Judit Reigl: Artist Biography

by Janos Gat

Upon seeing works from Judit Reigl's Center of Dominance series (1958–59), the great violist, Yossi Gutmann, exclaimed, "Here is someone who paints exactly the way I play. I don't produce the sound; the sound carries me. I don't change the tonality; the tonality changes me." Judit Reigl, who often applies musical terms to painting, said she could not have put it better, explaining, "Time is given to us as a present that demands equal return. When I paint, fully present in every moment, I can live every moment in the present. What I do, anyone could do, but nobody does. I turn into my own instrument. Destroying as I make, taking from what I add, I erase my traces. I intervene in order to simplify. The control I exercise in each stroke of paint is like the pianist's when touching a key. You are one with the key, the hammer and the wire. You are in a knot with the composer and the listener, forever unraveling. The chord matches your state and the sound your existence."[1]

The *flux* motif is paramount in the Reigl Saga. According to family lore, Reigl's father's ancestors were aristocratic refugees from revolutionary France, sheltered on the princely estate of Eszterháza. Her mother came from a Saxon settlement in northeastern Hungary that kept its German language and culture intact over eight centuries. At the start of World War I, Judit's father, entombed for three days beneath the rubble of an explosion at Przemysl, miraculously rose from the dead.[2] A prisoner of war in Siberia for six years after his resurrection, he escaped repeatedly and fought his way home through civil-war-torn Russia. He was among the last returnees, after seven years of absence, in 1921. He resumed his law practice—interrupted by the War—in Sopron and was named the district attorney of that county on the Austro-Hungarian border.

Judit Reigl was born in 1923 in the border town of Kapuvár, at the ramparts of which, historically, the East meets, or does battle with, the West. As an infant, Judit was terrified by people in black garb and threw a tantrum whenever she saw a priest, a nun, or a widow. This started when she was still being pushed in a carriage, a year before she saw her mother wrapped and veiled in black at her father's wake surrounded by black-clad mourners.

Judit's father died one day before the Christmas of 1926 from a heart condition he had developed in his temporary grave. His death was precipitated by the loss of the last remnant of the family

fortune—the opulent Bristol Hotel, his brother's property on the banks of the Danube in Budapest—due to criminal mismanagement by a once-trusted business partner. His dying words expressed his fears about his brother and his brother's five children turning into paupers.

In 1927, Reigl and her mother moved to Budapest to join a most unusual extended family. One of Judit's uncles was the Hungarian authority on early Byzantine music; the second a cobbler; the third a piano maker; the fourth a master toolmaker; and the fifth the engineer of a steam locomotive. Going back to the parents' marriage: a pair of brothers married a pair of sisters, so it made perfect sense for their children to be raised together. Judit, while an only child, acquired five "brothers"—cousins László, Iván Zeno, Endre, György, and Otto—which meant that she had to assert herself to compete with the stronger boys.

Reigl's very first sensation, that of being trapped in an alien body, is the one that she cannot help but remember. As soon as she became aware of her body, she longed to be liberated from it. Weighing herself against her big brothers and finding herself wanting, she longed to be set free from this essential predicament.

Judit's first question was about the moon: what makes it stay up there? As a three-year-old, she asked for Lake Balaton in moonlight and silver slippers for Christmas.

When Judit was born, the Reigls called a sunny six-room residence their home. Then their income vanished and they sold whatever they had not lost outright to pay off the Bristol debacle. During Judit's childhood, by exact count, the family moved forty times—always in haste, leaving their furniture and even her toys behind—into increasingly seedy neighborhoods and ever smaller and danker apartments. Judit said that she wanted to move to Paris, where all the "painterartists" live.

In 1931, Judit's mother remarried. They lived for almost a year in the southern town of Szeged before they all joined the extended family again. Although Judit now had a loving stepfather, there was no improvement in the overall precariousness of their situation.

To make a good impression, Judit's—then still future—stepfather gave her a coloring book and a sumptuous watercolor set for Christmas. She maintains it was by far the best set she has owned in her entire life. The next day, at noon to be precise, she sat down by herself in a sparse, white-tiled, sun-filled room and opened the tiered, wooden box that held the dazzling array of tubes.

Reigl says that she has a vivid memory of an uncanny peace and a palpable quiet slowly spreading through her. When she worked in her coloring book, Judit would not paint the way she was supposed to, within the lines, but instead turned the pages and tried out the various shades in a row on the blank sides. She mixed Prussian blue with cadmium yellow and, miraculously, got a delightful green. Carmine red and ultramarine resulted in the warmest purple. In the end, she mixed all the colors together into the excremental brown that she has avoided ever since.

During her stay in Szeged, the eight-year-old Judit was mesmerized by a family heirloom, a severe German devotional painting of the Holy Trinity. She could see it from her bed; her eyes were inevitably drawn to it. The clouds fascinated her. How could they float, appearing as if made of solid concrete, and with two rather clumsy figures reclining on them? Only the white dove at the very top of the picture made sense. She loathed the Father on the right, a menacing character wearing a papal tiara and a golden cape. Judit often cursed, as rudely as she could, the stern God who seemed to grow angrier with every blasphemy. She was ashamed of herself, fully aware of her mortal sin. While she felt no guilt, she knew she would have been found guilty and kept cursing all the more determinedly because it was forbidden. She always had to do the opposite of what she thought was expected of her.

