhibition at the Galerie Rencontres, which I would call "Three Easy Steps to the Sublime (Single Use Instruction Manual)," read like this:

*1<sup>st</sup> step: Veil a rejected painting from the Man series with a light cotton sheet.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> step: Paint the visible side with tempera thin enough for the created imprint to be interior. (The color, in part, traverses the fine weave and settles as a light residue, and in part clots up against the structural reliefs and protrusions of the ruined work.)*

*3<sup>rd</sup> step: Unveil. (The painted side becomes the back, the imprinted the front.)*

Reigl explained her process in detail in the statement she wrote on April 28, 1973 for the catalogue of her exhibition at the Galerie Rencontres, which, with the reader's patience, I will quote at length:

*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 May 1972, I showed about twenty of these canvases called Man (1966-1972) at Rencontres. At the time, I thought to have had correctly analyzed the endeavors of my preceding six years. I believed I could draw two conclusions to advance my work:*

*1<sup>st</sup>, propel this man to full liberation, to flight.*

*2<sup>nd</sup>, make my painting more readable, more accessible.*

*During the fall of 1972, all this was belied by actual practice. For four months I kept ruining my canvases, without getting even a single one right. I had to stop. My analysis could not penetrate my subconscious, which is always game to bypass the orders given by the mind.*

*My initial breakthrough of 1966-1970, which stemmed from the revolt of the subconscious—as long as it was supported by the contribution of low values (G. Bataille), and as long as I was one of those who accumulated this eruptive force and whom are inevitably situated below (G. Bataille)—has itself become a wall. A wall, which gradually blocked the opening (1971-72) as I tried to direct this revolt, go beyond the contradictions, and reach the goal of liberation. My subconscious had abandoned me. I could no longer, in my practice, follow this Man taking flight in an Icarian escape. Was this a disguised search for the superman? The super-ego?*

*Simultaneously, my second conclusion brought me to crash head on against the world of rational utility, which cannot be abolished (G. Bataille). Another wall! Because, if we can take the first—the Icarian escape—as mere individual fantasy, the second prevents our entry into the real world, a zone that concerns us all, where we join the social and political spheres.*

*Now (February, 1973) I attempt to pass through this second wall. I staple see-through sheets over these men. Veiled they turn opaque, almost unwritten. From these obscure bodies, I lift the relief, or better—by touch, by stain—I undo the form, the momentum, the dynamism of the writing, the tension they create. I decompose, I decode, abolishing the black armature, these carcasses of protruding mass, indispensables until now, with their affirming heft and absolute contrast against the white background. I submerge. I paint on the top to appear on the bottom the sheets. I pass through utter defeat.*

*No certainty; no despair. Not accomplishment of any kind on the reverse side. Only the prospect of finding the flux of desire, a vibration of the flesh, the color that the Old Man of the Mountain and the Bathers so well knew how to capture.<sup>4</sup>*

This is Reigl's own analysis of her previous two decades of uninterrupted work, the course of which stands out even more sharply for having been sandwiched between two roughly half-year periods of painter's block. Reigl's first hiatus from painting, in 1954, ended in what she refers to in conversation as an explosion. Artistic explosion might be a more precise way of putting it, but even that term is too subjective to make any actual sense beyond the metaphorical: i.e. what the sudden release of immense pressure pent up within the artist must have felt like. Nevertheless, to talk about intangibles one must resort to metaphors and inevitably stray from the topic. Improbably and, needless to say metaphorically, the artist exploded. The fallout from this

explosion became her *Outburst* (1955-57) series, which vaulted this hitherto unknown painter to the forefront of abstraction. Reigl's gestural abstraction packed a New York School punch, much to the dismay of most French critics, who were appalled to see the unbridled power of her cosmically inclined paintings trump tame esthetics. Reigl's gestural work was well received elsewhere in Europe and was admired by her peers, but most French critics expressed their opinion of the work by not writing about it.

