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## **JUDIT REIGL - NEW WORKS ON PAPER**

*“An unknown adventure in an unknown space”*

*–Mark Rothko*

Although there is abundant commentary on Judit Reigl's painting by brilliant minds such as André Breton, Marcelin Pleynet, who has been scrutinising her art with precision and talent for more than 40 years, and Jean-Paul Ameline, another perceptive connoisseur of her work, it seems to me very few authors have examined her drawings. The artist did her first informal, detailed drawings in 1954 and then another series entitled *Présence* in 1958-1959. In 1965-1966, following an inflammation of the tendon due to the strenuous efforts required to paint her large canvases, she spent a year producing yet another series of India ink drawings on 21cm x 27cm paper, inspired by her favourite classical and modern composers such as Bach, Berio, etc. The latest series of large India ink drawings were executed in 2009-2010. A careful look at these works gives a glimpse of the exceptional scope of an artistic enterprise stretching over decades, in which Judit Reigl sets forth an unvarying proposition, which she rigorously demonstrates. Her itinerary has been unique and solitary, free and detached, far removed from the artistic fashions, official establishment and movements of the day.

She has abolished once and for all the longstanding separation between painting and drawing. By consistently overcoming the obstacles that held her back, Judit Reigl's work has continued to move forward. Unhindered by a career plan, she has advanced into a wide field of possibilities with complete freedom. Her manner of drawing is richly varied: it can be supple and flow from a single line as if it were concise, careful writing; it can also be condensed, following a powerful rhythm capable of suddenly acceleration. Her writing-drawing is vital energy, both “impulse and beat” to use her own words, akin to what Henri Michaux called “non-evocative ideograms”. Arising before any deciphering or knowledge, they escape from the reductive tyranny of our own alphabet. In her recent drawings, the artist strives to assign equal value to white and black. The hand orchestrates a partition in which alternating rhythms, empty and full spaces, are essential; this breathing is vital for the work, it gives it life, energy and strength. Judit Reigl is seeking to create an infinite space in her drawings, as she does in certain paintings. The white upholds, supports and reinforces the black line. Mallarmé imposed this rule in writing his poetry and some contemporary artists also abide by it, prompting Sam Francis to say: “I feel as though white is the same as the space between things”.

Judit Reigl finds strength in her drawings; at every moment, she is liberating and regenerating herself. She is careful not to rely on her knowledge or experience so that she can lose herself more freely; her gestures are open to accidents, and like her painting, based on the principle of appearance-disappearance. “An artist paints what he must”, Barnett Newman once told an art critic, an observation that clearly applies to Judit Reigl, who has avoided

making calculations or plans throughout her artistic life. Painting is the only thing that matters; the desire and energy are stronger than anything else. Incidentally, an article on her work published in the United States refers to its “explosive energy”, which is a particularly apt way of describing her uncommon determination to move forward each day despite difficulties, illness, the passing years. Judit Reigl continually tests space and experiments with her body. “Sometimes, though not often, the body becomes a very precise instrument.... I am in the now”, she declared in 1990, echoing an earlier remark to Jean-Paul Ameline that “the body is both the most perfect instrument and the most tragic obstacle”. The eternal tension between the intentional, the accidental and the impulsive. The artist, who knows her work and what motivates it so thoroughly, speaks of a flow, a back-and-forth movement between growing and diminishing, merging and separating, exploding and imploding. The wrist and the hand play a partial role in the creative process. “I paint and draw with my whole body, with every square inch of it, all the way to my fingertips”, she says. A seismographic phenomenon, a sudden upsurge from the core of her being that may accelerate of itself, if only to calm down later on. The artist’s allusive field (the eye, the hand) engages the body in its entirety, like the “allusive field of writing” that Roland Barthes speaks of in reference to Cy Twombly. Drawings that palpitate and beat, in which everything communicates and interpenetrates. Infinite lines, rhythmic and instantaneous. Accents, commas, initials, splinters, points of light and shadow; hieroglyphs of energy and vigour, a concentrate of life; very pure works. To express herself, the artist uses the simplest, most reduced means. “Suggest instead of say”, said Mallarmé, to which Wittgenstein replied: “Say something completely new with the oldest means”. Her signs are rebellious and free – “the signs of disobedience” that Henri Michaux talked about with regard to Klee.