“Everything changes,” but Reigl’s contrariness never did. Throughout her life, outside pressures triggered outbursts from within.

As a little girl, Reigl read all the time. She traveled the world, first alongside the heroes of the complete works of Jules Verne, and later followed itineraries set by Cervantes and the others in what was considered a classical education. Throughout her childhood, she kept returning to the ten-volume *Illustrated Tolnai World Almanac*, a digest of all history, including “art.” She was about ten years old when she first set out to make art. She still recalls the difficulty of trying to turn kindling into a human figure using a jackknife. The wood kept splitting and the result was frustrating. At that time, the family lived on the outskirts of Budapest on the border of that neighborhood’s lively red-light district. A stove setter whose shop was near the whorehouses on Happy-Valley Street gave her a ball of fireclay; she let it dry and had an easy time carving it, as if it were a block of sand- or limestone.

Because the family moved so often, Judit completed her twelve years of schooling in eight different places. For her third grade she won a scholarship to the Szalvator Institute, a Catholic boarding school in a working-class neighborhood. On the first day of school, a nun sketched Hell

on the blackboard and Judit was made to understand that, according to the religion, it was her likely destination. The nuns had a very particular take on child rearing. On All Saints Day, they took the girls for a picnic in the freezing cemetery. Judit, who was intrigued by death, kept nagging the nuns with endless questions. She was told that they were snacking among the headstones to get on familiar terms with the dead, which meant that she had to learn how to keep quiet. Judit, ever inquisitive, stole away into the funeral chapel. There, in the back, she found two mortuaries, empty save for the open coffins on the biers. To the left she saw a little boy, his head bandaged in white. She read his name and age written in bold letters on a tag. The boy was seven years old, just like Judit. At that moment, the boy's mother burst into the room screaming, "That is not my child!" Judit sneaked away to the other bier. For years to come, she was haunted by the sight of the dashing young man, twenty-six and stylishly dressed, laid out there. She recalls his greased hair was parted in a straight line and combed to stick smoothly to the sides of his head like Rudolph Valentino.

From a surprisingly early age, Judit had one over-arching conflict: how to reconcile sex and a God who finds it a punishable offense. Her head swarmed with graphic imagery prohibited to children and, in the opinion of God as refracted by the nuns, perhaps even to adults. Before her first communion, Judit was taken to confession. If there was one thing that set Judit apart from every other child, it is that she would not—and could not—ever even try to lie. She admitted cursing God and having sinful thoughts, but found the process flawed; impure thoughts flashed through her mind the moment the confession was over. From then on, she tried to skip Mass, as her classmates would gym class. It is not that she was afraid of divine retribution; she accepted it, yet was tormented by it. She found relief only in reading or painting and drawing. Judit had fond memories of her second grade at a progressive model school in Szeged, where the children were free to do almost anything they wanted. In art class, she painted a perfect circle with a sponge to enormous acclaim, in the Giotto mode.

In 1933, in keeping with her stepfather's lofty aspirations, Judit was sent to the prestigious Sophianum of the Society of the Sacred Heart, where most of the nuns took pleasure in enforcing the straight and narrow. Judit abhorred orders and never got along with nuns and their arbitrary righteousness, more human than divine. She did look up to her professors; they in turn managed to get Judit readmitted, in view of her academic brilliance, after the nuns expelled her for insubordination. One of the best high schools for girls in Budapest, the Sophianum catered mainly to the wealthy, but also accepted, free of charge, talented pupils of modest background—at least as Judit understood. It took her a long time to find out that she was the only *déclassé* in

class, and that it took all of her stepfather's not inconsiderable charms to keep her in school, while deferring her monthly tuition in perpetuity. To be schooled for most of the year at an elite institution among the offspring of the upper crust and then taken on organized vacations by the municipal charity for proletarian children must have seemed a matter of course to Reigl. Her long walks between Budapest's lowly outskirts, where she lived, and its stately center, where the school stood—a few steps from the National Museum—were twice-daily samplings of a cross section of the city's population. Streetwalkers, medical students, musicians in the Gypsy ghetto, boulevardiers—every detour that she would take gave her a view of a different side of life.

In 1941, Reigl was admitted—by a rare unanimous decision, which allowed her to choose István Szönyi as her master—to the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest, first on partial, then on full scholarship. She began to visit the Museum of Fine Arts, which housed the impressive old master collection of the Eszterházy family. She spent hours with El Greco, Goya, Raphael, Bruegel, Veronese, and the magnificent *Portrait of a Youth* attributed to Giorgione. She saw displays of Egyptian art and Leonardo's drawings. Elsewhere in Budapest, the Hatvany collection held important XIXth century works—Courbet's *The Origin of the World* hidden among them. There were Hungarian Barbizon and Nabi artists, and others who were connected to the Munich or the Julian academies, but Hungary was not the place to see modern art. The best Reigl could manage was a gallery exhibition with reproductions of works by Van Gogh and Gauguin.