In 1972, after more than ten years of not showing her work locally, Reigl presented her *Man* series—six years in the making yet still in progress—to the Parisian public. The very critics who had largely ignored Reigl's abstract work for over a decade now were dismayed by her apparent return to figuration. What Reigl embraced as a breakthrough, they called a betrayal. Just as the young Poussin and Porbus in Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece*—in which masterpiece, as in *Man*, the image depicted is a human body emerging from a primordial ground—the critics, blinded by ideology, could not *see* what was right before their eyes.

When in her text Reigl describes her forceful handling of paint as *that very same writing*, we should believe her. The last works of *Weightlessness* (1965 - 66)—the final subseries of Reigl's abstract *Mass Writings* (1956 - 66)—could be close-ups of her yet-to-be-realized *Man* paintings. Are not Titian's grand and complex figural compositions composites of pure abstraction, which we might discern only from up close? In 1966, Reigl does not return to figurative painting. She continues to paint as she always has, and when from the dark matter applied on the canvas a human figure emerges on its own, she simply takes a step back to see it better—and then allows the figure to remain. In painting the *Man* series, Reigl changes her vantage point, not her style or intention.<sup>5</sup> The abstract and figurative labels do not stick. There is no reversion to a previous style. There is change and continuity.

As Reigl puts it most eloquently in her essay, her work led her to a breakthrough: the human figure regained. The human body engendered new works that, as bodies tend to do, eventually piled up, to the degree that she could not keep up with them or develop them further. Reigl writes about a *gradually blocked...opening* (1971-72). It is as if her men, too many of them taking off at one time, blocked each other's flight. Reigl's explanation is at once neat and poetic, but looking at the paintings in question, I find her to be too critical of her working process, which means too critical of her self. She even identifies her subconscious as the culprit most likely responsible for her perceived failure. Of course, the artist is the absolute authority, but on the issue of culpability

I beg to differ. The airborne figures of 1971-72 project certitude and grandeur, even in their doomed flight. As the bodies morph from one canvas to the next, the series shifts from the figurative toward the abstract. The last men released in flight come equipped with wings, which in turn become fuselages that then become parallel lines in Reigl's next abstract series, *Unfolding* (1974-1985). This is a logical change of vantage points for those who can see with their eyes, and a confusing change of styles for those who cannot.

Though she has lived through, by, and for art—actually living art—Reigl has remained at a remove from the art world. This was not a conscious decision on her part. Although she never articulated a motive, we can now detect a practical, if unconscious one. It permitted her to safeguard her freedom—her freedom to work as the work itself would dictate. When I recently read these very lines to the artist over the telephone, she immediately said: “This was my luck: never in my life could I participate. Had I gotten married and had children, would it have been a better life? And please be careful—I would never use the word ‘freedom.’ I did everything throughout my life without thinking, often against my better judgment, contrary to my will. You cannot force a wild animal to behave as if it was tamed. As Béla Bartók's said, ‘you can't connect lightning to the power grid.’ I always had a feral nature. It is not that I would bite or bark, but that I would leave, seclude myself, withdraw. Of course I could never withdraw from what I never joined in the first place. I could not join; this was a birth defect of mine.” Reigl did not realize that in explaining why I should refrain from using the word “freedom” she had defined the concept better than I ever could.

However disconnected from the art world Reigl may have been, she knew that exhibitions were important, even necessary. She also knew that, however well her work might be received, exposing her world to the world at large would inevitably lead to a clash. In her 1973 text, Reigl claims that her own work—the *Man* bodies she could no longer put into flight—prevented her from painting. I would put the blame not on the paintings but on the timing of their exhibition, which might have been premature. Presenting 20 powerful paintings from a series still in progress, paintings that already contained more than anyone might possibly expect from a canvas, made it seem, at in her eyes, that she had set and achieved some kind of a goal.<sup>6</sup> Here we must note that for Reigl settling on any formula or strategy—i.e. *propel this man to full liberation, to flight and make my painting more readable, more accessible*—would be completely out of character. Making decisions and arriving at solutions would have severely limited Reigl's ability to work. She cannot follow instructions, especially from herself. Reigl's way—flux—precludes preconceptions. What Reigl said in 1985 about the human body, *the most*

