

Judit Reigl

Unfolding and History

by Marcelin Pleynet July/October 2008

“You possess astonishing means, and I can see you achieving great things.” –André Breton, 1954

INTRODUCTION

The first text that I wrote about Judit Reigl followed my discovery of the artist in early 1975. At the time, she was represented in Paris by Galerie Rencontres; as for me, I was working with Philippe Sollers, editing and managing the review *Tel Quel*. I went to see the artist's paintings at Rencontres.

The gallery, located behind Les Halles, was initiated by Betty Anderson—a pupil of Henry Moore—whom Judit Reigl had met during her first journey to Italy in 1947, and with whom she remained until Anderson passed away in 2007.

I came to Reigl's mature work and her adventurous life at the same time, and they both made a strong impression—that only deepened when I had the pleasure of visiting her studio in Marcoussis, a village outside Paris where she withdrew in the early 1960s. The place, which was dear to Corot, and where, in June of 1886, Cézanne painted in the studio of Villeveille (known for historical scenes and portraits, a student of François Granet, born in 1829 and died in 1916 in Aix-en-Provence) is today an isolated township with little cultural interest.

Everything connected to Reigl's oeuvre is surprising. And, for a writer, no doubt as much her biography as her bibliography. One could not fail to be impressed by what André Breton wrote back in 1954 about a painting whose title, *They Have an Unquenchable Thirst for the Infinite*, is borrowed from Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*. Addressing Judit Reigl in a letter months after his visit to the studio of the unknown painter who was still new to Paris, André Breton wrote: “You cannot imagine the solemn joy that flooded me this morning. This painting, the moment I saw it, I knew that it communed with the Great Sacred... I would never have thought that Lautréamont's words could find an image equally exalted, the full adequacy of which struck me the moment I entered your place.”¹

One must see the painting to realize just how justified André Breton was in this letter and the text that he wrote about Judit Reigl in *Surrealism and Painting*. It is important to note

that I belonged to a group that placed great importance on Lautréamont, about whom I edited a volume in the *Seuil Écrivains de toujours* collection in 1967 (a book whose success got me an invitation to teach at an American university in Chicago), in order to appreciate the kind of impression and certainty that I had. In short, Judit Reigl's work struck a powerful chord in me from the first. When the painter presented her major *Unfolding* series in the 1970s, I wrote an essay about her in 1975 entitled “On Painting as Sign.”²

At the request of the artist and the galleries representing Reigl, I continued to regularly publish my admiration for her work. Judit Reigl's bibliography, culminating in 2001 with a major monograph for *Éditions Adam Biro*, proves that I never ceased to support and celebrate her art. Needless to say, this time too I was quick to agree and give my absolute support, especially when I heard that the artist had in fin decided to place her oeuvre under the generic title of *Unfolding*. It goes without saying that I have included her in the various events to which I have been invited to contribute, whether in France, at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1979, in *Art Currents in France 1968-1978*, *The Choices of Marcelin Pleynet*, or abroad (Italy, Germany, Luxembourg), in *Twenty Years of Art in France: 1960/1980*.

THE WORLD OF SIGNS

Tracing the full trajectory of the oeuvre, a unique signature appears that prompts and justifies, step after step, the passage from one series and period to the next. But there is something that distinguishes *Unfolding* (1974-1984) from the preceding series of *Outburst*, *Mass Writing*, *Guano*, *Man*, and *Drape/Decoding*. The *Unfolding* paintings were executed while Reigl walked along the canvas. The artist herself provided us with the key to this adventure in December, 1977, in the catalogue of her solo exhibition at the Maison de la Culture in Rennes.

“*Unfolding*:

Phase one: I roll out a reel of fine cotton (240 cm wide) starting from one corner of the studio, stapling only the top edge, to blocks of varying dimensions and at different angles created by

my old paintings leaning against the wall, so the different planes, jutting out or receding, cover the entire length of the studio, eliminating the empty space between the groups of paintings. Another section of the wall is covered, and then the door, the fabric hanging vertically over these last two. Here we have a white path, uninterrupted, flowing, turning, changing direction at the corners, *straddling obstacles*, passing at once in front of and behind me, stopping at last when it runs out of space.