In the library of her musicologist uncle, Reigl found the collected fragments of the Pre-Socratic philosophers.[3] She leafed through the surviving works of the thinkers of antiquity, surprised by how their arguments spoke for her, and how their visions anticipated her own. The sentences of Empedocles, Heraclites and all the other greats seemed logical where intact and mystical where broken—the more obscure, the more illuminating. Axiomatic, thus inherently true, the ancient texts opened a way for her, just as her favorite paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts had. Here she stumbled upon what became her mantra: *panta rei*. This experience, of obeying Rilke's command, "You must change your life," from his poem, *Archaic Torso of Apollo*, was to repeat a decade later, when she discovered the other great compilation that spoke to her directly—the *Vedas*, one of the sources of early Greek thought.

As opposed to her hitherto stifling education, the Academy felt wonderfully alive. Reigl could paint as she wished. Her fellow students at the Academy—Antal Biro, Lipót (Poldi) Böhm, Tissa David, and Sándor Zugor—became her lifelong friends.[4] The Academy of Fine Arts, liberal and tolerant by tradition, was the only institution of higher learning in Hungary that had not enforced

the restrictions of the so-called "Jewish Laws." In the outside world, there was no place where she could fit in, Hungary having had the distinction of being the first proto-Fascist state in Europe. During the Nazi occupation, she had to face daily hardship and hunger, but was spared the fate of her Jewish compatriots.

Towards the end of the War, when much of Budapest was shut down by nightly air raids, some of the Academy's activities were transferred to the artists' colony at the Koháry castle, an abandoned property of the King of Bulgaria in northern Hungary. With the front fast approaching, Reigl made hundreds of oil-on-paper landscapes and studies from life and, despite the chaos outside their haven, she and her group of friends managed to have an almost idyllic existence—with minimal sustenance. In October 1944, SS soldiers requisitioned the castle and locked the art students in a cattle-car attached to a train that, after a week, miraculously made it to Budapest.

After the war, Reigl continued her studies at the Academy. She and her group of friends were among the first to understand the importance of the great Hungarian painter, Csontváry, whose canvases had been kept in a basement that flooded during the siege of Budapest in 1945.[5] They fought for restoring the works and it counted as an outright rebellion when they unrolled his enormous paintings and hung them on the walls throughout the school. This improvised Csontváry "retrospective" was the fruit of their enthusiasm and could have only taken place in the short-lived democratic interlude that Hungary experienced after the War. Reigl's group felt that they had a voice, though some of their professors—and, surprisingly, most of their classmates—derided their campaign for this most eccentric of Hungarian artists as "crazy fans of a mad painter."

Reigl spent most of the 1946 school year handling Csontváry's paintings, assisting the restoration of his masterpiece, *The Lone Cedar* (1907). This was the first time that she had a master's brush strokes at her fingertips—her great lesson at the Academy. The pure colors and thick impasto of her own paintings between 1956 and 1972 come, if not "from," then "through" Csontváry. Her art studies were mostly tactile and, as to her method, she soon abandoned using brushes in favor of applying the paint with improvised tools or directly with her fingers.[6]

In October 1946, Reigl and her friends left to study Italian art at the Hungarian Academy in Rome. Sent not by the state but privately by their professors, they spent four months in Vienna waiting for their Italian visas. Although they lacked ration cards and were literally starving, the

opportunity to see the paintings of Bruegel, Correggio, and Rubens and to attend concerts made up for the deprivation they endured. A new world opened to them in a city that otherwise they found bleak, filled with hostile crowds expressing personal loss over having lost the war. There were a few bright spots: Fitz Wotruba took them under his wings and arranged, in time for Christmas, for the Ministry of Culture to buy a painting from each literally starving artist. Given up all hope, guided by a band of soldiers-turned-smugglers they tried and failed to cross the border illegally; the mountains were impassable with snow. Dejected, they returned to Vienna where miraculously their visas were waiting.

In January 1947, they arrived in Rome. In Italy, they had their "Renaissance." Spending their tiny stipend on art supplies, for extra income they drew portraits of tourists at the cafes. On a trip to see the mosaics of Ravenna, they met the young English artist, Betty Anderson, whose train ticket from London had been bought by her teacher and friend, the sculptor Henry Moore.[7] Except for one short interval apart, Reigl and Anderson would spend the next six decades together. They remained in Ravenna for a while, sleeping in a shack in the pine forest that was the site of Dante's descent into Hell in the *Divine Comedy*.

Reigl and Anderson returned to Rome and then later the whole group of friends hitchhiked back up to northern Italy. On their way to the 1948 Venice Biennale, the first since the end of World War II, they made an *ad hoc* pilgrimage to Piero della Francesca sites. They were stunned by the Arezzo frescoes as expected; duly transported by the Masaccio and Masolino frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence; and humbled by Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padova. In Venice, of course, they found the Venetians, which allowed Reigl to experience the abstract concept of a singularity. Titian—"a universe apart"—Giorgione's *Tempest*, and Carpaccio, with "light from within," were background to concurrent shows of important works by Cézanne and new works by Picasso, which formed the foundation of what was Reigl's long-delayed encounter with contemporary art. At the end of October 1948, Reigl left Anderson in Venice and, believing a rumor about her mother's supposed illness, returned to Hungary just days before the drop of "Stalin's guillotine."

