

between two states but belonging to none: The Paintings of Judit Reigl

by Marcia E. Vetrocq

I

In one of the 17th century's most dazzling feats of artistic legerdemain, Velázquez made the deep and soaring space of his studio in the Real Alcázar of Madrid appear on a great plane of canvas: *Las Meninas*. Velázquez further claimed the space in front of the canvas for his illusion. He portrayed himself gazing outward and revealed the object of his attention—the king and queen—by capturing their reflections in a beveled mirror positioned on the studio's rear wall. The mirror hangs beside an open door, and in the passageway beyond the door stands the queen's chamberlain, who draws aside a drape to expose a rectangle of light. The chamberlain pauses. Is he entering or exiting? We cannot be sure. But we see that another spatial realm lies beyond the studio, through the image, "behind" the canvas. The mirror tells us who is standing right before Velázquez's eyes. The door opens to another space that will remain a mystery to ours.

Eleven centuries before Velázquez painted *Las Meninas*, a mosaicist in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna portrayed a different royal court—that of the Empress Theodora. Like the Spanish queen's chamberlain, a member of Theodora's retinue draws back a drape in a doorway, revealing not light but an immeasurable darkness. Did the imperial party just arrive or is it preparing to depart? Entrance or exit? We cannot be sure. But for all the formality and frontality of the 6th-century composition, the presence of Theodora and her attendants seems as momentary as the jets of water that spray in the stone fountain shown nearby. The black portal beckons. Whatever lies through the doorway and beyond the image remains unseen and unknown.

Ravenna was one of the most important stops on a revelatory pilgrimage to Italy undertaken in 1947–48 by the young Hungarian painter Judit Reigl. In the course of an extensive exchange during the summer of 2013, her 90th summer, Reigl recalled that in Ravenna she climbed

the scaffolds of restorers who were repairing the damage of the recent war and was granted a privileged, intimate look at the mosaics in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo. She confirmed, too, that the sight of the black portal in the Theodora mosaic of San Vitale is one of several long-ago experiences that found their way, unbidden but insistent, into the image of the doorway in the 1986–89 series of paintings called *Entrance-Exit (Entrée-Sortie)*.¹

The *Entrance-Exit* canvases present a portal that is centered, frontal, roughly life-size, proximate, and open. In basic formal terms, the paintings comply with modernist doctrine: each is an abstract field delimited by line and color, its flatness uncompromised by the modeling and perspectival illusionism that had reached a magical apogee in *Las Meninas*. But Reigl's *Entrance-Exit* series also defies or—perhaps better—ignores the modernist proscription against the image. To propose a passage *through* the canvas is to sidestep any fretting about the falsification of depth *on* the surface. And why does a door exist if not for the human body to pass through it?

The audacity of painting an open doorway lies in a dual proposition: the canvas is a permeable plane and the viewer is embodied and mobile. These propositions exceed the purely visual premise that the painting is a window which frames a scene for a stationary viewer. During his Cubist-inspired flirtation with abstraction, Matisse painted *French Window at Collioure* (1914), an arrangement of narrow planes of color that signify a pair of tall, glass-paneled doors which have opened upon a black void. This is arguably Matisse's least ingratiating and most radically confrontational canvas, not least for implicitly daring the viewer to make the next move. In 1957, when Picasso created dozens of riffs on *Las Meninas*—compositions that eradicate every trace of Velázquez's illusionism until the picture lies as flat and jagged as a child's puzzle—the open studio door and the figure of the chamberlain retain their specificity, reliably pointing the way through the painted surface. Twenty

years later, as the grip of modernist dogma was beginning to loosen, Brice Marden broke with pure abstraction by painting blocky horizontal and vertical elements that evoke an architecture of posts and lintels. Among his most celebrated paintings is the 18-panel *Thira* (1979–80), whose name is the Greek word for door. Yet in *Thira*, as in Marden's other post-and-lintel works of the 1970s and 1980s, the verticals primly abut one another to consistently defend against any visual penetration.

