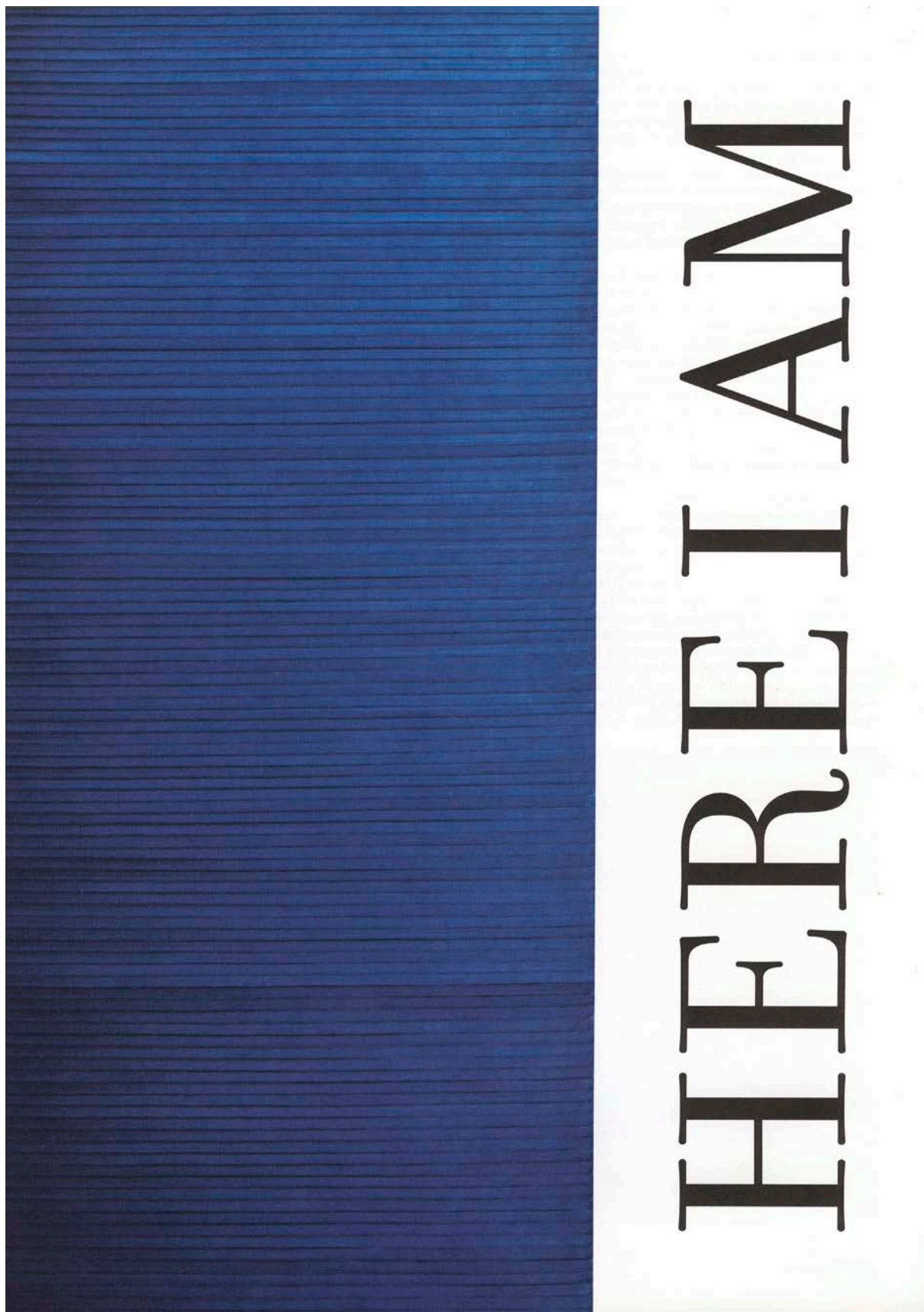


IRMA BLANK — who has been creating her 'writings' for over 50 years — talks to *Barbara Casavecchia* about her relationship to word and image

I AM,

Radical Writings.
Schrift-Atem-Bild 8-6-92
(Text-Breath-Image),
1992, oil on canvas
(diptych), 2 × 2 m.
All images courtesy:
the artist, P420, Bologna,
Alison Jacques Gallery,
London, and Galerija
Gregor Podnar, Berlin



BARBARA CASAVECCHIA Your earliest works from the series 'Eigenschriften' (Self-Writing, 1968–73), were created in response to your move from northern Germany, where you were born, to Syracuse in Sicily. Can you describe how these 'asemic writings' (similar in form to handwriting but meaningless and unreadable) came about?