For a very short while back in Hungary, Reigl imagined that she was going to build a better world. She was given three commissions, the first for a mural with the title, *Workers and Peasants, Unite!* The completed study of an embracing couple—coyly-smiling, muscular, young men—did not sit well with the authorities. The second, for a mural entitled, *Liberation*, for the Ministry of Defense, depicted a dancing crowd. When she was asked about the whereabouts of

the tanks and soldiers of the victorious Red Army, she said in all earnestness that, as the War was over, the soldiers had joined the crowd in civilian clothes. The third commission, which sounded more like an order, was for a mural-sized poster of Stalin and Rákosi for the "Fifth Free May 1st International Workers' Day" celebration. She refused, though it was made clear to her that her access to art supplies depended on this commission. Reigl was invited to join the Communist Party, but the concept of a classless society through the dictatorship of the proletariat made no sense to her—nor would any kind of dictatorship for that matter. She knew that, despite the danger this represented, she had to leave.[8]

After numerous attempts, Reigl escaped from Hungary on March 10, 1950. She walked, hitchhiked, took trains, and crossed nine borders—counting the occupation zones—illegally until, on June 25th, she arrived in Paris. Some of her friends of the previous years were already there. They—more than the city itself or her supposed French ancestry—would have made Reigl's "great escape" feel like a homecoming had it not been for her recognition that "one prison cell is exchanged, at most, for a more agreeable one." Friends took her around to galleries, where she admired works by Wols, Max Ernst, Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet. And she was "shocked" by her first encounter with Georges Mathieu, a small painting in the window of the Galerie Pierre Loeb that seemed to carry an electrical charge—of the positive polarity.

In 1954, Reigl was invited by André Breton to join the Surrealists and she attended their meetings a number of times. That was the only time she ever came close to being associated with a group. Reigl's only affinity, and only in retrospect, was with the geographically remote New York School.[9] She knew about the works of the Abstract Expressionists, but until the early 1960s did not see any. Reigl's own gesture paintings are said to have been triggered by the 1956 Hungarian uprising, except that she started them in 1955. Even unconsciously she was not reacting, but predicting. The paintings came as they are titled and, as what they are, in an *Outburst* (1955–57).

Reigl always found names defining and to be defied. If her patronym, from the French word *règle*, meaning "measure" or "rule," determined her work, the name of her birthplace determined the course of her life.[10] Kapuvár translates as "Gate-Fortress," at once passage and barrier, as in the *Entrance/Exit* series (1986–88). While Hungary's other borders have changed over the centuries, its westernmost line of demarcation remained in place, porous or impervious by decree. The West ended and the East started at Kapuvár. From Reigl's bulwark of a hometown,

raised to stop Eastern invaders, the West was but a few steps away. Reigl reached it by crawling over a ladder that spanned the chasm—the *mindfield*—between twin rows of barbed wire.[11]

The great poet, writer and art-theorist, Marcelin Pleynet, has pointed out that "Reigl, having crossed one border laid with mines, went on crossing borders ever since."[12] When she transgressed the sacred divide of abstraction/figuration in the *Man* series (1966–72), the judgment passed by art critics in France matched in severity what would have been meted out by a Hungarian court had she been caught by the border guards in the act of breaching the Iron Curtain. Reigl, in her own words, "left one country to belong to none."

Statelessness renders the temporary timeless, which is the path to permanent timeliness. Reigl has always tried to emulate—and not only in itinerary—the greatest Eastern conqueror of the West, her idol, El Greco, who gave Byzantine imagery a most serene Venetian twist in the ecstatic light of Spain. Not bound to a locality, nor by extension to earth, both are, to paraphrase Tibor Hajas, among their contemporaries "as spaceships among race cars."[13] They escape gravity.[14]

Reigl, the extraterritorial, is the envoy of an extinct paradox—the Dual Monarchy. Cleverly put: on her *promenade* (Walser) around the *castle* (Kafka) she kept bumping into *sleepwalkers* (Broch) *without qualities* (Musil). And she "literally" saved a book after an *Auto da Fe* (Canetti). In 1945, after the library of the German Lyceum of Budapest was torched and plundered, she found among charred parquetry another "life-changing" volume, a bilingual paperback of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*.

Hungary's main contribution to Modernism was in photography. Between the Wars, Hungary spawned a distinguished generation of photographers and Reigl must have learned from what they had learned from. In her *Unfolding* series (1973–79), fine washes of paint are applied from both sides of the light linen canvas. There is endless depth, but within the surface emulsion, as in a photograph.[15] Photographs are cutouts of the world. Reigl never fills, but, as a photographer who frames segments of the endless, crops her canvases, crossing out what she discards as if on a contact sheet. Reigl is fully ignorant of the particulars of what she once jokingly referred to, paraphrasing Pleynet, as the "one-eyed method," so this must be—as so much about her is —"objective chance."[16]

Reigl relates less to Hungarian visual art than to Hungarian poetry. In her immersion in art, in her attitude to life, in her fluid pursuit of and independence from form, and even in her choice of titles, she is deeply indebted to Attila József.[17] And she has everything in common with János Pilinszky, who spent the year 1947 with Reigl and her friends at the Hungarian Academy in Rome.[18] The most insightful description of Reigl is Pilinszky's remark about himself: "My language is tonguelessness." They both have a distinct, concentrated output in the style of never settling on one.