The thrust and parry of modernist criticism was far from Reigl's thoughts when she painted the *Entrance-Exit* series. Each of the works is the outcome of her engagement with technical challenges. Reigl never sets out to demonstrate a theory of painting, to tell a story, or to exorcise her psyche. But just as the Surrealist concept of automatism helped her disengage from the constraints of literary representation in the 1950s, so, too, does she recognize that memory and desire infiltrate her work. Asked about the visit to San Vitale, Reigl disclosed that it was in front of the Theodora mosaic that she met Betty Anderson, then a British art student, who would become her life companion until Anderson's death in 2007. Poring over a reproduction of the mosaic, with its knotted drape bright against the black passage, Reigl recalled being taken as a small child to the Church of Our Blessed Lady in Budapest. When the curtain that covered the Baroque tabernacle was drawn aside, the little girl was terrified by the dark recess.

No illustrative intention connects these remembrances to the conception of the *Entrance-Exit* series. Reigl describes such remote memories as "embedded," part of the fabric of her being. She understands their stealthy but durable influence only retrospectively, at a distance from the studio, where she is wholly immersed in making her art. Yet even before the portal declared itself outright in the first *Entrance-Exit* paintings of 1986, a black quadrilateral that reads as a passageway had appeared sporadically in her work. In a 1978 conversation with the painter Christian Sorg, Reigl noted that the passageway had a way of appearing whenever the thick accrual of paint on canvas came to feel like an obstacle. She mused about the likely connection between her need to create a visual escape through the surface and her own very real escape from behind the Iron Curtain:

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. Who knows if the fact that I managed to break through is the reason why the often recurring "doors" in my painting are invariably openings; they are never barred.ⁱⁱ

The story of Reigl's flight from Hungary has been related in numerous essays, most of which rely on the artist's jubilant reminiscence, "Temps vrai, temps légal," written in December 1975.ⁱⁱⁱ In it, she describes the frustration of eight failed attempts and the terrors of barbed wire, guard dogs, and landmines. In the dramatic momentum of that story, it is easy to overlook the fact that Reigl *paused* in the no man's land between East and West, at the edge of a cornfield, at the "threshold of Austrian territory." During that interval she took stock of her absolute freedom: "the ground (where I remain for a few more minutes) between two states but belonging to none is not the symbol but the reality of my existence." Reigl experienced the fullness of her liberation not in Paris—her ultimate destination—but in the cornfield, where she exults, "no passport, no visa, no luggage, no money, no identity, truly free, I start my new life . . . Vita Nuova." Reigl savors the threshold. The in-between. The passage to the unknown. Exit and entrance.

II

The *Entrance-Exit* series comprises more than 20 canvases, the majority of them tall rectangles, though some are more square in proportion. A framed central zone in each indicates an opening. The opening typically rises directly from the bottom edge of the canvas, offering a passageway that is bluntly grounded, but some of the compositions feature a band of painted canvas between the edge and the opening, as if to emphasize the decision to step up and pass through. Reigl permits a small number of these canvases to be hung with the erstwhile bottom at the top. Inverted, the paintings present a portal set high in a wall, a position that recalls the barn doors, reachable only by ladders, which she saw in the Italian countryside.

Every *Entrance-Exit* is executed over an earlier painting that Reigl deemed unsuccessful, a painting from a previous series in which the surface—banded and mottled in long, irregular vertical stripes—had grown clotted and intransigent. Reigl would lean the unsatisfactory painting against the studio wall and

apply masking tape to outline the portal. Wielding an assortment of tools, she built layers of color within the frame of tape or over the surrounding field, which became a de facto wall. Reigl had used masking tape before, but *Entrance-Exit* is the only series in which she left the tape in place, intact or partially peeled away. The boundary of tape creates a slight relief, enhancing the suggestion that an immaterial expanse lies beyond the portal's frame. Where strips of tape have been removed, the exposed canvas reads as light that gleams around and through the aperture.