*perfect instrument, the most tragic obstacle*, applies here to a fault. The head-on crash she refers to in her text was decidedly not against Bataille's *world of rational utility, which cannot be abolished*, but the one true obstacle; Reigl, in her Icarian flight, crashed into herself.<sup>7</sup>

*I attempt to pass through this second wall. I staple see-through sheets over these men. Veiled, they turn opaque...* Covering up the problem—literally pulling a white sheet over the carcass of a *problem-painting*—for Reigl meant getting to the heart of the problem. Like the venerable Chinese painter in Marguerite Yourcenar's *How Wang-Fô Was Saved*, Reigl had no choice but to paint her way out of a worse-than-death sentence—painter's block—which was imposed not by a mighty emperor but by her own temperament. For Reigl the veil worked both as a metaphor and as a blank surface on which to create—as in Yourcenar's tale—her vessel of escape. As Reigl told me, "I knew perfectly well while working that I was undergoing a profound self-analysis. Luckily, my cover-up, my obfuscation of one side emerged as something distinct, real on the other."

Reading the last paragraph of Reigl's commentary on *Drape/Decoding*—and I think I can speak for most readers—I knew whom she meant by "the *Old Man of the Mountain* and the *Bathers*" (Cézanne), but I can't say that I understood the exact relevance of Georges Bataille's *contribution of low values and eruptive force... situated below*, or Gilles Deleuze's *flight of desire*, and *vibration of the flesh*. I had a fairly good idea of why Reigl stopped painting in 1972, but still had no clue as to exactly what enabled her to resume her work in 1973, or as she had characterized it, led to her breakthrough of draping her rejected paintings. In the course of an interview—really, an afternoon conversation—in August, 2014, Reigl answered my unasked questions by telling the story of the astonishing incident—some might call it divine intervention—which blasted her through that seemingly impregnable *second wall*.

"There was a movie house on Montparnasse, which must have opened after the war and kept functioning until the 1990s. The programs ran only for an hour, mostly newsreels. I found it rather fascinating, to go to the movies without the lure of a feature film, only the news, and a few shorts, documentaries. Giacometti has mentioned visiting the same movie house; it was important for him too... Because when he came out, he saw that everything looked different than before watching the film.<sup>8</sup> After the movies people appear to move differently... as in another dimension... Coming out of the movies Giacometti was transported to a brand new world. This is exactly what happened to me. One afternoon I saw a documentary movie, in which an Indian snake charmer with his double flute made the snake rise from the basket. And as I sat there,

tranquil, a gigantic slap, not painful but overwhelming, as if an enormous mass, hit me. I was struck, much like by a bolt of heavy voltage, by lightning, to the point that... I jumped and my seat bottom snapped back up, producing such a bang that everyone turned and were looking at me from all around. I had no luck. When I came in, I had found an empty spot, but people could hear this wallop from far away. The usher guarding the entrance ran up to me, alarmed...

Judged by the shock I felt, there was nothing metaphorical about the experience. Slammed by a ton, a stunning blow: exactly as snakebites are described. It did not penetrate from outside. What I felt emanated powerfully from within my core. I was never bitten by a snake, but I happened to be struck by lightning, and was knocked cold by a powerful current before. It felt just like it. Having had close calls on numerous occasions, I have to consider myself lightning-prone. The one time that I suffered a direct hit, I was at the Nagybalog artist's colony in 1944. Painting *en plein-air* with my fellow art student and friend Antal Biro, we were caught in a storm. As we were running toward a shelter, dragging our paint boxes and easels along, the world around us exploded in a flash as I was cut down by a spectacular—as my friend told me afterward—bolt of lightning. I credit the wood of the paint box and the easel, a kind of insulation, in saving me. I blanked out. My first memory is of the fuzzy beard and the frazzled expression of my friend Antal, frightened to death, believing me dead. Then, as he drew back and I could see better, I discovered that I had been thrown into a ditch and lay covered in mud, flat against the bloated carcass of a pig. Me being me, what came next to my mind was Baudelaire; his poem, *Une charogne (A Carcass)*. Fifteen years later in-Bourg-la-Reine, dumb or bold, I was trying to fix a wall-mounted electric clock using a switchblade. Standing on a stool, I accidentally stuck my knife into the current. Luckily, the knife had a wooden handle, with only the blade, which I barely touched, carrying the juice. Once again, the wood dampened the shock. I found myself some time later gathering my senses on the floor.

