

Judit Reigl and the case of the Haptic versus the Optical.

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After hearing of Judit Reigl's passing in August (Kapuvar, Hungary 1923- Marcoussis, France 2020), this text first started as a sort of extended obituary, but soon veered toward a reexamination of a unique artistic legacy. If Judit Reigl is not completely unknown in the US, where she is usually treated with a distant respect by the critics, her unorthodox evolution, with its back and forth between abstraction and representation, has often led to confusion and misinterpretations. We will attempt here to anchor her work in the French art context from the nineteen fifties to the nineteen eighties, where it developed.

In recent years, her presence in New York and the US has been relatively steady, albeit very low key, and it barely registers in today's conversation on abstract painting. Most recently, her painting "Guano (Menhir), 1959-64" was included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2018 Survey "Epic Abstraction", a well-suited title in her case. In 2016, the Allen Memorial Art Museum, in Oberlin, Ohio, organized a comprehensive survey of her work titled "Body of music". In New York, between 2007 and 2009, the Janos Gat Gallery presented three different bodies of work, and in the last ten years the Ubu Gallery organized a few presentations showcasing different series of her work as well. There were also a few "Déroulements" (Unfoldings) paintings on view in Paul Rodgers' Chelsea gallery in 2013.



Guano (Menhir), 1959-64, mixed media on canvas, 73" x 83.5", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC

As she recounted in the French periodical *Art Press* in 1977, Reigl finally escaped out of Communist Hungary in 1950 on her eighth attempt at crossing the all too real mine fields of the iron curtain. After a grueling trek across Europe, she settled in Paris, where her compatriot Simon Hantaï had arrived two years earlier. They had attended the same art school in Budapest during the mid-forties. He promptly introduced her to André Breton and a short Surrealist rite of passage followed for both of them. What interested them in Surrealism was the potential of automatic writing. Unfortunately, by then Breton had already moved away from it in favor of a more literary approach. Hantaï exhibited at the Surrealist gallery *L'étoile scellée* in 1953, and Reigl in 1954. She was the first of the two to break away from the group, a few months after her own opening, and Hantaï followed in 1955. Significantly, the exit from Surrealism was preceded by the discovery of Jackson Pollock's work, a revelation which would take a while to sink in.

Pollock's paintings were seen in Paris for the first time in 1951, *Galerie Nina Dausset*, in "*Véhémences confrontées*", a group show organized by Michel Tapié and Georges Matthieu. Then again in February 1952, at the *Galerie de France* in "*Regards sur la peinture américaine*", an exhibition which was immediately followed in March by his one and only personal show in Paris, at *Studio Facchetti*. Even with that momentum, which would have been impossible without a minimum of interest from local artists and critics, legend has it that no one in Paris took notice. Indeed, perhaps the collectors and the museums did not, but for two anonymous Hungarian immigrants there, these events would turn out to have a profound and lasting impact. To use Thierry de Duve's well coined expression about Rauschenberg acknowledging receipt, forty years later, of Duchamp's 1917's urinal "telegram"; Hantaï acknowledged receipt of Pollock's "telegram" in 1960, with his "*Mariale*" series, and Reigl in 1974 with her "*Déroulements*" (Unfoldings) paintings.



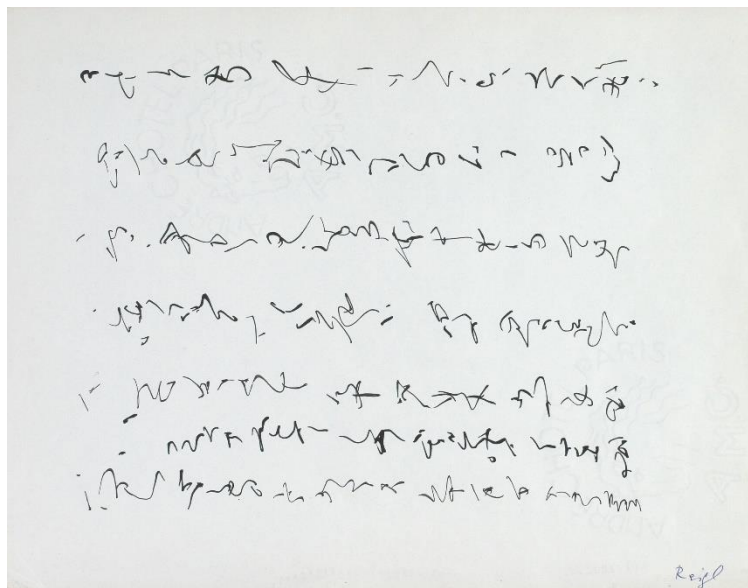
Mass Writing, 1965, oil on canvas, 81" x 92", courtesy Janos Gat Gallery, NY