IRMA BLANK When you arrive in a foreign country and you're no longer surrounded by your native language, you're unable to express yourself to the people you meet, so writing is a kind of escape. The 'Eigenschriften' series employs a language that doesn't belong to any culture – or, perhaps, it belongs to all cultures.

BC Did you choose a German title in order to stress the autobiographical element of the series? Etymologically, 'autobiography' combines three Greek words: *autos* (self, one's own), *bios* (life) and *graphein* (writing). This seems effectively to sum up your practice – particularly since you've always described your artworks as 'writings'.

IB I think whatever you write is autobiographical. All of my work is: whether the signs I make are rigorous or free, small or large, they all express different aspects of myself. I write and recount, yet it also provides an escape because I simultaneously declare something and deny it.

BC The Italian critic Gillo Dorfles describes the precision of your work as 'monastic'.

IB When I first started making my writings, I did not know what I was doing or why. I just knew that every day I had to be punctually at my desk: art commands and you need to do what you're told. You can buy time but then you surrender to it. My first 'Eigenschriften' were very disciplined. To me, one sign represented all the other signs, because they were always the same, yet never identical.

Of course, I need the utmost concentration to make my work – almost to the point of exasperation. My studio is sacred and the door remains closed for hours. Distancing yourself from others in this way can be a form of egoism, a way of carving out personal space. While I am working, I am neither hungry nor in need of anything. A practice



of this kind becomes a kind of trance, a bit like praying. It is a departure from the world around you and a step into your own inner space: my writings are a way of creating something from this.

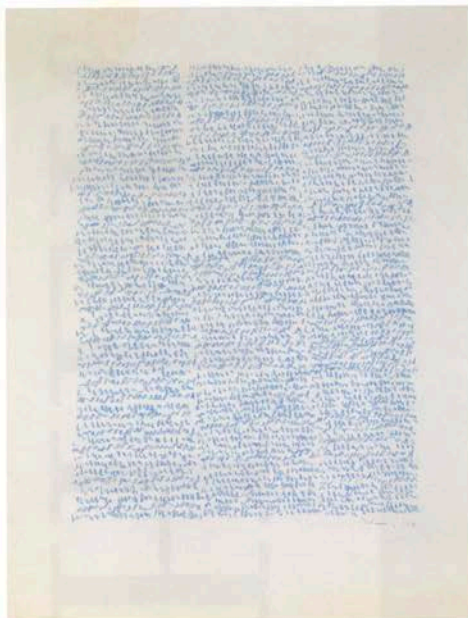
BC The dense signs that form the 'Eigenschriften' series reflect the irregularities and 'hiccups' of handwriting. After moving to Milan in the early 1970s, however, you switched to a more formulaic style for the series 'Trascrizioni' (Transcripts, 1973–79), in which your signs imitate the regularity of typefaces and even the punctuation pauses on the printed page.

IB If, with the 'Eigenschriften', I observed my inner world, with the 'Trascrizioni' series I responded to the world around me: to media, culture and knowledge.

BC Your work has often been discussed and interpreted in relation to minimalism and concrete poetry. I find it fascinating that so many women artists have attempted to structure an alternative language by means of abstraction. I'm thinking of Carla Accardi, Hanne Darboven and Agnes Martin, to name but a few. In 1978, you took part in the exhibition 'Materializzazione del linguaggio' (Materialization of Language) – a section of the Venice Biennale curated by Mirella Bentivoglio that explored the relationship between word, sign and female identity. How do you feel about having your work categorized in this way?

IB Every era has a tendency to want to define itself, without recognizing that labels quickly fade, losing their power and significance. What counts is the doing itself, which gives strength to thoughts and underlines fundamental questions. The focus of my research is the human being who lives, hopes and suffers: it's the relationship between me and you, between one and many. Labels belong to fossils.

BC Is there one particular exhibition that has played an important role in your career?



ABOVE
Radical Writings, Rosa geatmet, rosa geschrieben (Pink Breathed, Pink Scripted), 1987, acrylic on canvas (diptych), 2 × 2.4 m. Photograph: C. Favero

LEFT
Eigenschriften (Self-Writing), 1968, pastel on paper, 40 × 30 cm. Photograph: D. Lasagni

OPPOSITE PAGE
Eigenschriften, Spazio 52 (Self-Writing, Space 52), 1970, pastel on paper, 70 × 50 cm. Photograph: D. Lasagni

IB In 1982, I had a solo show, 'Sette Autoritratti' (Seven Self-Portraits), at Mercato del Sale gallery in Milan. It was a journey from pink to pink-blue created from seven shades of colour that ran along a wall: a bright song divided into seven parts. In each section, the sheets of paper were arranged in rows of seven, both horizontally and vertically: 48 were pure colour fields, while the final self-portrait at the bottom retained a form of 'writing' similar to the 'Trascrizioni'. For me, writing refers to our rational development, while colour refers to our emotional side, to the origins of the self. In that show, for me, being and becoming, inside and outside, came together.