So as I jumped from my theater seat, I knew exactly what I had just experienced. The only difference was that this time, at the movie house, I remained fully aware of what happened to me throughout and did not lose consciousness, as I did both times before. Neither snakebite, nor high-voltage discharge, this was something equally powerful, but impossible to define. Except that later someone said to me: this sounds very much like what we call Kundalini. Who was that person? I guess someone who studied yoga or Eastern philosophy. This so called Kundalini is energy that derives, emanates, or projects from the loins, from down there going up... Now my whole painting is done that way by the way, always an upward lift, no other way but up. Kundalini, for good measure, is depicted as a coiled up snake at the bottom of the spine, and is

said to be experienced as an electrical current along it.<sup>9</sup> Possibly, my slight familiarity with yoga helped to bring this on... Still, this all came as a shock...three shocks in one...As I said, I had already been painting most series with upward motions, but after this time I went on doing it, instinctively, always...starting from all the way at the bottom, going all the way up, skyward...” My conversation with Reigl came about because in June 2014 I presented the *Drape/Decoding* series in New York, and this provided the occasion to reacquaint myself with her 1973 catalogue text. The exhibition was accompanied by a recorded performance of chamber music by the French composer Pierre Bernard—written expressly for *Drape/Decoding*—and two unforgettable live concerts by the composer John Zorn and his extraordinary ensemble. It is superfluous for me to say that people were deeply moved and, as a result, their senses were inevitably sharpened. The sounds enhanced vision as perceptibly as the visuals the sound. To my great surprise, between sets I kept overhearing the same remarks among the visitors. Everyone understood the concept of the *Drapes*, if not from looking with their own eyes, then from reading the press release, which suggested that we were to observe abstracted bodies as embodied abstractions. The visitors kept finding not only expanded bodies but also bloated faces. Upon further inspection, people also perceived scaled-down versions of the enormous figures, one in the center of each composition. (Here I must interject that observing clouds is the best primer for the consummate art amateur.) It was as if the blimp-like torsos were being piloted by these little men and women from right between the legs: homunculi unabashedly positioned in the lower realm of the loins. When I related the visitors’ remarks to Reigl, she was amused and told me that they were onto something. Of course, she had done none of this intentionally—after all, she was making rough impressions of oversize male torsos—but all her motions in doing this series ensued from a single powerful blast, like lightning, from *down below*.<sup>10</sup>

So Reigl told me her story, then said: “Everything in my life was like this, unforgettable and inexplicable, all randomly interlocking...as in the Jacques Monod title: by chance and necessity... just think about it... One goes to the most banal movie house, one which does not even show a feature, and everything clicks... I went to back to my studio and started the *Drape/Decoding* series by draping over the carcasses of my paintings.”<sup>11</sup>

The not-exactly-prints of the *Drape/Decoding* series are painted from the back. Painting from the verso is nothing original. In the Byzantine Empire, painting on the back of glass was a popular, low-cost alternative to standard icon painting. The technic was perfected during the Middle Ages in the Murano glassworks, and flourished again in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bohemia. Now best known as *hinterglasmalerei*, a Bavarian folk tradition, it was spread by ethnic Germans throughout Eastern

Europe in the 19th century. During his Munich period, Kandinsky appropriated the method on his way to pure abstraction.<sup>12</sup> These endearing folk icons were ubiquitous in German-speaking villages in Hungary but less so in cosmopolitan Budapest, and Reigl might or might not have encountered them, though her *Drapes* are similar in execution and luminosity. In Reigl's case, painting on what became the back of the canvas produced another unexpected effect: the bodies that appear in reverse on the recto tend to change sex.

