

# Judit Reigl, May 1954 to June 1955

## (Annus Mirabilis, Annus Horribilis)

by Janos Gat

Everything one can say about the oeuvre of Judit Reigl is conditional. Reigl is the exceptional nonagenarian who enjoys the present without questioning the past. But when she is questioned about her work, she volunteers enough information to support an equally valid theory for each possible point of view. One can share with her in all the facts, but not in the actual *act* of painting; thus one might talk about paintings, but not *painting* itself, which the more one understands, the less one can explain. How could one pin down what is elusive by nature and which cannot be addressed in absolute terms?<sup>1</sup>

Reigl is the missing link between two concurrent movements of abstract art: the New York School, informed by Gorky and Surrealism, and the School of Paris, by Wols and World War II. The Americans achieved revolutionary effects with traditional means, the Europeans traditional effects with revolutionary means.<sup>2</sup> The American artists started with the surface of the painting, the Europeans the support.<sup>3</sup> While the American artists were erasing the past, the Europeans were rebuilding on what little remained of it.

A 1945 Allied bombing raid created the vast and desolate square *à la de Chirico* with teetering façades and a broken marble statue that was the first Surrealist landscape Reigl encountered.<sup>4</sup> Reigl overcame history through art history: she studied art in the killing-field of Budapest; painted the Arcadian scenery of the Carpathian foothills not far from the front lines; and spent all her time in museums while going hungry in occupied Vienna. Then, Reigl found her Garden of Earthly Delights in Italy, in the marshes of Ravenna next to the very cave, which Dante said led to Hell.<sup>5</sup> Lured back to the Purgatory of her native Socialist-Realist Hungary, partly under false pretenses and partly by misplaced hopes, she reversed what could have been a lifetime's blunder by stealing back to the West, crossing the revived concept of a no-man's-land put into deadly practice at the Austrian-Hungarian border.<sup>6</sup> Reigl's land-bound odyssey, months of wandering and seven more illegal frontier crossings, ended in June 1950 in Existentialist Paris, where she did construction work for a pittance to enable herself to paint as obsessively as she wanted.<sup>7</sup>

Youth needs no distinct style; Reigl's pre-Paris paintings recapped her student years. What she considers her first acceptable work, *Flood* (January 1945), now lost, depicted the actual apocalyptic moment. The paintings that followed summarized episodes of European art history and the times and places of her learning about them. In the visionary canvas she painted at the Hungarian Academy in Rome in 1947, *Campo de' Fiori*, now known only from a photograph, she recalled her time at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts by displaying the influence of Csontváry, Hungary's most influential painter. In the beatific tableau *Hitchhiking between Ferrara and Ravenna*, she recalled the 1947 event in the title in the manner of Duccio and the other Sieneese Trecento masters whose work she saw for the first time on the previous leg of the trip. In the maquette of a refused mural commission in Budapest, *Worker and Peasant Friendship*, she recalled Masaccio and her last memory of Venice in October 1948: the porphyry *Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs* next to the Dome, a turn of the Third and Fourth Century sculpture looted from Constantinople in the early Thirteenth. In 1950, she mixed elements from Durer, Bosch, Goya, Picasso, Max Ernst, Henry Moore, and even Tissa David, a classmate in Budapest and her roommate in Paris, in *They Have Insatiable Thirst for the Infinite*.<sup>8</sup> Then, in 1954, Reigl's art caught up with real time with dozens of collages and canvases and a series of ink-on-paper drawings that could be called *spacescapes*. At the age of thirty-one, having worked in Paris for four years—albeit in total obscurity—Reigl found herself in a limbo: repelled by the School of Paris, her all too familiar milieu, and attracted to American action painting, which she knew only a little from a few pictures in magazines.<sup>9</sup>

For her biographers, 1954 is considered the *annus mirabilis* in Reigl's career, the year of her discovery by André Breton. Touted by Breton as the great hope for the future of painting—with Ernst lending support from the wings—her presence was finally noted by the notables of the art world. Her winter exhibition at the Surrealists' gallery, À l'Etoile scellée, brought Reigl to the attention of her lifetime collector, Maurice Goreli, and dealers like Rene Drouin and Otto van de Loo.<sup>10</sup> Breton's famous letter to Reigl – part thank you note, part homage, part encouragement – became the *laissez-passer* that enabled her to show internationally.<sup>11</sup>