BC In 1984, the Braidense National Library in Milan hosted an exhibition of your work titled 'Libri e giornali' (Books and Newspapers). You've created several artist books but you've also used books as subject matter in your work. Which were the texts that you chose to rewrite for the 'Trascrizioni' series?

IB I have always objected to quoting authors directly, since I don't wish to associate my name to particular poets or writers. By transcribing articles from newspapers, I was embracing the reality of the world around me. In 1994, however, I decided to violate my own rule with my booklet *No Words*. This small publication, which is only 7.5 x 11 cm, paid homage to the first edition of Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937). I transcribed some parts of it that are significant to me and published them opposite a reproduction of the original.

BC It must have been a very time-consuming process.

IB I mainly worked on the 'Trascrizioni' at night, as it was the only time I could concentrate without interruption. I felt the same need to focus intently when I created 'Radical Writings' (1980s–90s). For this series, I used a paintbrush to make long, horizontal marks from the centre of the canvas to the edge, then from the left and the right. It was imperative for me to complete at least one side of the work without stopping. So, before I started, I would spend days preparing everything, stretching the canvas then mixing the colour. To make the work, I needed to get myself into a state of feverish anxiety. When the day to begin painting finally arrived, I would remove all distractions and take the phone off the hook. Occasionally, a noisy passing car or another sudden sound might make me jump, which would be recorded in the painted line. If it was slight, I would keep it in, because the hand is not a machine. In some cases, however, I had to start again from scratch. When you are immersed in that atmosphere of intense thought/non-thought, you become hypersensitive.

BC What is the role of sound in your work?

IB Since writing the 'Eigenschriften', I have become very aware of sound – of my breath, of the scratching of my pen nib on paper. Working alone at night, the more I plunged into silence, the greater my awareness of my breath became: my drafting table became a soundboard, like a drum. I came to realize that this sound was part of the work. In my series 'Radical Writings', it's the duration of my exhalation, rather than the reach of my arm, which determines the length of the brush stroke. I have titled some of my writings *Schriftzug=Atemzug* (Writing=Breathing), because German is a perfect language when you want to express abstract concepts. But each cycle has had its own sound.

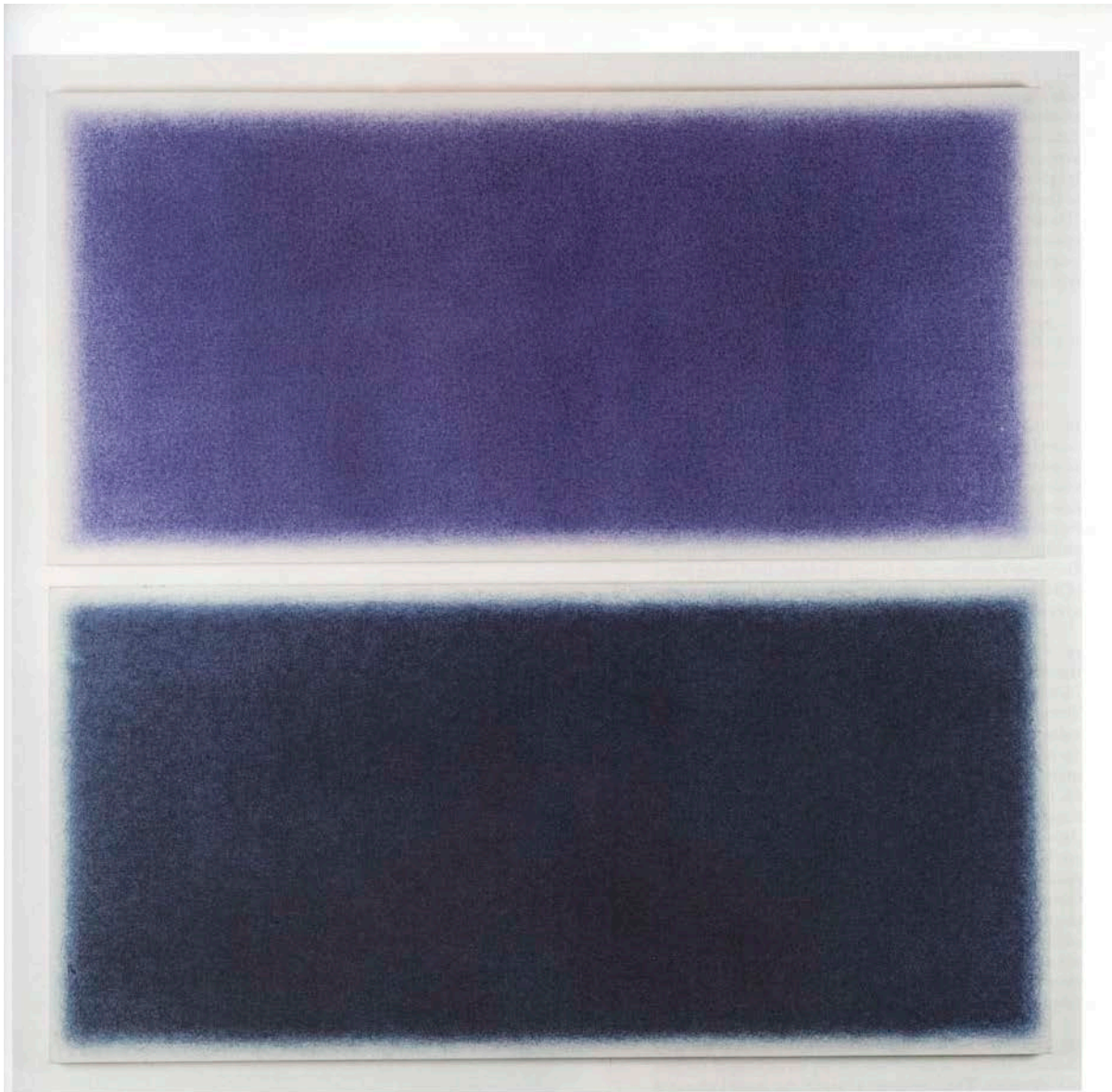
BC In 2005, you released a box set of CDs, *Sign and Sound*, which is a recording of the sounds of the eight series of works that you made between 1968 and 2000.