That last point may need some additional clarification. When asked about gender identity in the *Man* series Reigl said, "There are female figures in *Man*, although much fewer than male. I know I painted more male figures, and I can find many different reasons but not one single purpose. Thinking about it, when I started the *Man* series, the figures were standing, both male and female. The later, levitating, flying or falling bodies somehow turned out all male. The female body seems less adept at flying... What could be of interest is that often the figures were inspired by classical sculpture. In art, especially with the Greeks, the female body is rendered differently. The men move; the female body is static. The Egyptian gods step forward; the goddesses sit. There is a long painterly tradition of the reclining nude. When at the age of twenty I painted women, they were always horizontal: nothing erotic; alone, in the sand, for example, but always lying down. Giacometti wrote in his diaries that his women were sculpted stationary and man walking. I am a woman who thinks—and for many paints—like a man, although I know that one is always both. In all cases, the female in me is actual, while the male is latent. Having been born in a female body, why make more of what I currently am?"<sup>13</sup>

Once the painting stage is done and the drapes are flipped over, most reveal—at least as I read them—a female imprint made by the underlying *Man* form, and a female in flight at that. This multiple reversal occurs in a quite straightforward manner. Loading a wide bristle brush (the first time Reigl touched a manufactured tool since her student years) with tempera (the only time she used that medium) of German manufacture (high quality yet unpopular and therefore remaindered and affordable, though she would have bought it anyway), Reigl marks her male body impressions. The pronounced armatures of undiluted and thickly laid oil paint rising from the stiff canvases of *Man* have the tactility of heavily muscled male torsos. Touching them one could in essence touch flexed muscles. Compared to the *Man* canvases, the diluted tempera used in the *Drape/Decoding* series make the works feel like a woman's soft skin. Moreover, the figures of the *Man* series, with a few exceptions, are just torsos, the sexual organs generalized, even sketchy: pronounced scrota suspended from the suggestion of penises. Following the

existing protrusions with tempera may have resulted in a seeming reversal of sex—i.e. scrota into pudenda.

What concerns us here has little to do with gender and everything to do with mutability, change: Deleuze's *vibration of the flesh and flux of desire*. Flux—which is fundamentally contrary to deliberate progress—is Reigl's element, and in 1972, according to her text, Reigl found herself separated from it by her undeniably solid body of work: a wall of her own making. She had painted herself into a corner. With her *Man* paintings displayed to advantage but misunderstood, at least by most French art critics, because of their figuration, Reigl was driven to want her painting to be more accessible. It was the only time in her adult life that, much against her grain, she made a conscious decision about how to paint. Planning in advance how to proceed with the *Man* series halted her in her tracks. Reigl did the best she could to remain spontaneous and keep her integrity, and that was to do nothing. She simply stopped painting.

Having duly followed Reigl retracing her steps, with hindsight, we recognize that she draws her strength from her own perceived setbacks. For Reigl—a Taurus with Aries rising—crashing head on into all the obstacles she encounters is a tried and true and sensible approach. In early 1973, spending an idle hour in a movie house instead of painting, Reigl was jolted *back* into action and sent *back* to her studio by a sudden kick from within, which made her to go forward with her work—ingeniously or in a stroke of genius—in reverse mode. The first time, in 1954, it took a metaphorical explosion to get her to paint again. The second time, in 1973, it was a snake-induced, re-experienced shock of electrical current, like a bolt of lightning. In both cases, Reigl found within her whatever it was that she needed to generate the necessary charge for proper ignition...the ignition of an engine!