Hungarian art is distinguished by its "cutoffness." It keeps abreast of the times through hearsay. Its view is from the innermost recess of Plato's cave and that is why, by leaving Hungary, an artist leaves Hungarian art behind. Thus, as the art historian Eugene Kolb wrote, "The one trait all leading Hungarian artists share is the lack of a common ground."[19]

In keeping with tradition, the other Hungarian of the post-War international scene, the painter whose biography overlaps Reigl's, Simon Hantaï, is her exact opposite. Hantaï collapses the pictorial field, crushing the paint-soaked canvas in his hand, a method he first learned in the village of his childhood, and which became his trademark folding; Reigl expands the pictorial field by simply walking along the canvas—each step into the unknown re-treading the first step she ever took—with *Unfolding*.[20] Reigl and Hantaï, the same as their approaches, complement one another.[21]

Reigl kept away from the art world, save for what was absolutely necessary in order to exhibit periodically and properly. She has never been willing to produce for the art market and she still ignores it, which means that, until a few years ago, she was reciprocally ignored. It suited Reigl, who would prefer her work to remain anonymous, detached from any definition, including her name. She says, "I was always very fortunate in my misfortune, which forces me to turn the negative into positive." Reigl's overall disassociation allows her to matter. In the technical aspect, she can't help but flout practice. Ingrained by nature to go against the grain, she used high-explosives—adding aluminum dust to water—to paint her *Volutes, Twists, Columns, Metal* (1982–83) and *Hydrogen, Photon, Neutrinos* (1984–85) series.

"Art is Absolute Hieranarchy."[22] Reigl's vision is uncannily conveyed by the 1977 Charles and Ray Eames film, *Powers of Ten -Cosmic View: The Universe in 40 Jumps (a film dealing with the relative size of things in the universe and the effect of another zero)*, in which the camera zooms out from a man on a family picnic to the outer galaxies, then back through his skin and flesh to

the elementary particles. To get from the cosmic *Center of Dominance* series (1957–59) down to *Neutrinos,* Reigl "created *Man*" and then rose back up through the figures of the *Body in Plural* series (1990–92) and the hollowed forms that populate the outer space of *Unfolding Phase IV, Anthropomorphism* (2008). "A particle of the universe / Is the Universe."

To understand Judit Reigl's seven decades of work in progress, read Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter*. See it not as a farewell to writing, but as a foreword to a staggering opus. Without having read the *Letter*, a short text Reigl wrote about leaving Hungary[23] approximates von Hofmannsthal's throbbing, resounding universe in his grand allusion to Baudelaire's "the language of flowers and silent things."[24] Solving the Lord Chandos Problem, that Creation dumbfounds creators, is Reigl's daily routine.[25] Hearing makes one speak about why one should be silent.[26]

When she was a child, Reigl thought that she would have more freedom were she in a male body. Then, as an adult, in a body at once fully male *and* fully female, one that would exceed the limitations of both sexes. By now, at any rate, Reigl has long been liberated from the constraint of gender because of and through painting.[27] It only stands to reason that having used her body as a tool to paint all her life, in her latest series she, with her anthropomorphic projections, breaks free of the limitations that the human body represents *a priori*. Being, from the outset, subject, material and tool, this is not a resolution of an inner conflict, but her means of addressing what comes next. Can the *State of Weightlessness*—the title of a series from 1965–66—offset the still burning memory of her first conscious moment?

For Reigl, painting was not a choice—it was her way, although not her way out. Her paintings do not demarcate a path; they are the steps she takes. Continuity is cyclical. In life, there are no forward steps, only the illusion of progress.[28] Reigl's heartbeat is one with the universal rhythm.[29] Each one of us can only descend deeply within ourselves. But then, the more profound our descent, the greater is the force by which we are pushed back up and, the faster, to breathe. Completion is death; nothing we embark on should ever come to an end. Reigl's oeuvre is her Testimony to the Unknown, to Flux. It embodies—and keeps—unfolding.[30]

Note from the author In quoting from and paraphrasing remarks Judit Reigl made to me in conversations in 2009–10, I try to follow János Pilinszky's *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton* (1977), the essay/fiction that was very loosely based on similar "conversations," not with my

then future wife, Sheryl Sutton—who was on tour with Robert Wilson at the time—but with me. In both cases, by "conversations," I mean that I had the great privilege to listen, while trying my best not to interrupt. (Pilinszky was a close friend of Reigl in Rome in 1947–48 and of mine from the time I met him in 1967, until his death in 1981.) The form of this essay, with text and footnotes at once independent, parallel, and interchangeable, comes from Mikhail Zoschenko's (1894–1958) magnificent *Youth Restored* (1933)

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[1] I was surprised to hear how Reigl's words here matched my father's—József Gát's—in his classic *Piano Methodology,* Corvina, 1954: "The essence is not interpretation; to achieve a singing tone, the touch must eliminate the noise of the attack, of the relay mechanism and the percussion of the hammer."

[2] Przemysl was the Verdun of the Eastern front. Its fortress, the third largest in Europe and updated to contemporary warfare, was lost and retaken a number of times during WW I. At its first surrender by the Austro-Hungarian forces on March 22, 1915, the Russians captured 126,000 prisoners.

