

Judit Reigl: Late Paintings and Drawings

Unfolding (Phase IV – Anthropomorphism), 2008, and Birds, 2012

by Janos Gat

The painting series Unfolding (Phase IV – Anthropomorphism) projects immediacy and power. Emerging from an oeuvre that won its freedom hard and is incomparable in many respects while unique in every way, Reigl's up-to-date generation of works demonstrates an eternally young way of being.

—Marcelin Pleynet¹

Fighting to get free is essential. Where I encountered a border, I had to breach it. If there was a wall, I had to break through it, be that brick between rooms, or a canvas saturated with paint. I always wanted to free myself, in life and in my work. Now, looking at this world already as from another planet, I still would like to break free.

—Judit Reigl²

Judit Reigl's late large canvases, from 2008, are populated by outlines of the human body rising in outer space, and her late large works on paper—two dozen floor-to-ceiling scrolls from 2012—by birds that overwhelm the sky. No wonder: throughout her life Reigl felt the pull of an anti-gravitational force, and is still now—in her ninety-third year—obsessed with flight. Not the specific flight of humans, birds, or vessels, but pure flight, free of limbs and wings, mechanisms and physics.

To approach Reigl's late series, it helps to start with her start. Her first drawing at the age of three depicted a coffee grinder. She drew the whole apparatus, but was really intrigued only by the cast-iron handle, the lithe shape twisting gracefully into a knob, the fluid curve stretching in mid-air over its wooden pendant. This first drawing led to scores of similar childhood drawings: repeated renderings of the hovering arc, with a dangling contraption anchoring it to the presupposed ground. As would be the case with the adult Reigl, a first work begets a series.

Reigl's first Surrealist painting, *They Have an Insatiable Thirst for Infinity (Ils ont soif insatiable de l'infini, 1950)* pictures the four horsemen of the Apocalypse soaring above a landscape from which the "scape" has been determinedly obliterated. According to Reigl, eight successive versions of hills, mountains and seas lie hidden under the final bare marshland, which is marked by random hoof prints. When Reigl painted the first work in her signature style, *Outburst (Éclatement, 1955)*, she did away with the very notion of the ground itself. No one, not even the painter, can say exactly what triggers artistic activity. But it can safely be said that Reigl spent the nine decades since that first drawing discarding incidental ballast—ground, matter, gravity—to distill the essence, the pure experience of flight.

While an upward drift is apparent in almost every Reigl composition, the pair of late series—*Unfolding (Phase IV – Anthropomorphism)*, 2008, and *Birds*, 2012—treat ascendance as both subject and theme. Both bodies of work were meant to be exhibited together as integral sets.³ Furthermore, and not incidentally, each defiantly uplifting and exhilarating set can be interpreted as a memorial to a personal loss beyond words.

The *Unfolding (Phase IV – Anthropomorphism)* polyptych commemorates Betty Anderson (1918–2007), Reigl's companion. Anderson, a gifted sculptor—the pupil and friend of Henry Moore—renounced her own artistic career to accompany Reigl throughout hers. Anderson was the first person to see almost every painting and—as the director of Galerie Rencontres in Paris—exhibited many for the first time. She enabled the artist to work as freely as possible for five decades. *Unfolding (Phase IV – Anthropomorphism)*, Reigl's requiem for Anderson, was the first series the artist painted while living on her own.

For Reigl, Anderson's death meant absolute disengagement:

I experienced what the occasion called for and feared that I would not be able to paint ever again—until three months later miraculously I could. I was sucked into a vacuum for these three months—not too long an interval all considered—facing nothingness.

Tackling it, instead of trying to keep my feet on the ground, I went under—following my father. Then, if not exactly resurrected, I was shaken awake. It felt very strange, just as it must have felt in 1955 or in 1973, when I lived through my previous breaks.

With Betty dying, it stands to reason that my world would immediately collapse. Already, during her illness, for a year or two, I could not paint. Devoting myself to her care, I

ceased all artistic or so-called artistic activity, and this without a moment of regret. It meant no sacrifice for me, nothing of the kind; it just fell away, like a leaf off a branch in October. I lost my motivation and had no desire to work, no ambition whatsoever. Then came the void. It set in the moment she passed away: everything left me, spirit, desire, all.