Reigl, however, writes off 1954 as an *annus horribilis*: the only bleak period of her life, which she remembers as chaos, a void that she had to fill with fireworks of work just to get through alive. Seasoned by her wartime experience and fortified by her art, Reigl's imperviousness to an impersonal world still left her vulnerable to personal problems. In 1954, she came face to face with nothingness. Heartbroken not to be with her mother, who was slowly dying of cancer, she received the coup de grâce in tandem from the two people whose support and love she thought

she could take for granted. Breton's professed esteem for Reigl had turned her best friend, also a formidable artist, against her and the love of her life, confused and under considerable duress for a litany of reasons, became distant, then left her, for only a month as it turned out, although it started as forever.<sup>12</sup> The emotional ground had been pulled from under Reigl, so even what once might have seemed minor setbacks now loomed like utter defeats. The pain she felt was so real that death seemed preferable. A vivid action sequence kept flashing through her mind: she stands close to the edge of a cliff, holding a bucketful of paint in each hand – one pitch black, the other pure white – and takes a running leap, flinging the buckets into the chasm and diving in right after them. The color-trails mark her flight!<sup>13</sup> Reigl had lost her taste for life, but painting remained her life, and the inevitable blowup that could have led to a breakdown was sublimated by painting.

Reigl needed a break from Paris. She left at the end of September for the village of Causse-de-la-Selle in the Languedoc Roussillon region in the south of France, taking no art supplies with her except for one pad of drawing paper, which she soon forgot. Her daily routine was simply wandering in the woods, and the absence of concrete activity sharpened her senses. More open to the world, she absorbed more of it. Her long walks often led Reigl to the locks of the Hérault River. She was simply fascinated by dams, reservoirs, canals and anything to do with the mechanics of water.<sup>14</sup> Back then, she never gave much thought to what now seems evident to her: the locks figuratively illustrated her role, pointed the way, *in a way*, because in life every change is triggered not just by one, but a confluence of events. Trite as it may sound: life is a flow; a flow cannot be invented and postulated, only channeled and regulated. Every time she approached the riverbank her eyes were drawn to a mysterious ark straddling the dam: a luminous five-by-five-foot structure with an arching top and a door on one side that was always shut tight, resembling, as she came to realize, the tabernacle that had so terrified her three-year-old self at her parish church. There, as the curtains were parted during mass, instead of the expected sacraments, she saw three severed heads, meaty, flushed, bewhiskered, and, in retrospect, phallic-looking—something she never talked about, since no one would have believed her. Walking over the dam one day, she found the mystery ark open—the door had been torn off overnight—and saw that it housed the controls of a Nineteenth-Century hydraulic floodgate apparatus, no longer used. The cast-iron gears and levers appeared to be out of Chaplin's *Modern Times* or Lang's *Metropolis*. Ceremonial tabernacles are alleged gateways to heaven, holding provisions to share for ecstatic mass transit. The obsolete device appeared as a *deus ex machina* in Reigl's stalled life.

Reigl was transported by the mutilated vessel; the disused apparatus cast a heavenly light. The levers and gears of the faux-tabernacle enlarged Reigl's perspective and set, beyond the figure of speech, her eyes on the stars. The artist must probe chaos to locate logos. With the rudimentary gearbox as her makeshift sextant, Reigl could navigate chaos and find logos in her new work. The Grand Design glimpsed through an ordinary gadget, a complex conjectural problem was solved with something basic and concrete. To conceptualize the imponderable, Duchamp played chess; to paint *Running Man*, Malevich studied the stars; Reigl foraged the woods for mushrooms and scaled cliffs collecting fossils to find the cosmic in the mundane, the sublime in the *found*. Reigl, who always strove for the cosmic, grasped the mechanics of the cosmic when she peeked into the ark over the dam, and she pulled out of the scrapped contraption six decades worth of work, at least that is how it seems to her now. From then on she stuck to this fortuitous *no-method* and went back to the same village to *not* work for a month at the end of September every year.