[3] The slim *Ancilla* that accompanied the two massive volumes of Hermann Diels's 1903 edition of the *Fragments of the Pre-Socratics*.

[4] Antal Biro (1907–1990), Lipót (Poldi) Böhm (1916–1995), and Sándor Zugor (1923–2003), all painters, and Tissa David (b.1921), a film animator. In 1950, David and Reigl escaped from Hungary together. Simon Hantaï (1922–2008) was also a classmate. Hantaï and Reigl had a two decades long, if at times complicated, friendship.

[5] Tivadar Csontváry-Kosztka (1853–1919), who developed his own visionary expressionism, is often called the "Hungarian Rousseau," but for Hungary he is Cézanne, Gauguin and *Le Douanier* rolled into one. This was the second time that his almost complete oeuvre of close to a hundred works had to be rescued. The first was a few days after the artist's death. A young architect, Gedeon Gerlóczy, happened to pass by the barn where the enormous, fine quality, and thoroughly painted—thus impermeable—canvases were to be auctioned off for use as canopies and packing material. It was enough for him to partially unroll one painting to buy the whole lot.

[6] Reigl says, "A formal work environment and proper brushes may have been appropriate in more formal times. Ours is the chaotic era of the lowest common denominator. Reality is basic. To aim high, you must stay low," as in the Hermetic, *That which is below is like that which is above that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing* (in Isaac Newton's superb translation). "One cannot be prepared for Chaos. I paint where I live and my implement is my body. I could think of my week-long search—that was in the early 1950s—for a piece of iron, a 'just-so bent curtain rod,' the metal bent, if you will, to my will, as the prelude to the oeuvre. But for me, there is no preparation: I plunge in."

[7] Betty Anderson (1918–2007) was painter, sculptor, and intellectual in the deepest sense of the word, with an encyclopedic knowledge of music, literature, philosophy, and art. The guiding spirit of Galerie Rencontres, Anderson was instrumental to every aspect of Reigl's career.

[8] Upon her return to Hungary, Reigl's passport was confiscated. Reigl, like almost all Hungarians after 1948, was not permitted to travel to the West. The Moscow scholarship that she was offered instead, a rare honor for the times, she refused—which, in turn, was a brave act for the times. The art that she would have wanted to see—modern masterworks in the Tretiakov Collection, the Rublev icons—was locked away, and she was repelled by the false "theories" of Zhdanov. (Socialist Realism, the meaningless definition of which was "to render reality in progress.") As Reigl said in an interview with the painter, Christian Sorg (*Evident/Hidden/Actualized/Latent*, Document sur, no. 2/3, October 1978): *At first, the border appeared to me in 1950 as a hermetically sealed door: padlocked. I had to force it open at any cost, or die there trying.*

[9] Regarding the New York School, although "affinity" is the polite term and "fits" would make a strong point, the truth is elsewhere. Reigl had almost nothing in common with her contemporaries in Paris and much with the attitude, the spirit, and with certain works of some in New York. The answer to the question of Judit Reigl's awareness of the pictorial shift during the 1950s in the USA is beside the point. (…) Nothing suggests the influence of these artists on Judit Reigl in any way (…) but it might be considered for a quick schematic layout of the overall pictorial framework. (Marcelin Pleynet, Judit Reigl, exhibition catalog, Galerie Rencontres, Paris, 1975, p. 11–12). Objectively, subjectively, and because of the assonance, I would situate Judit Reigl between Franz Kline and Yves Klein. This affinity is most aptly defined by the following put-down of gestural painting by Gregor von Rezzori in The Death of My Brother Abel (Der Tod meines Bruders Abel, C. Bertelsmann Verlag GmbH, Munich, 1976, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, Viking Penguin Inc., 1985, p. 518). Snails produce their houses at the command of their species; they have no biological choice, as it were; but still, their houses have individual peculiarities. One can tell by the changing styles of art-historical eras that human beings obey such biological orders in the way they express themselves collectively, (…) something breathing, pulsing through the world, making mankind lean alternately in one direction, then the other, like a wheat-field in the wind (and the wind, as if sparked by Aiolos' divinely musical sentiment, truly blows first from here, then from there into various cultures).

[10] Reigl could never abide by rules, except her own. As in the poem she wrote in 1985: *Mon corps joue le jeu dont / je suis la Règle. / Règle du jeu, je de Reigl / Déterminé. Déterminant. / Une corpuscule de l'Univers. / Une corpuscule de l'univers/ C'est l'Univers.* "My body plays the game of / which I am the Rule. / Rule of the game, I of Reigl / Determined. Determining. / A particle of the Universe. / A particle of the universe / Is the Universe."

[11] *Mindfield* is the title of a book by the great beat poet, Gregory Corso (1930–2001), published in 1989 by Hanuman, New York.

[12] Marcelin Pleynet, *Judit Reigl, Unfolding and History*, exhibition catalog, Kálmán Makláry Fine Art, Budapest and Janos Gat Gallery, New York, 2008.

[13] Tibor Hajas (1946–1980) was, by current consensus, the greatest Hungarian poet/writer/artist of his generation. Conceptual and Actionist as an artist, as a poet and a writer, he is venerated for his precise—pushed to the limits to the point of utmost cruelty—use of language. The quote is from his unpublished diaries.