Phase two: I turn on the radio and find music, not to stimulate or inspire me, but rather to direct the range of my movements and gestures—physically—by concrete external imposition. I *step forward* touching, punctuating, and skimming the canvas at each step with a homemade brush dipped in enamel paint. Step by step, I capture and release horizontal snippets. I start at the top left and progress to the right, stretching at first; then I fill the space, bending lower and lower, while continuously adapting the music's frequency to the rhythm of my body, or the rhythm of my body to the music's frequency. If the music stops, I stop; if it changes, I continue—by discontinuing—until the inscription, fully decoded, covers all the available space (leaving gaps only where the pictorial field is without underlying support, or where it is cut by silence or broken by angles or protuberances.)”

I quote this at length because Judit Reigl reveals—better than I could—the creation and composition of the great canvases of the *Unfolding* series. And also, because she connects them by *taking steps, by stepping forward*. Hers is a process of rigorous poetic logic. And we can't help but notice that this sort of account and process is not unrelated to what, on a certain day in March 1950, altered the artist's destiny. That is to say, the crossing of the Hungarian border, on foot, in a forced march. Her escape from the Stalinist regime...her choice of freedom.³ Contemplating these apparent abstractions that induce the notion of “unfolding,” we are immediately struck by the esthetics, the beauty of the paintings—just what gives them their ultimate relevance. And just as it would be hard to miss the graphic integrity of the oeuvre, it would be hard not to connect the signs in *Unfolding* with musical notes. Was not one of the works of the *Unfolding* series called, in 1982, *Art of the Fugue*? In this case we should interpret “fugue” as related to the art of flight (from the Latin *fugere*), from a place in which one lives more or less freely—in Reigl's case less so—or from which one must escape, crossing the no man's land, defying the borders.

As Judit Reigl says, both senses are correct. The first: during two years, working almost daily to the music of Bach in order to find, in body and mind, the primeval motion and rhythm of all music, painting and poetry (Proust, Joyce, Hölderlin, right down to Marcelin Pleynet). The second: nothing in the artist's oeuvre allows us to forget the singular experience that was, for her, the choice of freedom. Should we forget, she would not

miss a chance to repeat it and expound on it. In particular, in *Art press* No.5: “I have breached, in this very instant, the Iron Curtain (a narrow minefield corridor bordered by two barbed wire fences, a no man's land fifty meters wide on either side). I have just crossed right over the mines...”

The oeuvre starts, at the time when André Breton became aware of it, with the painting *They Have an Unquenchable Thirst for the Infinite* in 1950, based on a particularly revolutionary but seldom read work of literature, *The Songs Of Maldoror*. In all cases, Judit Reigl's pictorial intelligence owes much to her literary interests, in particular, her reading of poetry, of words that transform and reveal themselves in their capacity to play with words and forms.

“Mon corps joue le jeu dont
je suis la Règle.
Règle du jeu, je de Reigl
Déterminé. Déterminant.
Un corpuscule de l'Univers.
Un 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
Resolved. Resolute.
A particle of the Universe.
A particle of the universe
Is the Universe.

(J.R.1985)⁴

HOW FREEDOM COMES TO PAINTING

Above all, liberation is intrinsically tied to the artist's destiny. Judit Reigl's biography testifies to that, and so does her interpretation of dissent from March of 1950: “I left one bloc so as not to belong to any other.”