Returning to Paris at the beginning of November, Reigl tried to resume painting. One cannot use the cliché “she picked up the brush again” because she was already done with paintbrushes in her student years at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts. She shaped, scraped and scored paint, layers of which she first rubbed into the canvas with her bare hands, using tools she improvised for each task.<sup>15</sup> Her esoteric set of twisted blades and lengths of bent iron could have belonged to an alien mechanic, fittingly, since Reigl's strange pictorial vistas grew progressively distant from the earthly plane. As the inner planets already belonged to Ernst and Roberto Matta ruled the Milky Way, Reigl first picked up then left behind their imagery on her way to the limits of outer space.<sup>16</sup> Maurice Goreli of the “unerring eye” considers Reigl to be the last living member of the Surrealist group.<sup>17</sup> This historical tidbit, supported by her first Paris paintings, including the 1954 *spacescapes*, rings true to all except Reigl herself, who rightly disputes it, because even though Breton wanted her in, she never joined the Surrealists. She went to a few meetings, having admired the Pope, but not his courtiers. Reigl stopped “painting Surrealist” the moment she met the full assembly, which Breton convoked to welcome her on the terrace of Café Blanche in June 1954, the date written on the back of *The Grinding of the Void*, her last Surrealist influenced canvas.<sup>18</sup>

Opening on November 18, 1954, Reigl's exhibition at À l'Etoile scellée, a show of two Surrealist and twelve Abstract Surrealist works, was a resounding success in all ways except commercially: nothing sold. Also, in an art-handler's Lilliputian act of class struggle against the gallery director, or the artist, perhaps both, or to spite the gods, the hanging was done “carelessly.” The central

work of the show, *They Have Insatiable Thirst for the Infinite*, was placed over a fuse box that had to be accessed daily, so the painting was moved very often and almost as often it fell to the ground. For Reigl, even a good day ended in a lingering sense of unease, which was compounded by the dismal reality of having to go back to an empty home. The weeks she had no one to talk to in her tiny home-studio pushed her to work harder than ever before.

She modeled the interior of the faux-tabernacle as a collage, the elements of which looked like the spare parts of a celestial machine. Reigl often looked for images in newspapers and magazines, *Life* above all, which could be had for nothing at the ubiquitous bookstalls on the banks of the Seine. Strange creatures and features, explosions, fuselages, bats, papal chalices, shapes of uncanny resonance: what she liked, she cut out and then glued the pieces onto sheets of paper. She started to make collages in 1952, first encasing them in paint over canvas, as she had seen it done in many Surrealist paintings. She loved the collages of Ernst, especially *La Femme 100 têtes* (1929) and *Histoires naturelles* (1926), and like Ernst, she also referred to Édouard Riou (1833-1900) and other illustrious illustrators of the Jules Verne universe, having read all fifty-three volumes of the *Verne Gyula Complete Hungarian Illustrated Edition* as a small child. She, quite innocently, believed that she was innovating by assembling the cut-outs without manipulating them further. The marked difference in her way of collage is not in the lack of overpainting in the Surrealist manner, but that elaborate images are made with minimal intervention; as in silent-film editing, the dramaturgy hinges on the cut.

When not making collages, Reigl drew. During the time that she was alone she felt compelled to fill every moment, which meant filling quite a few drawing pads, more than a hundred drawings altogether. She never thought that the drawings should be framed or shown. Truth be told, Reigl did not think much at all of these particular drawings, though she found them sincere when she made them. To put the drawings in context is even harder than the paintings, which are already almost impossible to situate, because Reigl rarely talks about them. The conclusion derived here is that the largely unknown and rarely exhibited 1954 drawings are pivotal to the Reigl oeuvre. Reigl never used preparatory drawings, but these drawings could be mock-ups for the breakout series she was to do next. The lines are not tracing anything; they indicate directions, which true to her spirit, Reigl had to forget in order to follow.<sup>19</sup> Reigl paints as she dreams: in a state that at once dwarfs and magnifies the one in which she otherwise lives. One can see the paintings as her waking dreams, induced by her drawings, which are as the dreams that she forgot. To her, the drawings were transitory and the collages seemed so too once they were assembled. And even her paintings, instead of being definitive works, were simply manifestations of a lifelong work in

progress. Reigl's macro-micro perspective, her high-low vocabulary, her mixing of media reflected her life, chaotic as it appeared to her just then. Fields and color fields into vectors, the collages and the earlier paintings were abridged in the drawings, which then, unbeknownst to her, took her in a new direction: the one by which she later came to be known, her own.