In today's light, the multiple series from 1955 to 1973, alternating between abstraction and representation, -such as "Eclatements" (Outbursts, 1955-58), "Centres de dominance" (Centers of dominance, 1958-59), "Ecriture en masses" (Mass writings, 1959-65), "Hommes" (Man, 1966-72), "drapés/décodés" (Drape, Decoding, 1973), all seem like a long preamble and a slow build up leading to the "Déroulements" of the seventies. These large abstract paintings would establish her as a major presence on the Parisian art scene. From 1974 to 1982, her most successful period, she was on equal footing with her peer Simon Hantai. No small feat, in view of Hantai's increasing historical status. During that period, even if very distinct from each other, their works follow very similar trajectories. Today, in hindsight, we need to recognize a shared community of spirit in their respective artistic developments. One of the most often cited example being that they would paint on unstretched canvas, and then re-stretch for presentation, as they both rejected the unstretched presentation fashionable then with the French avant-garde. They were seen in France (as was Jean Degottex -another fascinating painter with Surrealist beginnings in dire need of better exposure) as direct precursors and older contemporaries to the Deconstruction of the younger Supports/Surfaces group, whose trademark became, for better or for worse, the loose and unstretched canvas.



Man, 1966, oil on canvas, 100" x 82", courtesy Janos Gat Gallery, NY

Coming on the heels of her “Hommes” and “Décodages” figurative series, Reigl’s “Dérroulements” paintings seem to come out of nowhere. What the Allen Memorial Museum exhibition in Oberlin, Ohio, brought into focus was how much these paintings owed in fact to a lesser known series of drawings from 1965, titled “Ecritures d’après musique” (writing after music), automatic drawings generated by the response to a musical stimulus. With the “Dérroulements”, the mark making evolved from existential gesture on a flat surface, to mark as inscription of the body on an unfurling space. The process that Reigl developed for making these paintings is unusual: loosely hanging large sheets of fabric from the ceiling around the perimeter of her studio, she repeatedly walked along the sheets to the sound of classical music on the radio (mostly J.S. Bach), barely brushing the fabric surface with enamel paint, the enamel slowly seeping into the fabric. Then working on either side (or both) of the canvas, she saturated the background in acrylic washes. The painting finished, she then picked the side she preferred, cropped it, and stretched it for presentation. Beginning in 1975, she benefited from the unconditional critical support of Marcelin Pleynet, editor in chief of *Tel Quel* at the time, and her most lucid exegete to this day.



Writing after Music, 1966, ink on paper, 8.75 x 10.75”, courtesy Janos Gat Gallery, NY

The title of the Oberlin retrospective, “The Body of Music”, did point us in the right direction. Music was indeed an integral part of how the whole body was used as a tool for gesture in Reigl’s paintings. Baroque Music especially, seems to have had an important place in Catholic Hungarian culture: Johann Sebastian Bach for Reigl, Heinrich Schütz for Hantai. It is no coincidence, for example, that Hantai’s three sons became

respected Baroque music instrumentalists. Baroque chamber Music can be as intensely introspective as Baroque Architecture can be exuberant.

But in the mid-eighties, in an unexpected development, figurative silhouettes of floating bodies, reminiscent of the “Hommes” series of the late sixties, reappeared and began to proliferate in Reigl’s paintings, until the last series of the birds (2012), where the weightless bodies of the nineties gave place to primitive bird figures. Many of her initial followers saw these last series as a kind of regression in her evolution. We will return to this aspect of her work toward the end of this essay.