Black was the first color to occupy the *Entrance-Exit* doorways, as it was in the earlier paintings where an opening had appeared to relieve Reigl's sense of being oppressed by her own composition. Black remained the prevailing color for the portals, even as green, copper, a glowing maize, and other hues followed. Reigl never mixes her paint before application. The surfaces present pure hues or invented colors that result from a reiterative process of applying paint, scraping the surface, overlaying another color, scraping again, addition, subtraction. Some *Entrance-Exit* doorways retain the pattern of the underlying painting. The surrounding wall may be a field of solid color, sometimes incised with vertical lines that evoke a surface of long, fitted boards. Where the original pattern occupies the wall area, and particularly when the markings have been enriched by metallic paint, the ribbon-like verticals resemble wallpaper. When the stripes are uncommonly broad and oriented horizontally, they resemble the veining of marble. Scored with a grid of widely spaced lines, the surface recalls the stone revetment of a medieval façade.

Four of the *Entrance-Exit* paintings are subtitled. Like the joyful exclamation "Vita Nuova" that concludes Reigl's account of escaping to the West, the subtitles testify to the enduring imprint of her year in Italy. Three paintings from 1988, all with crisply defined black portals, share the title *Entrance-Exit. Venice*. In one, the dominant color is Venetian Red; in another, Veronese Green; and, in the third, a rose tint characteristic of the lagoon city that Reigl devised by working a thin stratum of Pozzuoli Red over a strong white base. From the same year comes *Entrance-Exit. Sorrowful Door. (Entrée-Sortie. Porta Dolente)*. The subtitle refers to the third canto of the *Inferno*, when Dante stands at the gates of Hell, and it was appended some time after the painting was

completed, as Reigl assessed the flamelike quality of the palette and agitated surface.

Two years into the development of the *Entrance-Exit* series, Reigl was surprised to discover a figure standing within the framework of tape on a canvas. It was a nude male figure, little more than a contour but firmly in place. The male body had appeared in her work before, but this time it was uninvited. With the wry humor of a fabulist, Reigl describes her resistance to the intruder, his persistent return, and then his escape from the canvas:

The human figure appears and imposes itself, at first static, erect. I erase it; it reappears. I scratch it out; it emerges again through a quick, spontaneous writing, repeated one hundred times, suppressed one hundred times, buried. Finally, a violent pictorial energy explodes the architectural structure and spews out the figure diagonally, as if trying to push it right off the canvas. The surface becomes a true palimpsest. Here is *Entrance-Exit* transformed into *Facing* . . .^{iv}

In this manner, the *Entrance-Exit* series gave rise to and, for a time, coincided with the *Facing (Face à)* series of 1988–90. Erect and stationary but never quite touching the ground, the body occupied the open portal. Then—not unlike the young Reigl—it demanded to be released. In successive paintings, Reigl eliminated the framework of tape from around the portal. As the *Facing* series developed, the distinction between aperture and wall evaporated, leaving behind a field of pure space. The painted body surges upward, first straight and then diagonally, to be free.

III

For all their coherence as a series, the *Entrance-Exit* paintings are materially and conceptually bound to the works that came before and after. Reigl's oeuvre is marked by a complex rhythm of recurrence within progression, and it is unified by her abiding determination to materialize boundless space and unimpeded movement in her art. The means and the impediments are one and the same: everything depends on manipulating the physical substance of paint and on the action of her own body. By Reigl's estimation, she fails more often than she succeeds. She paints her way to and through a problem, and then beyond the comfort

of the solution to the next problem. Dissatisfaction, not success, is the spur to paint again.

A defiance of complacency and convention is fundamental to Reigl's nature and is expressed nowhere more clearly than in her unorthodox studio practices. She abandoned the brush not long after leaving Hungary for France and developed a physically engaged process, flinging the paint with her hands and massaging it into the canvas, or covering broad expanses with a blade or wooden lath. As the paint accumulated, Reigl—who had made clay sculptures as a youngster—carved, scraped, modeled, and incised the material using improvised tools: the faceted stopper from a Chanel No. 5 flacon, scrap metal, a twisted length of curtain rod. With few exceptions, she relied on unmixed commercial paint.