In such a case, everything happens quickly and more quickly still. *They Have an Unquenchable Thirst for the Infinite* was completed during the first year of Judit Reigl's stay in Paris in 1950, followed, between December of 1952 and January of 1953, by *Incomparable Delight* (title also borrowed from Lautréamont). Already in 1952, the astonishing *Interrogation of an Object* (50x60 cm) evoked Cézanne's statement that had made such an impression on the cubist painters: “Approach nature with a cylinder and a sphere, align everything in perspective, point every side of an object or plane towards a focus.” If we wish to understand it for Judit Reigl as we do for Cézanne, then “nature” cannot be separated from the nature of painting. The deliberate composition of this small painting

would lead to more. Judit Reigl executed it using the first object at hand: a rectangular box with which she worked directly, moving it across the canvas through the thick layer of wet paint. And already, in this spontaneous gesture of taking the first object she could find—to create, by unreservedly throwing herself into the widening chasm of the painting—there is a real breakthrough that goes beyond trivial surrealist dream-imagery. Surrealism outdone by Surrealism itself.

In short, from this moment on, Judit Reigl kept from Surrealism what had made the movement so original for literature: automatic writing, and what justifies it as an “unfolding,” the engagement of “mental automatism complemented by corporeal movement.” Hers was a genuine artistic revolution, chronologically parallel to the triumphant one in the United States that established the prestigious New York School. The paintings that followed at the end of the 1950s, the *Outburst* (1955/1956) and the *Center of Dominance* series (1958-59), logically prepared the ground for the majestic and beautiful *Mass Writing* series (1958-1965), some of which evoke Clyfford Still, even if their aims are different. She follows another kind of poetic logic, more specifically and fundamentally Surrealist in tone... Freudian, not to say Lacanian.

Knowledge is caught in the net of language and its very intricate conscious, subconscious, and pre-conscious formulas. If we isolate and enlarge each of the signs in the suites of *Unfolding*, the call to mind a Chinese ideogram, a script with which Judit Reigl, though she speaks at least three languages (Hungarian, French, German), is not familiar. But Reigl did write: “One of the most significant responses to the search for depth is *Chinese space*. Contrary to Western perspective, which narrows, that of China opens up onto infinity, and simultaneously swoops and soars.” In all cases, visual associations will not reveal how the young artist was formed by the fundamentally European biographical experience of dissidence.

A SCIENCE OF PAINTING

In this context, I would like to note a few elements that play a specific and defining role in the creation of Judit Reigl’s works:

1. an obvious passion for a knowledge tied to poetry—that is to say, a true love of reading.
2. the decades of relative isolation in Marcoussis that could only facilitate and deepen this type of reflection and meditation.
3. the fact that this isolation was contemporary with numerous experiments then under way in the avant-garde, with certain studies of literary theory in France: such as the activity of the formalists... also, the updating of the science of “semiotics,” which joined together linguistics, psychoanalysis and esthetics, notably in the

circle of the journal *Tel Quel*, the works of Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva.

The horizontal *Unfolding* series, which, in 1983/84, turned into the vertical one entitled *Hydrogen, photon, neutrinos*, reveals the wide range of Judit Reigl’s concerns at that time. What we also see in following the “unfolding” of her oeuvre is that the series engender far more than succeed each other. What seems surprising at first was already present in the preceding series, and has been developing quite naturally. Decades later, this is particularly striking. When the doors appeared in the series *Entrance-Exit*, we find again in the 1980s something that had already made a strong impression between 1958 and 1962 in certain paintings of the *Guano* series. *The Man* and *Drape/Decoding* series (1966-1973) grew into the vast ensemble of *Unfolding* (1974-1979), the graphic qualities of which evoke the gesture manifested in the earlier works. The door appears once more, imposing itself, for example, in three large-scale works of *Unfolding* (220x600 cm) from 1975 (one of them now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York).

The figure, in the Reigl oeuvre, is presented with a very particular intelligence that is not of a naturalist’s world. She uses words to “decipher” or “decode” her figures, notably the figures in the *Man* series, which have obviously survived the no man’s land of the border—the border that must be crossed in order to arrive, nude or draped, and achieve truly liberated painting. In one of the works of *Entrance-Exit*, the figure of a young man returns, standing, arms hanging straight down; this figure would define the series from the late 1980s and early 1990s entitled *A Body in the Plural* (title from Spinoza). This freedom is rooted in Reigl’s relations with the language of poetry, and with her native Hungarian, itself a very flexible language. It is a poem by one of the most famous Hungarian poets, Attila József, that Reigl evoked in the 1960s when she borrowed the title *Guano*. Then, after 2000, the title of the series *Priceless Body* was borrowed from Rimbaud.