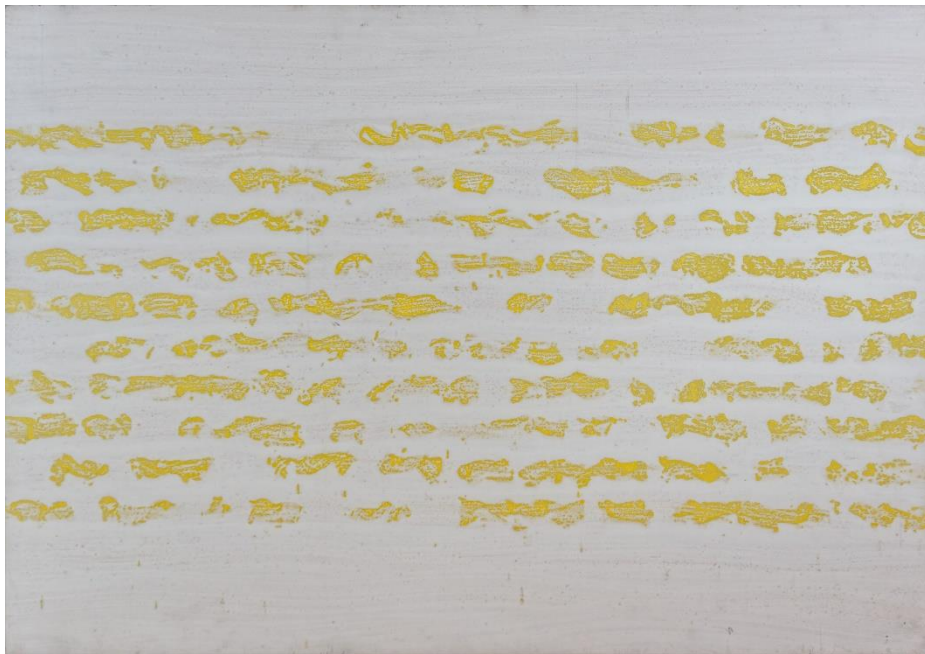
If Pollock extended the automatic drawing technique from a hand gesture to the full body, with Reigl and Hantai, Pollock’s gesture, initially projected on an external surface, is internalized within the painting process through the manipulation of its materials and supports (the unfolding/unfurling for Reigl, the fold for Hantai). With Reigl, the affirmation of a corporeal presence did not depend any longer on the projection of an anxious gesture on a surface, but on the body’s inscription within the medium itself: A very significant shift which resulted in the elaboration of a haptic space, taking in consideration the tactile, physical materiality of the canvas.



Déroulement, 1975, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, courtesy Janos Gat Gallery, NY

For Reigl it meant working on both sides of the painting and developing an unlimited space, for Hantai it would be the invention of the “pliage as method”. In both cases, as French critics would frame it in the

seventies, painting, existing now in the same literal space as the painter's and viewer's body, and in opposition to the American flatness, painting was now approached as volume. Both concepts of the body's inscription and of painting as volume, would become pivotal points in the French critical response to an American discourse which could only conceive of painting as a flat optical surface. This critical construct found a wide echo with French artists at the time and became a central tenet of the discourse around Supports/Surfaces. To contextualize this in the ideological battles of the Vietnam war era, it was also crucial for French critics and artists to distance themselves from Clement Greenberg's narrative of flat opticality, associated outside the US -for right or for wrong- with American cultural imperialism, when most French intellectuals were anti-war, by elaborating an alternative to it. In this context, both Hantaï and Reigl's role in the counter narrative of that period turned out to be much more central than what was initially suspected.



The Art of the fugue, 1980-82, mixed media on canvas, 78" x 120", courtesy Janos Gat Gallery, NY

As his splendid retrospective currently on view at MoMA demonstrates, Donald Judd recognized very early that Greenberg's fixation on opticality had driven painting into a dead end. But his own response of the Specific Object, even if magisterially articulated, was to deny painting any future. And by redirecting the viewer's focus towards the supremacy of a phenomenological eye, the Specific Object still respected Greenberg's preeminence of opticality over any other kind of experience of the work. "The perceiving body",

the subtitle of a Robert Morris traveling exhibition in Europe, presently at the MAMC in St. Etienne, France, is a good example of that approach of a body only tolerated in the work as an eye.

Both Greenberg's and Judd's discourses conveniently expurgated Surrealism and the role of the unconscious from their readings of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism: Pollock's work became perceived primarily through the prism of Action Painting, while Judd's minimalist visual phenomenology, originally intended to reject the limitations of the flatness precept, turned out to be a sublimated exacerbation of opticality, not a rejection of it. In the US, The Post-Minimalist response emphasized this, on one side, through the reintroduction of the role of the unconscious in Eva Hesse's work, as on the other side, Robert Smithson excavated the notion of gravity in Pollock's work to expose its ultimate subtext of Entropy. In Europe, Supports/Surfaces response to Minimalism's positivism was to develop a haptic space for painting and reintroduce the collective unconscious (as sublimated nostalgia of the primitive) through an anthropological focus on artisanal practices.