[14] As in Proust (A la recherche du temps perdu, A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, Pléiade, Volume I, p. 555): To take to the skies, it is not necessary to have the most powerful of motors, one must have a motor which is capable, instead of continuing to run along the earth's surface, intersect the line it was following with a vertical one, converting horizontal speed into lifting power. Similarly, the men who produce works of genius are not those who live in the most delicate atmosphere (…) but those who have had the power, ceasing suddenly to live only for themselves, to transform their personality into a sort of mirror, in such a way that their life, however mediocre it may be socially (…) is reflected by it, genius consisting in reflecting power and not in the intrinsic quality of the scene reflected (…) They in their fine Rolls Royces might return home (…) but he, in his modest machine which had at last "taken off," soars above their heads. And in Joyce (Ulysses, Episode 12, Cyclops, p. 338) And the last we saw was the bloody car rounding the corner (…) when, lo, there came about them all a great brightness (…) and they beheld the chariot wherein He stood ascend to heaven. And they beheld Him in the chariot, clothed upon in the glory of the brightness, having raiment as of the sun, fair as the moon and terrible that for awe they durst not look upon Him. And they beheld Him (…) amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness at an angle of forty-five degrees over Donohoe's in Little Green street like a shot off a shovel. Amended by Pilinszky: There are laws that cannot be circumvented. For flight, one must keep in mind gravity; flapping one's arms wildly in the air will only convince one's own ilk of ascent. (The Birth of a Work, lecture to students, 1946).

[15] The musicologist—and pianist—Benjamin Perl noted the similarity between Reigl's "traces of signs" in the Unfolding series and Mozart's idiosyncratic handwriting, in which dashes—used up to four at the time—replace most punctuation marks. What we have (…) is not writing as a process of organized thought in coherent sentences, but (…) a visual recording of live speech. Reigl painted much of the Unfolding series listening to Mozart. What we have is a visual recording of not just the Universe, but of music as universal as ever made. Perl's remarks on Mozart equally apply to Reigl and her "Absolute Hieranarchy:" (…) the rules of syntax and punctuation were perceived by Mozart (…) as a kind of parental fetters, which had to be shaken off. A full stop marks a neat separation between two ideas, and, in a way, breaks off the continuity of discourse. Commas, semicolons and colons create hierarchical relations between phrases and words, establishing a clear system of significance. Written language thus becomes a representation of a well-ordered society, neatly divided according to rank and social standing. The dash, as Mozart uses it, blurs all these distinctions. It creates a separation, which is needed to make the text intelligible, but fixes no hierarchy. Continuity is preserved in spite of separation. In Mozart's letters (…) there is often a flow of fragmentary utterances, separated by dashes, none of them a fully shaped idea, but, in combination, presenting a clear train of thought. (…) Dashes designate pauses in speech, breathing-pauses having no definite grammatical significance. Thus Mozart revolts discretely against the established rules of grammar, and creates a kind of personal syntax, which is of course readily understandable to any reader, and has consequently escaped the attention of most experts. (Mozart as a Letter-Writer: The Dash as a Stylistic Feature and its Affinity to Musical Phenomena, 2010).

[16] The accepted translation of Breton's apt *hasard objectif,* here it is doubly correct by chance (objective as in a camera), though in Reigl's case "unerring luck" may also be right.

[17] Attila József (1905–1937) was, by current consensus, one of the two greatest poets in the Hungarian language. His closest parallels would be Rilke, Lorca and Mandelstam in poetry and Bartók in music.

[18] János Pilinszky (1921–1981) was, by current consensus, one of the two greatest poets in the Hungarian language. His *Selected Poems*, translated by Ted Hughes, was published by Carcanet New Press, 1976, London. His closest parallels would be Celan in poetry, Webern or Pilinszky's friend and collaborator, Kurtág, in music, and Reigl in art. The quote, worthy of repeating, "My language is tonguelessness," is from a 1969 interview by Péter Lengyel for the periodical, *Élet és irodalom*, Budapest. Reigl is closely tied to poets and poetry, and her signs come from the same source as writing. And just as she, a painter, shone contemporary light to Lautréamont, she was discovered not by art historians, but by prophets moonlighting as great men of letters. André Breton, the theoretician of Surrealism, wrote in glowing terms about Reigl, gave Reigl her first exhibition in Paris and included Reigl in his book on Surrealist painting. The poet and writer Marcelin Pleynet was the first critic to recognize, and to relentlessly point out Reigl's relevance, and did more than anyone else—often against the odds—to keep her in the limelight. Marcelin Pleynet wrote classic essays not only on Giotto and Cézanne, but also on Reigl (*Judit Reigl, the Unusual*). Pleynet's *The United States of Painting* includes a drawing by Reigl— one single line. A farther note on Kurtág and Reigl: now they both live in France and lately have become fast friends, if only over the telephone. Kurtág's exacting use of silence is matched by Reigl's deliberately intact surfaces—the absence of sounds (un)rendered in white. In the words of József Gát—from a 1966 lecture on piano playing in Fredonia, NY—"It is not only the notes that you produce, it is the silence between the notes that counts." Also, see: György Kurtág: *Four Songs to Poems by János Pilinszky Op. 11*, 1975-76, on www.youtube.com/watch?v=1olWHlePhuA

[19] Eugene Kolb (1898–1959) was Israel's leading art historian of the 1950s. A highly regarded writer on aesthetics while still in his native Hungary, he was a member of the influential Budapest Sunday Circle. The quote is from *István Farkas*, Ars Hungarica, Budapest, 1935.