This vigorous, muscular process yielded gravity-defying compositions. Indeed, from her earliest Surrealist images to the abstractions and the resurgent figure, the elements within Reigl's paintings fly, hover, and soar. This fascination with suspended and mobile forms is often obscured by the dire postwar symbolism of the Surrealist paintings, many of which feature the low horizons, barren landscapes, and toxic skies that were pioneered by Tanguy and Ernst. An airborne squadron of grimacing beasts and monstrous riders—the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse for the nuclear age—herald the end of times (*They Have an Insatiable Thirst for Infinity*, 1950); dozens of crystalline and curving shapes are suspended against a blue ground, as if tossed aloft by an unseen hand (*Interrogation of an Object*, 1952); an impossibly involuted form, at once brooding and lurid, clothlike and metallic, hovers in a fiery orange sky and drips blood into a photomontaged chalice that rests on an altar tended by Goyesque bats, likewise photomontaged (*Incomparable Pleasure*, 1952–53).

As if she had detached the glowing edges from that grim suspended form, in 1954 Reigl leapt to abstraction with the so-called automatic writing paintings, unleashing lines of pure color that loop, hook, spiral, and race across dark, cosmic space. Traces of Matta's sparkling, fractured realms linger in these works. But in the following year, with the first *Outburst* (*Éclatement*) painting, Reigl arrived at an expression of propulsive energy that was entirely her own.

The black of interstellar space becomes the color of

explosive action in the *Outburst* series of 1955–58. Walking toward the propped canvas with paint-filled hands, Reigl flung the dark matter and swiftly shaped it with tools and fingers, always using an upward motion. Jagged, abruptly angled lines and fractured planes—abetted by flares of red and yellow—take precedence over the curve in centrifugal compositions that burst and streak across raw canvas. The paint retains velocity, even where it is licked up into crests and peaks. By comparison, the roughly contemporary action paintings of Franz Kline in the United States and the *Informale* canvases of Emilio Vedova in Italy seem determinedly structured and earthbound.

In the course of 1958, the trajectories of the *Outburst* compositions began to curve inward, like the organization of a galaxy, until Reigl arrived at the arcing, rotational forms of the next abstract series, *Center of Dominance* (*Centre de Dominance*, 1958–59). The paint is substantial—thrown and manipulated into ridges, knots, and bulbs—but the circular form at the center remains weightless, suspended, free.

For the next series, *Mass Writing* (*Écriture en masse*, 1959–65), Reigl turned to a black, pitch-like material sold in bulk at building supply shops. Sometimes wrangling eight canvases at a time, she troweled on the tarry mass and allowed it to partially set. Then, rapidly scraping and carving, she finished each work in a single session, trusting spontaneity and intuition even as she accepted a high rate of failure.

While working on the *Center of Dominance* and *Mass Writing* series, Reigl recycled unsuccessful paintings as dropcloths to protect the studio floor. Over time, and inspired in part by the work of Jean Dubuffet—who turned coarse and cast-off materials into compositions of primordial power—she came to see potential in the waste-encrusted cloths. Reigl shaped and incised the surface, added more paint, and finished with a unifying wash of color into which she made additional marks. With weighty forms looming like the lunar surface or a prehistoric menhir, the so-called *Guano* paintings (1958–65) have an ancient, geological quality. But the earthy thickness, the very “slowness” of the accreted paint came to feel obstructive. In two of the *Guano* paintings completed in 1964, a vertical black rectangle appears within the blocky mass, like a door in the side of a rustic shed. Later Reigl recognized that she had painted an escape through the surface.

Because each painting arises from an uninterrupted sequence of instinctive yet decisive actions, Reigl is inclined to credit the arrival of a specific form or image to the unconscious. So a passageway appeared without premeditation in the *Guano* paintings, and so the human body asserted its presence in 1966. Reigl had been working on the abstract series *Mass Writing* 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'apensenteur, 1965–66)*, whose abstraction then yielded—despite Reigl's resistance—to the overtly figurative paintings of *Man (Homme, 1966–72)*. Each *Man* displays a human torso—a few are female but most are male—from neck to knee, as if the entire body could not be contained within the area allotted by the stretcher. The more naturalistic early torsos evolved into taut, angled structures of muscular vectors that point beyond the canvas. As the torso assumed trajectories once mapped by the *Outburst* paintings, Reigl found her way back to open space.