Reigl's first abstractions from 1955 are uncharacteristically dense, painted if not by a different person, a different personality. These canvases are black holes; centripetal zones with paint as dark matter suppressing light that travels nowhere, trapped and lost, just the way she felt during that time. Gravity over levity; the *no exit*; Reigl painted the nothingness she was facing.<sup>20</sup> She came to understand this phase of her life and work only years later, when reading an article in the journal *L'Astronomie* about supernovas, then seeing one illustrated in a Bayeux tapestry: all matter sucked into a central nothing explodes as a second sun.<sup>21</sup>

Harmony meets strife in a rush of everything at once: the elements of a cosmicized personal drama compacted in Reigl's brain made her body ready to burst. Can the metaphorical be physical, an image real? The act of creation, easily dispensed with biblically, is the fetish of philosophy and the hex of science. The artist breathes life into matter and creates reality. The veracity of art mirrors the depth of engagement. Reigl gave all of herself: it is she one sees exploding in *Outburst* (1955-58). The canvas is there not to memorialize, but to perpetuate the gesture of Reigl throwing and then troweling the paint. The dark matter covering the preceding abstractions dissipates. The support may be intact, no slash needed to make a point, or for light to break or darkness to show through, but the ground seems warped and the paint projects into real space far beyond the stretcher. The concept of perspective is inverted; instead of a single vanishing point within the frame, a whole host hovers behind the viewer. The painting suspends the immediate. Life, condensed to a flash, becomes a blast into a new world. *Outburst* is the big bang of the mature Reigl oeuvre. The big bang was followed by even-bigger bangs, producing a torrent of singularities difficult to fathom. *Outburst* is erroneously said to prophesize the Hungarian uprising that broke out more than a year later: the connection is nominal only in that both were explosions. If one must affix a label, *Outburst* is self-referential, as its matter was spewed out from deep within her.<sup>22</sup> Chaos and logos in one, the first *Outburst* encompassed a year, which encompassed a *half-life*, which made the very moment of its making everlasting and tangibly present.<sup>23</sup> The motifs of the 1954 collages, drawings, and paintings, which summed up everything Reigl knew about art, are distinct in the first *Outburst* and are discernable in the gestures of the successive ones, ever more simplified from one burst to the next.

Every detail mentioned above is true or is the truth as remembered by Reigl herself: all of it relevant, most of it accurate, and none of it helpful to understand what her work *is*, only how certain works were made, and what may have made her make them. Reigl never settled on a style, so it is no wonder her universe is continually changing and expanding, her canvases heave and her colors shift, her marks being signposts to the infinite, each a miracle for which there is a different technical explanation. To make sense of it all, one ends up playing with the basic building blocks: ink, paper, canvas, medium and pigments. Matching up shapes and lines with compatible paint strokes, it should be child's play to prove that the 1954 drawings were the first blurts of a language that only Reigl spoke. In Judit Reigl's oeuvre, everything is deliberate and nothing is intended; accordingly, one should see her paintings through the eyes of a newborn and would be better off babbling about it than trying to put it into words. In the self-evident one may analyze the self; compared to her indomitable oeuvre, Reigl herself presents a safer and equally alluring subject.<sup>24</sup>