[20] Even in Paris, their obvious strengths notwithstanding, both artists were relegated to the underground. However, over time Hantaï found a degree of acceptance, representing France at the Venice Biennale, and publishing with Derrida, while in "high" circles Reigl was still being referred to as "the Hun." And not because of her Hungarian origin, but because of the sheer power of her canvases, which mock classification. It is only now that the public can sense the balance the artists—who greatly admired and, on rare occasions, influenced each other—drew through their opposite polarity. Both artists held exacting views on art, with the proper distance, ever so rare, maintained from their own. One could learn more about art in a short conversation with Hantaï or Reigl than from reading almost any book. The "Folding-Unfolding" opposition was even apparent in their body language. In conversation, Hantaï started with a superior view, which, approaching his hands, he narrowed to the clearest possible point. Reigl makes points with universal implications, supported by expansive gesturing—the flow of ideas conducted by the outward motion of her arms.

[21] What Nadezhda Mandelstam (Hope Abandoned, translated by Max Hayward, Atheneum, New York, 1974, p. 548) said about Velimir Khlebnikov and Ossip Mandelstam and their poetry also applies to Hantaï and Reigl, as well as to their work. The question is not: "What it is about?" but, "Why it was written?" A poem has to be read as a whole in which words and meanings are inseparable; the minor details, which deepen your understanding of the basic sense of the poem, will become clear later. (…) It is easier to understand individual poems or lines in light of the poet's entire work, or the rest of the book in which they appear. Once the whole of the poet's work is clear in general outline, then it is possible to distinguish the different stages in it and finally, to penetrate the meaning of "individual" words which at first eluded the reader, but now impinge on him in all their rounded tangibility. (…) Khlebnikov is "incomprehensible" in a totally different way from Mandelstam—they are direct opposites of each other. They [or Hantaï and Reigl] followed different guiding lights. (…) Both have an equal right to exist—no poet can lay claim to more. (…) Each poet has his own universe, his inner ideas or theme that has formed him as a human being. A poem is never a random thing, but the expression of the inner core of someone who has become a poet through his relationship to language.

[22] *L'art est l'Hiéranarchie Absolue* is Reigl's one-line statement for her 1956 exhibition at Galerie Kléber.

[23] *True Time, Official Time*, "Art Press International," No. 5, March 1977.

[24] *Le language des fleurs et des choses muettes,* from *Les fleurs du mal*, by Charles Baudelaire. Overcome by the onrush of existence that shatters perceived structure, including the unity of body and soul, Hofmannsthal, as Lord Chandos, writes most exquisitely about why he decided to give up writing—how the living is silenced by Life, which dazzle the senses that would take measure of it. *It seems that the language in which I might have been granted the opportunity not only to write but also to think is not Latin, or English, or Italian, or Spanish, but a language of which I know not one word, a language in which mute things speak to me and in which I will perhaps have something to say for myself someday when I am dead and standing before an unknown judge.* Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, translated by Joel Rotenberg; New York Review of Books, New York, 2005, p. 127. The Lord Chandos Problem, "What we should speak about, by that we are silenced" is the other side of Wittgenstein's "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." The Problem both foreshadows and shadows Adorno's, "There is no poetry after…" "Poets write against their better judgment," said János Pilinszky. Also, see the last lines of paragraph ten in the current text.

[25] …and dwarfs creativity. Reigl was always looking at the sky, the stars and the clouds; is an expert on mushrooms and still enjoys picking them; and, most markedly, has been foraging for fossils throughout her life—often with a rock hammer. But she also has visceral understanding of Titian, Cézanne, and others too numerous to mention; was immersed in the music of Gesualdo, Monteverdi, and Schütz; and painted a series (1980–82) adjusting her rhythm to Bach's *The Art of the Fugue.* No work would be inspiration *per se*, she goes after their source.

[26] Besides the obvious and obligatory Wittgenstein, the reference is to the conductor, Eric Leinsdorf, cursing the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra in rehearsal: "Gentlemen, Beethoven wasn't deaf!" (Source: Yossi Gutmann.)

[27] Art is dimorphic. Purely masculine art is Fascist art; purely feminine art is handicraft.

[28] As alluded to in Friedrich Nietzsche's The Will to Power, Volume II, Chapter 2, paragraph 55. There is no fixed certainty in a metamorphic flow, lacking context, the distinct would disperse as rain would over rocks (…) the mirror infers permanence (…) first arises the belief in permanence and identity (…) only later, having compacted the surrounding world into a routine, can we fix our own image. Reigl incarnates Nietzsche's concept of affirming one's life in every single detail.

[29] Reigl puts it as *la pulsionnel et la pulsationnel*, which can only be mistranslated: "cryptic and rhythmic;" "covert and overt;" and so on. "Below and Above is One."

[30] The *Unfolding* series (1973–79) was continued by *Unfolding Continued* (1980–85).