A projected bite by a snake seen in a documentary short in a Montparnasse movie house recommended also by Giacometti is experienced as a third generation shock of electrical current—that itself reminded her of a bolt of lightning—which pushes Reigl to drape the cadavers of ruined paintings that show bodies of men who failed in their attempt to fly, putting an end to her painter's block, so a single stroke with a tempera-filled housepainter's brush can make her whole—meaning a working painter—again. This sequence of events—which sounds fantastic and nonsensical, more like a dream than the truth that it is—solves, at least for me, the riddle of the last paragraphs about *Drape/Decoding* in Reigl's analytical catalogue text of 1973. This is the story that animates those dense paragraphs, which stick out from the rest because Reigl wrote them in the present tense. Every paragraph, every sentence in the text has its own

animating story. They would all be equally true, and they would all sound equally fantastic and make no sense if taken out of their context. One's reality is another's fiction, and nothing will change that. By wanting to clarify, I may simply be obfuscating all the more.<sup>14</sup> In her writings, Reigl describes her practice in detail and relates all the relevant supporting history. I will not try to improve on that and therefore I am not able to conclude my essay with an adequate summary that conclusively answers all questions. At best I could passably paraphrase what Reigl has already said. So instead, I will try to reduce her all-inclusive working process to a plain formula. Comparing Reigl with her much-admired immediate precursor in the field of body imprint will not help. Yves Klein's *laisser la trace* figures connect to *Drape/Decoding* only superficially, as Klein's transfer of the human form is immediate. So rather than continuing with the obvious *Anthropométries*, glass icons, or various holy shrouds and mantles, I would like us to consider, as the given that is needed to formulate a workable equation, the frottage of Max Ernst.

It should not be overlooked when Reigl repeats that she “went beyond Surrealism through Surrealism.” Reigl's decoding derives, perhaps subliminally, from the exquisite works Max Ernst realized by applying the Surrealist technique of frottage. The smaller in scale the Ernst frottages were, the more powerful Reigl found them.<sup>14</sup> But for Reigl being Reigl, always larger than life, Ernst's finger exercise is blown up to massive size in her *Drapes*. This brings us back to Reigl's failsafe method of ignition: the inner blast, the burst of energy from within. To sum it all up, all factors, variables, and constants considered, I propose to decode Reigl's *Drapes* by this equation: Frottage + Outburst = Decoding. (*Frottage + Eclatement = Décodage*)

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<sup>1</sup> This essay's subtitle honors the schoolboy protagonist of Robert Walser's (1878 – 1956) first book, *Fritz Kocher's Essays* (1904). Having found my favorite passage of art writing in it, which is: *Nature really is great. The way it shifts colors, changes robes, puts on masks and takes them off again! It's very beautiful. If I was a painter, and it's not out of the question that I'll become one someday, since after all no one knows what their destiny may be...* in writing this essay I tried to adapt if not the inimitable Walser style, the Kocher point of view, his earnestness beyond sense or comprehension. (J. G.)

<sup>2</sup> I have recently discovered a possible cause for this uncanny connection. Beginning in 1954, during every fall Reigl and her companion, Betty Anderson, spent six autumn weeks in the Languedoc-Roussillon region. On one occasion—most likely in 1972—they were invited to be guests for about three weeks in a cottage owned by a Mr. Ravailles, a local vintner and founder of the future celebrated Domain de l'Hortus cooperative. Mr. Ravaille's property included the peak of the Pic Saint-Loup mountain across the valley. His own house was already wallpapered with commissioned “portraits” of his prize possession, and he asked the visiting artists the favor of painting him a few more. Reigl, who never carried art supplies when taking her yearly break, went to a stationery store and bought a cheap watercolor set. She and Anderson each did a series of mountain “portraits.” Reigl does not consider these to be part of her oeuvre, but enjoyed the hiking involved in trying to find the right views. This was the first and only time

since her student days ended in 1945 that Reigl painted after nature. No wonder she dreamed about Cézanne: the peaks of the Pic Saint-Loup and the Saint-Victoire, the same as the banks of the Hérault and the Arc rivers-if only from certain vantage points-were like twins.

<sup>3</sup> Marcia E. Vetrocq, “between two states but belonging to none: The Paintings of Judit Reigl,” in *Judit Reigl: Entrée–Sortie*, Vienna, W&K Editions, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *Judit Reigl*, Galerie Rencontres, Paris, 1973. The text continues with a description of Reigl’s *Guano* (1958-64) series, included in the same exhibition.