PAINTING AND BIOGRAPHY

The explanation that Picasso felt obliged to give for the very precise dates (day, hour, month, year) that quickly accompanied his signature at the bottom of his paintings—“There will doubtless be a day when men will have developed a science to explain various aspects of the works”—can, in many respects, also be applied to the paintings of Judit Reigl.

We must keep in mind the important biographical event that the decision to leave Hungary represented for the artist, crossing the border that would allow her to paint *without borders*, she, all the while, remaining profoundly occupied and preoccupied by this passage, and by the fact that this passage should be through, precisely, a *no man’s land*.

The painting of Judit Reigl (paradoxically, the monumental series of Man is the proof) can be defined no more as what announces itself as “abstract painting” (unless all painting, *per se*, as a means of representing things symbolically, is essentially abstract) than with “figurative painting.” It is what all artwork should be—defined only by itself, within no apparent context.

The disdain for borders is without doubt an essential structural element of Judit Reigl’s oeuvre. It is, in any case, on the basis of this element and its existential consequences that, today, once more, in its fullest exposition, I shall interpret the thought and work of Judit Reigl, which from my point of view are peerless.

NOT TO CONCLUDE

Judit Reigl was born in Kapuvár, Hungary, in 1923, which means she is now eighty-five. This is what that I would classically consider, spontaneously—and against current dogma—the age of a painter’s maturity. It is, at any rate, the age at which the work is done without the least sign of hesitation.

And that is precisely what I observe looking back on the extremely coherent ensemble presented by the career of this artist, who, since her homage to Malevich’s *The Man Who Runs* in 2000, is secure enough to open and maintain a dialogue with the greats.

Her most recent drawings, after historically recognised artists, demonstrate clearly and with verve this new interest, which we must place between Alberto Giacometti and the German Expressionists (Emil Nolde).

The 2008 series *Unfolding (phase IV-anthropomorphism)*⁵, comprising five paintings of 220x200 cm, has exceptional immediacy and power. In them, a “new and young generation” is incarnated by an artist who won her freedom at a price, and they belong to an oeuvre whose every aspect is incomparable and, in many ways, unique.

Judit Reigl is now beginning to be appreciated as one of the greatest painters of her generation. And, while we may regret the fact that recognition of her work by the art market comes rather late, we can also rejoice that her paintings have been acquired by the Musée Nationale d’Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Tate Modern in London. In the United States, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, are currently engaged with this unmistakably decisive and historically significant oeuvre.⁶

- 1 This handwritten letter is reproduced in my monograph of Judit Reigl (Éditions Adam Biro, 2001).
- 2 Text reprinted in 1977 in a volume of essays, *Art et littérature*, published in Seuil’s *Tel Quel* collection.
- 3 See the account given by Judit Reigl in December 1976, published in *Art Press* in March 1977.
- 4 Translator’s note: the poem written by Judit Reigl loses its significance in translation, as it plays on the consonance between the French word, ‘règle,’ (rule) and the similar pronunciation of her surname in French.
- 5 Phase 1: Classic Unfolding (unprimed canvas) horizontal
Phase 2: Art de la fugue (light ground) horizontal
Phase 3: Inscriptions as Broad Flux (with the incorporation of aluminum, bronze and other metals) vertical
Phase 4: Anthropomorphism (polyptych) horizontal
- 6 The editor and dealer, Kálmán Makláry has undertaken the pioneering work of introducing Judit Reigl’s work throughout Europe these past few years with catalogues, books and exhibitions. It was Makláry who, in 2005, brought Janos Gat to her studio; Gat is currently exhibiting her work for the third time at his New York gallery (2007/2008/2009).