Suddenly, a jolt came from within, a shock that sprung me out of the self-entombment, or how should I put it ... a crack of light, an opening. Life is strange, but in a different way for everyone. For me it is strange in that at first things go well, and then I experience this break. Hopelessness, hesitance, abandonment, aimlessness, indirection ... and then, I don't want to say resurrection ... I get this sudden lift, an awakening ... this happens every time as a distinct event. It is not that first I get myself and the studio ready, and then I start to paint my brand new series. Unexpected as the break comes, as startling is the start.⁴

Late works will often sum up an oeuvre, if not by design then by fate. In 2008 Reigl painted the first four canvases of the *Unfolding Phase IV* polyptych in quick succession. The slightly larger fifth, which to all appearances is their summary, was painted soon after. When asked if she had set out to make a polyptych, Reigl answered "I could say yes as well as no ... anything could be true." Notwithstanding Reigl's avoidance of confirmation, the fifth painting maybe said to sum up more than the immediate series: it summarizes Reigl's whole painterly oeuvre.

In making the *Unfolding Phase IV* polyptych—her final large-scale paintings—Reigl had no ultimate statement in mind:

I don't function on my own accord. I don't like to imagine, to plan ... not only in work: I never plan my vacations. I paint without preconceptions, without knowing what comes next, then I see what I have done, which can take months, and then it all comes together. The motion is always there, in the making and in the painting. Elements levitate, figures fly, things appear and vanish when I remove what I find superfluous. Movement is ever-present, the basis for everything; there is a constant flow in the work and in the works. In my first series of outlines, in *Facing...* the human form appears in a doorway, in *Out* in an unspecific place, in the *9/11* series in relation to collapsing towers, and, in *Unfolding Phase IV*, fully disengaged, the human forms break free out in deep space.⁵

Starting to feel her age, Reigl gave up on making large canvases after 2008. In 2009 she cut up a number of earlier, less successful paintings to generate an enticing series of small works. It was clear to Reigl that to go on living, she would have to embark on a new and demanding project. If she could not paint on a large scale, she could certainly draw. But to get the effects she wanted, she would need the right kind of paper, something more industrial than could be found in an art supply store.

Besides the right kind of paper, Reigl also needed the spark that would make her want to work again. This inactivity was not an artist's block; she felt she had lost, if not the will, then the muscle and agility. She also thought, after seven decades of daily effort, that she had produced enough. Reigl had never accepted any commission to do a work, nor had she ever done an illustration. So it was natural for her to politely decline the well intentioned phone offer, done perhaps in jest, by a writer/art dealer friend, commissioning her to do one hundred drawings, the last of which would illustrate the cover of his not yet published book. However, when they next talked on the phone, her friend, no longer jesting, also proposed a New York gallery exhibition for the drawings as soon as they were finished.⁶

Slowly, Reigl warmed, certainly not to the commission, the illustration, or the exhibition, but to the stimulus to resume working. About a month after the offer, her friend brought a dozen rolls of plotter paper, which matched in width the no longer manufactured offset paper that Reigl had used to make her 1958–59 and 1965–66 ink series.⁷ To coax her to start, her friend quickly organized a video session to document the artist working in her studio—a first for Reigl, who had never before painted in front of an audience.⁸ She agreed to the video only conditionally, since she was still not sure how the ink would adhere to the paper. Then, on the day before the scheduled shooting, Reigl made her first and instantly satisfying test drawing on a roll of paper unfurled on the floor.⁹

Reigl defied the physical ravages of time in her documented video performance.¹⁰ Her work is consummately gestural and she is active and forceful in the extreme. She invests essentially her all in every move, and now admits that while working on her new series there were times she was not sure she would live long enough to complete the entire length of paper laid before her. She believes there was a distinct possibility that she would end up dead on the floor among her scrolls. She could well have scored her last gasps with the inkblots that marked her passage along the paper. The late scrolls are in fact Reigl's requiem for herself, her final farewell to gestural painting and to the unhindered freedom she had found only in her work.

The scrolls were originally all done horizontally, with the paper extending across the full length of the room. Once the ink had dried, most were cut into smaller sections, while certain were kept whole. Editing her new work, Reigl realized that the harder it became for her to advance along the paper, the more her ink marks came to resemble birds of one kind or another.¹¹ By 2012 Reigl deliberately drew only birds. One visitor to her studio grew anxious at the sight of her ominously circling vultures, while others were enthralled by how regally her eagles soared. Regardless of the species, the winged creatures were awe-inspiring. Reigl may have lost some muscle strength but had lost none of her artistic power.

Reigl's oeuvre culminates in a crescendo: in the summer of 2012, the artist shifted her compositions to a vertical orientation, making the flocks appear to be flying up and away. It was as if she were lifting herself up from the ground along with her *Birds*. Throughout her life Judit Reigl painted with all-out motions that engaged her entire body. She would fling her limbs in every direction; her gestures filled and ruled the space. By making her late ink-on-paper works while crawling on all fours, Reigl learned how to fly on instinct, patterns of flight having evolved from swimming, and swimming from the crawl.