<sup>5</sup> Reigl found my idea of her simply changing vantage points not wholly without merit. She said, putting it in these terms, that she actually took a step forward after completing the *Drape/Decoding* series in a little known sub-series called *Decoding*. A dozen of these small-scale (30 by 45 cm) abstract works, which she cut out from rejected drapes, were displayed at the Galerie Rencontres as a visual footnote to the 1974 exhibition of the *Drapes*.

<sup>6</sup> For Reigl *achieve* is an expletive that signifies an ending.

<sup>7</sup> I have asked art historian Agnes Berecz, author of numerous essays on Reigl, to read my text. She made a remark which I quote here from memory: “Crashing into oneself is a liminal experience: a collision of body and mind, and also a confrontation with one’s own mortality. While Reigl’s painting practice deflects conclusions and resist categorization in the name of flux, it is also and always about the finality, the consequentiality, the irrevocability of bodies and matter. Hard to pin down and incontestably present, all of Reigl’s works are indeterminate yet determined attempts to be one with the flow of life without ever forgetting the inevitability of death. This is not duality, but omneity... this is why Reigl’s volumes breathe: in each painting we get to witness the workings of the various forces without which we would be looking at bad art—a carcass as Reigl says, truly inert matter.”

<sup>8</sup> *There was for me a profound chasm between my vision of the street and the photographic or cinematic vision. Instead of seeing a person on the screen, I saw vague black blobs moving. I looked at the people around me and as a result I saw them as I had never seen them before. . . . I remember very clearly coming out on the Boulevard du Montparnasse and seeing the Boulevard as I had never seen it before. Everything was different: depth, objects, colors and the silence... That day reality was completely revalued for me; it became the unknown.* Giacometti in a radio interview with Georges Charbonnier, published in *Le Monologue du peintre, entretiens*, Julliard, Paris, 1959. (Giacometti dates the event described to 1945.)

<sup>9</sup> The *Yoga Upanishads* (translated from the Sanskrit, Jean Varenne, Gallimard, 1990, Paris) describe Kundalini (कुण्डलिनी) as lying coiled at the base of the spine, represented as either a goddess or sleeping serpent waiting to be awakened. In Mircea Eliades’s *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Pantheon Books, 1958, New York) Kundalini is described as an unconscious, instinctive or libidinal force, or *mother energy or intelligence of complete maturation*.

<sup>10</sup> Agnes Berecz has made another observation: “*Lightning from down below*, is a phrase that refers to Reigl’s constant reversal of materials (material and immaterial, meaning support and subject/object). It brings to mind the directional shift in Reigl’s use of the recto of the canvas as well as the morphing of the male and the female in her work. The ‘down below’ replaces the head as a site of illumination. It evokes Bataille’s Acéphale—the meaning of the word, the notion behind the title of his review. It locates thinking, knowing and sensing at the lower end of the body—the other side; the opposite; the inverse.”

<sup>11</sup> In retrospect, it makes sense that *Drape/Decoding* came out of an experience at the movies. There are endless parallels: the projection of oversize figures, the drape that functions much like a screen, the concept of portable monumentality, and the virtual aspect of the support.

<sup>12</sup> Reverse glass painting also connects to various methods of trick photography in German expressionist film that employed plates of glass and to the widely used (since the 1930s) cinematic technique of rear projection, which, incidentally, produces a washed out image similar to the drapes.

<sup>13</sup> Quote from an interview with the art historian Denise Birkhofer, August 2014, for the essay, *Judit Reigl: Body of Music*, to be published in the catalog of the Judit Reigl retrospective at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> After the war Max Ernst painted a series tiny works, which he called “microbes.” Eighteen of them were exhibited at the Julian Levy Gallery, New York, 1947, and thirty were reproduced in the artist’s book *Max Ernst, Sept Microbes vus à Travers Un Tempérament*, Les Editions Cercle des arts (Marcel Zerbib), Paris, 1953.