Casting off the impediment of the stretcher, Reigl realized her next series, *Drape, Decoding (Drap, décodage, 1972–73)*, by laying thin veils of industrial cotton atop *Man* compositions and sweeping a broad, coarse brush soaked with tempera—it is the only time she used tempera—across the cloth. The thick, raised surface below served as a relief block, and the image was transferred to the cloth as a form of monoprint. The “decoding” occurred when Reigl lifted the drape and found the image, in reverse, carried through the cloth by the paint. The emergent bodies of *Drape, Decoding* are incomplete, transparent in areas where bare fabric is exposed. Suspended unstretched, the figures appear to drift upward. From this singular lightness and motion, Reigl developed an unprecedented system for turning her own movements into painting.

Reigl began by hanging a continuous perimeter of industrial cotton around her studio, stapling the top of the cloth to the wall or to the stretchers leaning there, even covering a vertical aperture that she had cut through the exterior masonry years earlier to admit natural light and facilitate the moving of large paintings. Setting aside her frontal combat with the surface, and accompanied by music, Reigl would circle the studio—a dancer—touching the fabric to make long rows of marks with an oily commercial enamel that penetrated the

cotton. Reversing the cloth, she applied acrylic paint, which traveled around and away from the enamel, water repelled by oil. The uneven rows became more regular—like writing, says Reigl—when the cotton was cut and stretched. These works became two series, *Unfolding* and the more heavily painted *Unfolding Continued (Déroulement and Suite de Déroulement 1973–80)*.

Combining vast swaths of cloth, the osmotic activity of paint, and the movement of her body through the real space of the studio, the *Unfolding* series offered unequalled liberation, a condition all but free of resistance. Reigl has likened the transit of paint through the cloth to the passage of light, the wave and the particle, through a translucent membrane.^v Several of the compositions are uncommonly clear and exquisitely atmospheric, consisting of a single line of writing poised between unobstructed zones of color. One *Unfolding* (1976, Musée de Grenoble) is as ethereal as a Whistler nocturne, as if a string of lights and its reflection were shimmering across a marine horizon. With a few exceptions, Reigl determined which side would be the front of an *Unfolding* only when the work was finished. As she explained in 1976, she usually painted from both sides, “in an unstable and precarious equilibrium on the threshold of appearance/disappearance, at the boundary between birth and death.”^{vi}

Although Reigl experienced the luxurious intensity of the threshold and the boundary (*frontière*) while making the *Unfolding* series, the process could not forestall the inevitable encroaching sense of confinement. Seven of the *Unfolding* paintings, each about six meters wide, have a distinctive tripartite structure in which a black field interrupts the horizontal registers and creates two flanking zones. A strip of “writing” continues across the top of the black field, suggesting a lintel. As in the *Guano* series so in the *Unfolding*, Reigl had conjured a portal, an escape through the painting.

Between 1980 and 1986, Reigl produced three additional subseries within the expanded *Unfolding* category, each time with a diminishing of the sense of agency and options. Using *Unfolding* canvases that hadn't passed muster, and listening to the music of Bach, she began the paintings called *Art of the Fugue (Art de la fugue, 1980–82)*. Eventually the surface grew thick, and the evenly spaced bands of color above and below the registers of writing—so like musical notation now—settled into a

kind of stasis. One imagines that the broad horizontal expanse itself had become, perversely, an obstacle.

As if prompted by the lone rectangle of daylight that shone through the perimeter of cotton, Reigl turned to a vertical orientation in the next two *Unfolding* subseries: *Volutes, Twists, Columns, Metal* (*Volutes, torsades, colonnes, métal*, 1982–83) and *Hydrogen, Photon, Neutrinos* (*Hydrogène, photon, neutrinos*, 1984–86). The long registers of color, once akin to writing, became soaring architectural supports in the first group and the accelerated pathways of elementary particles in the second. Yet the surface continued to thicken, until, as Reigl described it, “*Hydrogen*, the last of *Unfolding*, seems to be buried under the layers of paint. They solidified into a wall that had to be breached.”^{vii} Breaching the wall, Reigl opened the portal of the first *Entrance-Exit* painting.