Breton came to Reigl's studio on June 1, 1954, a date of infamy for her ever since her mother's death two years later, and a month after the originally scheduled May 1st date, which happened to be Reigl's thirty-first birthday. The visit set off a year's worth of events that disrupted and ultimately changed the artist's life for the better in every possible way. In July, August, and September, for the longest period in her life, Reigl could not work. In October, for the first time, she decided to take some time off. She made most of the collages after October, and all the drawings in a few weeks during the À l'Etoile scellée exhibition in December, a month of infamy for Reigl ever since her father's death. The first *Outburst* is dated June 1955, which is when the accumulated matter of her life and work reached critical mass. The blast came in Reigl's 33<sup>rd</sup> year, which—to wax mystical—makes her umpteenth in the line of the exalted to trump mortality at that age. The stormiest year in Reigl's life ended with a three-and-one-half-by-five-foot *almost* gestural canvas, which made the artist an associate member of the New York School mostly on painterly instinct. *Outburst* gave a new life to Judit Reigl – and gave Judit Reigl to us – by allowing six decades of consequent work to unfold.

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<sup>1</sup> To save time, this essay could be replaced by the following triad of maxims: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," or I—I (Wittgenstein); *Everything is relative*, or  $E=mc^2$  (Einstein); *Can't see the forest for the trees*, or  $\Delta x \Delta p \geq h/4\pi$  (Heisenberg).

<sup>2</sup> Black Mountain College versus cities in ruins and Wols elevating wreck to a form.

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary art versus contemporary warfare; Alberto Burri; Jean Fautrier; Yves Klein-flame-thrower, naked bodies: [youtube.com/watch?v=6P2Z4BoAF28](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P2Z4BoAF28)

<sup>4</sup> In Reigl's words: *The first Surrealist landscape to strike me was not painted but bombed into existence in 1945. A fountain at the center of the stately Calvin Square – fronting a late-baroque church and the Corinthian-columned National Museum – I crossed daily on my way to the Academy of Fine Arts was blown to pieces in a night-time air raid; many years later I recognized the same scene in a Giorgio de Chirico painting.*

<sup>5</sup> In the Spring of 1948, Reigl spent the happiest weeks of her life in the very “dark forest” of Dante, in her words: *living like angels*. Read: the final scene in the Marguerite Yourcenar tale, *The Man Who Loved the Nereids* (1938).

<sup>6</sup> The *concept* of the border was fortified, mined, barb-wired, search-lighted much like the Berlin Wall more than ten years later. It was state of the art, and Reigl is one of the very few people ever to cross it and to live and talk about it. *A woman in the no-man's-land (of the Iron Curtain)*, wrote Marcelin Pleyne.

<sup>7</sup> Russian Zone, British Zone, American Zone, Germany, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, France.

<sup>8</sup> Reigl lists her sources as Albrecht Durer, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, late 1490s; Hieronymus Bosch, *Tryptch of the Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1501 and *Garden of Earthly Delights*; Francisco Goya, *Caprichos*, 1799 and *Follies*, late 1820s; Pablo Picasso, *Two Women Running at the Beach*, 1922; Max Ernst, *The Horde*, 1927, and *The Fireside Angel-The Triumph of Surrealism*, 1937; Henry Moore, *Shelter*, 1940. As it happens, Moore turned the detail of his drawing, which inspired Reigl, into the sculpture, *Helmet Head No 1* concurrently to Reigl painting it. (Interestingly, the eyes in Moore's bronze as well as in Reigl's painting move up, to overlap the helmet). And Reigl turned the grinning horse of a comical cartoon that animator Tissa (Teréz) David (1921-2012), drew in the early forties into a pair of terrifying apocalyptic beasts. The artist noted that “this painting could just as well be dated 1950-51, instead of 1950, when I started and painted most of it. This canvas, my first in Paris, is the one exception, in which I allowed myself to make corrections. I kept repainting the bottom of the image for the better part of a year. There are eight attempts of various grounds-rolling hills, mountains and seas-under the otherworldly, marshy surface of the ninth, marked by indefinable foot- or hoof-prints, which I found successful.” Reigl's painting of this painting serves as the perfect allegory to her eight failed attempts at crossing the Hungarian – Austrian border, before the ninth that succeeded at last.

<sup>9</sup> *Life*, August 8, 1949; January 15, 1951; etc.