Each work is the affirmation of power, of unbridled freedom. The act of drawing refers back to itself and discovers its own accomplishment in the process. The hand loses its way and wanders. Judit Reigl possesses no principle of organisation: she takes over the sheet of paper with immediate energy, her unconscious impulses. The pure joy of creation. To keep making headway, this writing-painting must be responsible, overcome the gratuitousness of the gesture and be open to new risks. A new gesture is required for each new work; the important part remains the energy contained in the lines. Gestures and lines establish space rather than submit to it and drown in it. A telluric dance, crawling along the paper. Ecstatic jubilation in the face of white, but also its reverse side – anguish and doubt. Hence, the essential need to destroy a large number of works, an act that fully satisfies Judit Reigl. There is no question of balance or measure or even beauty. Each work is not only a struggle and a conquest but also a total reappraisal and a re-creation; repetition and facility fall into the category of death. Detach yourself from habits, know-how and everything familiar. Expose yourself, put yourself in danger – that is the philosophy she applies to everything, in her life and in her work.

The speed of execution varies but it is extremely important. Each flash may be interrupted by slowdowns, but in general Judit Reigl works very quickly. Her work obeys the laws of nature and of the body, yin and yang, systole and diastole. Exploring a gesture, an impulse, a line as far as it can go; a gesture that is made and unmade, lines with folds, creases full and empty spaces, like writing. Something resembling a trance. It is amazing to watch the artist working on her recent India ink drawings: she throws herself into the paper with her whole body using sweeping gestures, moving forward on her knees, a faraway look in her eyes, like a shaman. Crawling rhythmically, the ink-drenched instrument in her hand. Pure, powerful acts that bring to life pure, powerful signs that allow for no hesitation, no retouches, no repentance. Looking at the drawings, I think of a wave that gradually transmits its energy, rolling forth and breathing before my eyes. Judit Reigl is always present in the lines; she is

always there in the work. Those wide, generous lines, the spots, the folds of the paper, the splashes, the white spaces, the intervals and the blanks are all physically induced by her. Her work brings to mind Walt Whitman's comment: "Did you think those were words, those straight lines, those curves, those angles, those dots? No, they're not words, the substantial words are in the air, they are in you". Her need for speed resembles de Kooning's concern – "perhaps I paint quickly to hold onto the lightning bolt" – because speed is part of the fight against time, against her body and herself.

Before she begins work, Judit Reigl ritually spreads out seven- to ten-metre-long rolls of paper on the studio floor without attaching them. Then she prepares her instruments – plant sponges – and a large amount of India ink, to achieve a deep, perfect rendering of black. Then she is ready, concentrated, with her hands protected by thick rubber gloves. For the base, she prefers to use paper that is not too soft, with a grain, slightly absorbent and rather narrow (about 70 cm wide), delivered in rolls; she wants the suppleness of a surface that will allow her to work very quickly and withstand the sometimes violent assault of her gestures. Once she has finished working, the long bands of paper enable her to review the drawings and cut up the sheets and "frame" the works if necessary, a technique she also employs for painting. She uses India ink that is both thick and liquid, a very deep black with an almost fleshy density and presence; she does not add anything to the ink, and depending on the gesture, it may be blurred or on the contrary applied thickly to produce a sonorous black.

Judit Reigl works, paints and draws the way some people write an autobiography. From one piece to the next, her work is nourished by memories, successes and hesitations, by exploration and experimentation as well as quotations, testifying to the fact that language, writing and painting merge in her work to enrich a highly original message, which has become essential and indispensable in the art of the early 21st century.

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Published in special issue *Judit Reigl*, *Art Absolument*, October 2010