IV

It is tempting and romantic but, in the end, erroneous to cast Reigl as a heroic isolate, working at a remove from the painting culture of her time. From the moment of her arrival in Paris in 1950, she grew conversant with the early 20th-century avant-garde and with the art of her contemporaries, from Dada and Surrealism to the canvases of Wols, Dubuffet, and, by 1955, the American Abstract Expressionists.^{viii} During subsequent decades, painting in France as elsewhere saw the advent of conceptual strategies and political agendas, the implementation of repetitive processes that mirrored mass production, and the widespread discounting of the painter’s subjectivity. Reigl grasped the situation and kept to her own course.

Given the turbulent physicality of Reigl’s practice, it’s not surprising that she was drawn to the work of Dubuffet. She recalls seeing, probably in a 1973 exhibition, his sand-encrusted, fork-raked *Door with Couch Grass* (*Porte au chiendent*, 1957), which he had pieced together using fragments cut from his earlier paintings.^{ix} She felt a different kinship with Yves Klein, admiring his rejection of both the finitude of the canvas and the confinement of the body. The acrobatic buoyancy of works such as Klein’s *People Begin to Fly* (1961) suggests an ease that was far from the strenuous abstract painting which engaged Reigl at the time. But later, after the *Facing* series, Reigl began to multiply the figure—though, rather

like the Trinity, the many bodies were one body—in the paintings she titled *A Body in Plural* (*Un corps au pluriel*, 1990–92). Now Reigl’s levitating bodies are more serene than Klein’s sailing figures. They rise effortlessly, contours unencumbered by matter, not unlike the ascendant figures in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* or El Greco’s *Resurrection, The Opening of the Fifth Seal of the Apocalypse*. Reigl had found a way to embody an experience she had once sought in abstraction: weightlessness.

Invoking Michelangelo and El Greco here is not a critical device. In a very real way, Reigl’s relationship with the art of the past is as keen and fruitful as her relationship with the art of her contemporaries. Perhaps more so. The poet and critic Marcelin Pleynet has compared the solitary figure in the doorway of Reigl’s first *Facing* paintings to a souvenir photograph from 1947–48 that hangs in her studio and shows a Roman catacomb fresco of Lazarus emerging from his tomb.^x Asked recently about the Lazarus fresco, Reigl responded that an even deeper impression had been made by the Lazarus depicted in the mosaics of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo. There, bound in bright white cloth, the risen Lazarus stands in the black doorway of his tomb. Among Reigl’s paintings, from the *Facing* series and beyond, are works that show a standing figure repeatedly crossed by lines which, she says, are meant to indicate the winding cloth of Lazarus as it loosens, falls away, and releases the living body. How can we not think of Reigl in her studio, encircled by white cotton, dancing the *Unfoldings* into being? The cloth grows thick and tight with paint, until, like Lazarus, she was released—or, more precisely, she released herself—through the open portal of *Entrance-Exit*.

Discussions of the recurring portal have led Reigl to weigh the influence of sights and experiences that preceded her escape from Hungary. The coat of arms of Kapuvár, the town of her birth, features the gateway to a mighty fortress that stood there until its destruction in the 18th century. Reigl recalls being little more than a toddler in Budapest when she accompanied her mother on visits to the grave of her father, who had died when she was three years old. They would pass a tomb with a carved nude figure entering the darkness framed by a black marble portal. One stone hand reached back toward the living. Later, though still too young to read, Reigl inquired about the letters inscribed at the cemetery entrance. She was told that the words were “We Shall

Rise Again.” It was the promise of resurrection, which the child could not fathom at the time but whose first instance is the story of Lazarus.

For all the associations with the tomb and the tabernacle, with Dante, Lazarus, and the Resurrection, one senses that the fundamental issue for Reigl is not the eternal soul but the human spirit embodied in the here and now. She has spoken ruefully of the rarity with which the body becomes a perfect tool for making art.^{xi} In 1985, Reigl composed an impressionistic text, a syncopated and eccentric inventory of the body, each body, every body, from molecule to celestial body, and, in art, from the Venus of Willendorf to the body as painted by Giotto, Piero, Grunewald, Rembrandt, Courbet, Cézanne, Dubuffet. It is an onrushing history of the body that ends with her own. Summarizing the essential human paradox, Reigl writes, “Body: the most perfect instrument and the most tragic obstacle.”^{xii}