<sup>10</sup> The gallery, *À l'Étoile scellée* (1952-1956), at 11 rue du Pré-aux-clerks in the 7<sup>th</sup> district of Paris, was directed by André Breton, Roland Tual and Marcel Knoll. The gallery's exhibitions included: *Degottex*, *Duvillier*, *Marcelle Louchansky et Messagier* (1953); *Pérennité de l'art gaulois* (1955); *Simon Hantaï* (1953); *Toyen* (1953, 1955); *Judit Reigl* (1954); *Jean Degottex* (1955); *René Duvivier* (1955); *Meret Oppenheim* (1956) and *Marcelle Louchansky* (1956). Maurice Goreli was born Moise Gorelichvili in 1923, in Milan, Italy. According to family lore, his grandfather, scion of a family of important fur merchants and involved in developing the Baku oil fields, had the honor of being held for ransom by Joseph Vissarionovich Djougachvili (Stalin), a budding bandit with a promising future. This fleeting acquaintance was supposedly helpful in the Gorelichvilis escape from their native Georgia in 1917. As a young man, Goreli studied psychology and philosophy but his real passion was music, literature, and the fine arts. Introduced to André Breton by their attorney, Maître Bomsel, Goreli became a regular visitor at *À l'Étoile scellée*, and was enormously taken by the 1954 exhibitions of Simon Hantaï and Judit Reigl. It was Breton's idea that as a young man of means, Goreli should start a collection of paintings and that he should collect the two most interesting and still

affordable artists in Paris: Hantaï and Reigl. For the next decades, Goreli provided the only support for both artists. The byproduct of this unique connection is one of the great art collections in France, which includes many of their most important works. In 1990 and 1992, Goreli donated a dozen paintings from each artist to the Pompidou Center, where they were exhibited in 1994. The exhibition, *Judit Reigl: Annus Mirabilis, Annus Horribilis, Works from May 1954—June 1955*, at Ubu Gallery, New York (December 2014–February 2015) is a testimony to Goreli's vision. At the age of ninety-two, Goreli still looks for treasures in the most unexpected places. It must be noted that with regard to Judit Reigl's 1954 drawings, only those that were purchased and preserved by Goreli are still known to exist. Goreli donated a number of works presented in this exhibition to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On a farther note: the writer of these lines would like to acknowledge Mr. Goreli as his foremost mentor in the arts. To mix Mark 8:18 with Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel "Everyone has eyes but few can see." Rene Drouin (1905-1979), who co-founded his eponymous gallery with Leo Castelli at Place Vendôme, a most elegant address in Paris, was-much like Charles Eagan in New York-a visionary art dealer with the greatest stable of artists. He knew everything about art and nothing about dealing. Otto van de Loo (b. 1924) was Drouin's German parallel, who luckily for all concerned knew plenty about both.

<sup>11</sup> Dear Friend,

You have surprised me with the most amazing gift of my life: you cannot imagine the intense and profound joy that flooded me this morning. This painting, as I knew it from the instant I saw it, belongs to the Great Sacred, and that it came to me I take as a solemn sign. I would have never believed that Lautréamont's words could find an equally praiseworthy image, by which I was stupefied, its perfect adequacy having hit me the moment I entered your home. I was afraid you might be a bit cross at me for my rush in urging you to exhibit it (with many other works) but you know as well as I do that it was but a surge in the mounting exhilaration I experienced as you kept on revealing to me your paintings. I only wish that everyone deserving to see them would share my enthusiasm. I have no idea, Judit Reigl, how to describe the present you have given me. It still didn't sink in, you see. For a woman, you possess astounding talent, and I expect you to achieve true greatness. Let me express my sincerest emotion and absolute admiration.  
André Breton

<sup>12</sup> It is not that the two people dearest to her became suddenly unworthy. On the contrary: larger than life, they were just asserting themselves, not unlike the gods of Greek mythology, whose moral code the Fourth-Century monk Evagrius Ponticus and the Sixth-Century pope Gregory the Great turned into their Seven Deadly Sins.

<sup>13</sup> An apt description of most paintings from Reigl's later *Mass Writing* (1959-65) series.

<sup>14</sup> Reigl sees a portent in the surname of her New York dealer, the writer of these lines, Gat. "Gát" means "dam" in Hungarian.