The upward drift of the outlined bodies in the late paintings takes place in an apparently endless cosmos; the birds in the late ink drawings aim for the open sky. Lautréamont's famously borrowed phrase "insatiable thirst for infinity" could have been a title as fitting for Reigl's late series as it was for her first Surrealist painting—or would be for the Reigl biography still to be written.

As Reigl patiently explains:

I always had an inner urge to reach infinity and touch the stars.¹² Humans strive for what is impossible in a human body, and can only be approximated in art. I was never concerned with perspective in the proper sense, and by now I have outgrown it. I am ready to unite with space and the void.

—Janos Gat, September 2016

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¹ From the catalog essay of the *Unfolding (Déroulement)* exhibition at the Janos Gat Gallery (New York, 2009).

² This essay is based on—and Reigl is quoted from—three interviews with the artist by the author (August 2014, August and September 2016).

³ *Déroulement (Phase IV– antropomorphie)*, 2008, is a series of mixed-media canvases, four measuring 220 x 195 centimeters and one measuring 225 x 225. *Oiseaux (vertical)*, 2012, is a series of two-dozen scrolls, the paper measuring 62 centimeters in width and approximately five meters in height. Both series are presented as integral sets in the Merchant House exhibition. (Reigl had worked on a few more canvases in 2008, which could also be considered to belong to *Déroulement (Phase IV– antropomorphie)*. There are also dozens of late 2011 and early 2012 horizontal works in the *Birds* series—the paper measuring 62 centimeters in height—several are five meters wide, and others range from approximately one to three meters.)

⁴ Reigl refers to her father, Antal Reigl, who was entombed for three days beneath the rubble of an explosion at the siege of Przemysl, the Verdun of the Eastern front during World War I, and then miraculously rose from the dead. Her “previous breaks,” which began at the end of 1954 and then again at the end of 1972, were two roughly six-month periods of hiatus from work. Out of the first break came the *Outburst* series and, from the second, the *Drape/Decoding* series. Following Anderson’s death, Reigl painted the last canvases of the *September 1, 2001 and Ensuing* series before starting the polyptych of *Déroulement (Phase IV– antropomorphie)*.

⁵ Reigl is referring here to the series *Face á...*, 1988–90; *Hors*, 1993–1999; *New York, 11 septembre, 2001*, 2011–12.

⁶ The author is that friend.

⁷ István Pankászi, from the Paper Conservation Department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, who had restored numerous works from Reigl’s earlier series, knew which brand would be the closest match.

⁸ Janos Gat (director), Nikhil Melnechuk (camera), and Dmitriy Rozin (camera and editing), *Judit Reigl, Chinese Ink on Paper*, Janos Gat Gallery, 2010. (<https://vimeo.com/18627622>) The video was presented as part of the exhibition, *Judit Reigl* at the Rooster Gallery, NY, and was released as a DVD insert in the exhibition catalog, *Judit Reigl: “Unfolding” Unfolding*, Ubu Gallery, NY (2011). Rozin edited the footage to the soundtrack of György Kurtág’s piano arrangement for four-hands of Heinrich Schütz, *The Seven Last Words of Jesus Christ from the Cross-Fragment*. Reigl made the first scroll on January 21, 2010, and the filming took place on January 22 and 23.

⁹ Working on the unfurled and uncut paper on the floor was a natural expression of Reigl’s longstanding preference for seemingly endless surfaces, for creating “local infinities,” as when she covered the walls of her studio with a continuous roll of canvas to make the *Unfolding* series of the 1970s.

¹⁰ *Unfolding (Abstract) / Déroulement (Abstract)*, 2010–11. [The ink on paper series] is the graph of Reigl’s life-trajectory, in which the signs of her total automatic writing—her musical notation as effaced traces—keep unfolding, signifying the process they are part of. Making [these drawings] Reigl uses both hands: one clutches the loose end of a heavy roll of paper—seven yards or more, pulled to the length of the studio—and the other moves the ink-saturated sponge, a violin player fingering the chords while drawing the bow. As in music, there is no question of speed, only tempo. A lightning-quick movement does not imply speedy execution. As for a musician, fast or slow means the same: time is subject to timing. (J. G., exh. cat., Ubu Gallery, New York, 2011.)

¹¹ The bird motif can often be found in, or read into, Reigl's abstract works, notably *Outburst (No. 2)*. Quite a few paintings from the *Man* series (1966–72) are comprised of forms that seem to resemble birds.

¹² Reigl alludes to Horace's grandiloquent "sublimi feriam sidera vertice," ("raised up, my head touching the stars.") from Ode 1.1, which she adored reading in Latin class at the age of sixteen.