There is a sense in which the different series that constitute Reigl’s oeuvre, so convenient for the curator, are misconstrued as categories and containers. The series are more like territories that Reigl crosses on her way to the next border, the next threshold. From this perspective, the paintings that defy the norm—the outliers and experiments and hybrids—have much to tell us. In one *Facing* (painted over a 1975 *Unfolding* some time after 1983), Reigl sets the body in a field that is not the usual monochrome but is divided horizontally into three unequal bands of color. A squarish zone of black surrounds and fills the delicately delineated body. Above, there is a pale terra cotta; below, a putty grey. The figure assumes the stance of a kouros, hands to the hips, left foot advancing. Unlike the other bodies in Reigl’s *Facing* paintings, the feet touch the ground, which is to say they touch the border between grey and black. The left foot breaches that border, bringing the body forward, as if it were leaving the uncanny black void to enter our space. It is a reversal of the movement to which the viewer is invited by the open portal in each *Entrance-Exit* painting.

With this exceptional *Facing*, Reigl painted an absolute distillation of the modernist problem posed a century earlier by Cézanne with his monumental *Bather*. Cézanne painted a frontal figure, flattened by an outline and locked in the surface by the colors it shares with the landscape and sky. Yet the bather’s left foot advances, like that of a kouros, as if Cézanne wished to insist, contrary to the

fact of the flat canvas, that the painted figure is a body in space. Reigl’s *Facing* goes further. There is no recourse to the tradition of the bather, no reassuring naturalism of landscape and sky. Reigl has stripped the body of everything but form and will, and positioned it exactly as she once declared herself to be: “between two states but belonging to none.” It is the human condition—uncertain, ardent, transitory, and driven by yearning.

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- i During the summer of 2013, a lengthy conversation between the painter and the author—sustained by emails, telephone calls, and the intermediation of a friend—yielded a wealth of recollections, many included in this essay, which bear on the genesis and interpretation of Reigl’s art.
 - ii Judit Reigl interviewed by Christian Sorg in “Evident/caché/ actualisé/latent,” Document sur, no. 2/3, October 1978.
 - iii Judit Reigl, “Temps vrai, temps légal,” published in Art Press International, no. 5, March 1977.
 - iv Judit Reigl interviewed by Yves-Michel Bernard, Kanal, no.6, March 1990.
 - v Judit Reigl in conversation with Jean-Paul Ameline, published online by Art in America magazine, April 2009, available at <http://www.judit-reigl.com/?english/texts-and-interviews/unfolding-a-conversation-between-jean-paul-ameline-and-judit-reigl.html>.
 - vi Judit Reigl, “Mes toiles récentes,” written in December 1975, published in the exhibition catalogue Judit Reigl, Galerie Rencontres, Paris, 1976.
 - vii Reigl in conversation with Ameline, op. cit.
 - viii In “Mes toiles récentes,” op. cit., Reigl wrote, “It was around 1955 that I started to hear about them [the Americans] at Drouin. Later, I showed with De Kooning, Kline, and other American abstract expressionists in 1964 in New York, at the International Awards at the Guggenheim Museum, then in 1967–68 at the Carnegie Awards in Pittsburgh. For me, the school of Paris always remained foreign, stifling. My first exposure to Rothko, Newman, Still, and De Kooning felt like a deep breath. It was gratifying to discover, in the early sixties, the vast expanse of the abstract expressionists, which I paralleled. I may not be one of them but I feel close to them.”
 - ix Dubuffet’s painting was completed in October 1957, sent to the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York for exhibition in February 1958, and purchased by the Guggenheim Museum in early 1959. The painting returned to Paris in 1973 as part of the Guggenheim-organized exhibition “Jean Dubuffet: A Retrospective,” which was shown at the Centre National d’art contemporain (the Grand Palais).
 - x Marcelin Pleynet, Judit Reigl, Paris, Adam Biro, 2001, pp. 15 and 111.
 - xi Judit Reigl, text published in Cahiers de psychologie de l’art et de la culture, no. 16, 1990.
 - xii Judit Reigl, “Corps. Question d’échelle,” published in Cahiers de psychologie de l’art et de la culture, no. 11, 1985.