<sup>15</sup> Already as a student at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Reigl preferred spatula to paintbrush. The feel of the hard metal agreed with her as much as the softness of a brush felt alien. The one brush she did use at times was a foot wide hard-bristle one, made for construction work. While throughout her career Reigl kept making tools as she needed them, she used one – a section of an iron curtain rod she bought at the flea market and bent-with her bare hands in 1952 – for over five decades.

<sup>16</sup> Reigl says, referring to her method of "complete automatic writing:" *Going beyond Surrealism via* [using the tools of] *Surrealism*. (A literal translation of the French original, *Un dépassement du surréalisme par le surréalisme même*, would be *Overtaking Surrealism through Surrealism itself*.)

<sup>17</sup> *My painting was not as much informed by the Surrealists, as shared in what informed them. As someone wrote it once: "Judith Reigl has nothing in common with the Breton circle, she represents a timeless surreality, the visionary, cosmic view. Not the school, the centuries old tradition it made its own." Not the method, if there was any, a certain way to look at things...think of Goya, the Surrealist works of Picasso. The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch did much more than just influence me. I appropriated a number of its elements in various paintings.* (J. R.)

<sup>18</sup> Reigl works in series. She usually does not sign and date her paintings until she is asked to when they are bought by someone or exhibited somewhere, as her paintings are never "finished," only "no longer worked at." In general, before a painting leaves her studio, she signs her surname and the last three digits of the year. The exceptions are the first and last paintings of the given series, which works she signs and dates on instinct right as she makes them, always including the month. A painting may never be "done;" with overpainting it can even become a succession of different ones, but she knows exactly when one series ends and a new one starts.

<sup>19</sup> In certain sense and only in order to make sense of them, one can mistake the 1954 ink on paper series for the preparatory drawings that they are not. Reigl's paintings are often compared to musical scores. The 1955 *Outburst* paintings are gestural; it is tempting to see the 1954 drawings as dance notation, shorthand choreography for the eventual gesture.

<sup>20</sup> When she was 19, Reigl made a wish to be granted by no one in particular, as she did not believe in a personified god, for the ability to go beyond herself, her person, beyond what, where and who she was. This wish, a constant throughout her life, is a key to understanding Reigl's method of "complete automatic writing," in which she is the instrument, the subject and the object. The taking of that crucial step beyond, toward the endless, is enacted as a performance.

<sup>21</sup> Rather than using the pretend-terms psychology or art history, Reigl refers to physics and astronomy when talking about art. Just as the makers of the Bayeux tapestry, Reigl painted numerous eerily accurate diagrams of future discoveries. Incidentally and inadvertently, Reigl fully realized the ideas put forth in Lucio Fontana's 1947 Spatialist Manifesto.

<sup>22</sup> If the paintings are explosions, the drawings were the fuse. As for the matter that exploded, the astrophysical formula of one part regular (accumulated in 1954) to six parts dark (a childhood trauma) holds-the obviousness of which was pointed out to Reigl by a psychologist that happened to be present at the first exhibition of the *Outburst* series (Galerie René Drouin, 1956).

<sup>23</sup> What was *mezzo (del cammin di nostra vita)* in Dante's time is more like *terzo* in ours, at least for Reigl.

<sup>24</sup> Indomitable; unwieldy; elusive; celestial; uncontainable; *Oeuvre au noir*, as in the Black Work of alchemy (the First Stage) and the Marguerite Yourcenar title for a novel, reading which one could learn plenty about what motivates Reigl. Subject = object = target.

ENDNOTE: The text above is a summarized remix of taped interviews with Reigl, recorded in August 2014. All events are described by splicing together the artist's own words, while the hagiographic tone of the unsolicited hypotheses and far-fetched assumptions belongs to the author. The catalog essay of the first Reigl exhibition at Ubu Gallery (2010), New York, and Laurentain Gallery, Brussels (2013), *Panta Rei*, includes helpful biographical information. Both texts, which, on second thought, should be read together, forgo art history for personal history and present the writer's subjective take on the artist and her art.