Coming out of Surrealism, Hantai and Reigl ended up with a very different reading of Pollock. Their understanding of the formal advances of the drippings and of the all-over did internalize the role of the unconscious within the strategies of the medium and allowed them to keep the body engaged in the process.

In "art and Objecthood", his historic article from 1967, Michael Fried, a staunch defender of opticality, chastised Minimalism for being "theatrical". Then in 1980, following up on that idea with "Absorption and Theatricality", which examined two coexisting trends in 18th century painting (for example Chardin's child sitter, absorbed in his/her activity, apparently oblivious of the viewer or turning his/her back to it, and the theatrical staging of this absorption), he articulated the idea of two opposite and coexisting categories. Reframed in today's language of a literal space, what Fried exposed was the contradiction between interiority and the spectacle. Absorption as internalization, as interiority. The introspective versus the spectacular. The contemplative versus the performative. The solitary silence of introspection versus the rhetorical noise of Formalism, as an audience creating, community binding, theatrical discourse. Fried may well have touched on exactly what separated Reigl's and Hantai's reading from the American reading of Pollock's work: the contemplative side and the role of the unconscious versus the performative side of action painting.

Interiority was essential to Reigl and Hantai for their understanding of Pollock's lesson. In fact, it may not be too far-fetched to say that in a typical baroque fashion, with the "Déroulements", Reigl shifted from gravity to gravitas, sublimating Pollock's gravity (and Smithson's entropy) into a Baroque gravitas, and in doing so, circumventing Modernism, opened the way for us to a possible reading of the weightless bodies in her later work.



New York September 11, 2001, 20, oil on canvas, 78" x 56", courtesy Janos Gat Gallery, NY

In a 2009 text, Pleynet quoted this small poem of hers from 1985 (here in English translation):

“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.”

The poem posits the body as a preexisting to the rule: *La règle* (Reigl: the rule, “regel” in German, in French “la règle” ... du jeux/je (the rule of the game -or of the I -same pronunciation). Reigl shows here that she can certainly play French word games. But more importantly, the artist transgresses the name of the father to break the rule of the modernist game, which predicates that abstraction should follow representation and not the other way around. In the French cultural landscape of the seventies, where

Abstraction and Representation were thought to be mutually incompatible, representation coming after abstraction could only be understood as an intellectual flaw and a fatal regression. The perception of Reigl's work has suffered greatly from the intellectual dogmatism of the times.

Both Reigl and Hantaï kept their distance from Deconstruction. Like Agnes Martin, who remained ideologically true to Abstract Expressionism even as she ushered in Minimalism, Reigl remained true to Automatic Drawing as she ushered in a new deconstructed haptic space. It might be worth noting that in a peculiar instance of synchronicity, the Korean Dansaekhwa artist Ha Chong Hyun, while coming out of an entirely different background and context, started pushing paint through the back of his burlap paintings in the early seventies as well. It is very unlikely that Reigl knew of the Korean artist's work (or vice-versa), even if she might have been aware of Lee Ufan's work (another prominent Dansaekhwa member) which was included in the 1971 Paris Biennale and exhibited later in 1975 Galerie Eric Fabre.



Birds, 2012, 165" x 24", ink on paper, courtesy Janos Gat Gallery, NY

It is particularly telling to see how older artists elect to conclude their career and the life adventure of their work. Many artists will end up replaying their "best of" ad infinitum. Hantaï, for his part, decided to stop working altogether, while Reigl chose to follow an inner voice that led her away from abstraction -and from

her audience's expectations- back into representation territory, as she saw no hierarchy between the two. Her late figurative work might sometimes be hard to look at (especially the paintings based on images of the victims of 9/11 jumping off from the burning towers) but are even more difficult to fit in the rest of her oeuvre. But as she mentioned to Jean-Paul Ameline in 2009, in her mind she was coming back full circle to the "Man" paintings of 1966-72. The last "Birds" paintings bring to mind the archetypes of Louis Soutter (1871-1942), the Swiss outsider artist. Come to think of it, the archetype was never too far from her mind, if you consider the torsos of the "Man" series. Perhaps Reigl's last word in painting was to shed all aspirations of Modern Art for the unmediated and haunted truth of Art Brut and, in so doing, to confirm that she did consider herself an outsider right from the beginning. It meant for her that the affirmation of her heterogeneity was more important than securing a place in a tentative historical narrative, as we know them all to be, by now. A reminder, if there needed one, that what great painters are interested in, within their own work, rarely coincides with what a viewer would like to project into it.