IB I didn't document each series in its entirety but I sampled my breathing, the sound produced by my writing, my voice humming and 'reading'. For some exhibitions, I made the recordings available to the audience with a set of headphones. On the one hand, there is the visual work; on the other hand, the sound. But it's important

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IRMA BLANK





*“I delete the original words in order to save what I aspire to
— silence, which transcends language.”*

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to me that the audience is free to imagine whatever they want about the recordings: the sounds remain completely open to interpretation. They may also simply think about themselves – the act of listening links the work back to your own body.

bc You did a performance one summer night in 1974, from sunset to sunrise, which, in many ways, was like a live recording.

ib I had this burning desire to make a book at night. So, I invited some friends to my beach house in Sicily and, while they happily feasted, I observed them and wrote on a notepad. It was a beautiful, non-exhibitionist performance, shared by everyone there. I sat in the midst of them and worked non-stop, with full concentration. I used black ink and the marks I made were small and dense. It's all in a book, titled (), which was issued in 1975 by Geiger, a small publishing house run by the poets Adriano Spatola and Giulia Niccolai. The book reproduces the original vertical format of the writing pad and its spiral binding.

bc It's a silent title. In both your writing and recorded work, you never actually 'say' a word.

ib I delete the original words in order to save what I aspire to – i.e. silence, which transcends language. This has been a constant in all phases of my work.

bc What does silence embody for you?

ib Nothing, emptiness, which is in fact everything, because something new can only emerge from a vacuum.

bc Is there a strongly spiritual dimension to your approach?

ib Of course! All of my work is spiritual. I've been told that some people are moved by it and I think it's because they discover silence, pain and aspiration – their human experience – in it. Because, after all, what are we? Nothing. We appear briefly and then disappear.

bc I think that your work also conveys the amount of effort you've put into achieving a certain ...

ib ... discipline! But, also, to learn how to forget it. At the beginning, you establish the rules and you let yourself be driven by them. In exceptional cases, you get to the point where you almost transcend yourself: it's as if all of you is in this gesture, as if you've become air, despite the weight of your physical body.

bc When it comes to our bodies, even if we always repeat the same actions every day, there is still something new to learn.

ib Yes, and then we start all over again. Repetition is a basic element of all of my work. Everything that surrounds us, life itself, is based on repetition.

bc Learning, too, is often grounded in repetition.

ib Everything is. Yet, you cannot make a mark that is identical to another. Not even when it's just a line.

bc What is the role of error in your process?

ib For me, it's not really about errors; it's more a matter of not becoming complacent. Sometimes, when you don't like the result, you need to throw everything away. Repetition has many facets.

bc What you describe seems both spiritual and physical.

ib To create 'Radical Writings', I used piles of bricks – something I still keep in my studio – as stairs to climb up or down in order to reach parts of the canvas. I had to work quickly or else the colour would dry.

bc This reminds me of Haruki Murakami's memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (2007). He describes how writing and training for marathons become two parallel tracks in his life, two forms of rhythm and exercise.

ib Writing is a demonstration of movement: it's like water flowing, the river that runs. One step might seem the same as another, but it's always different.

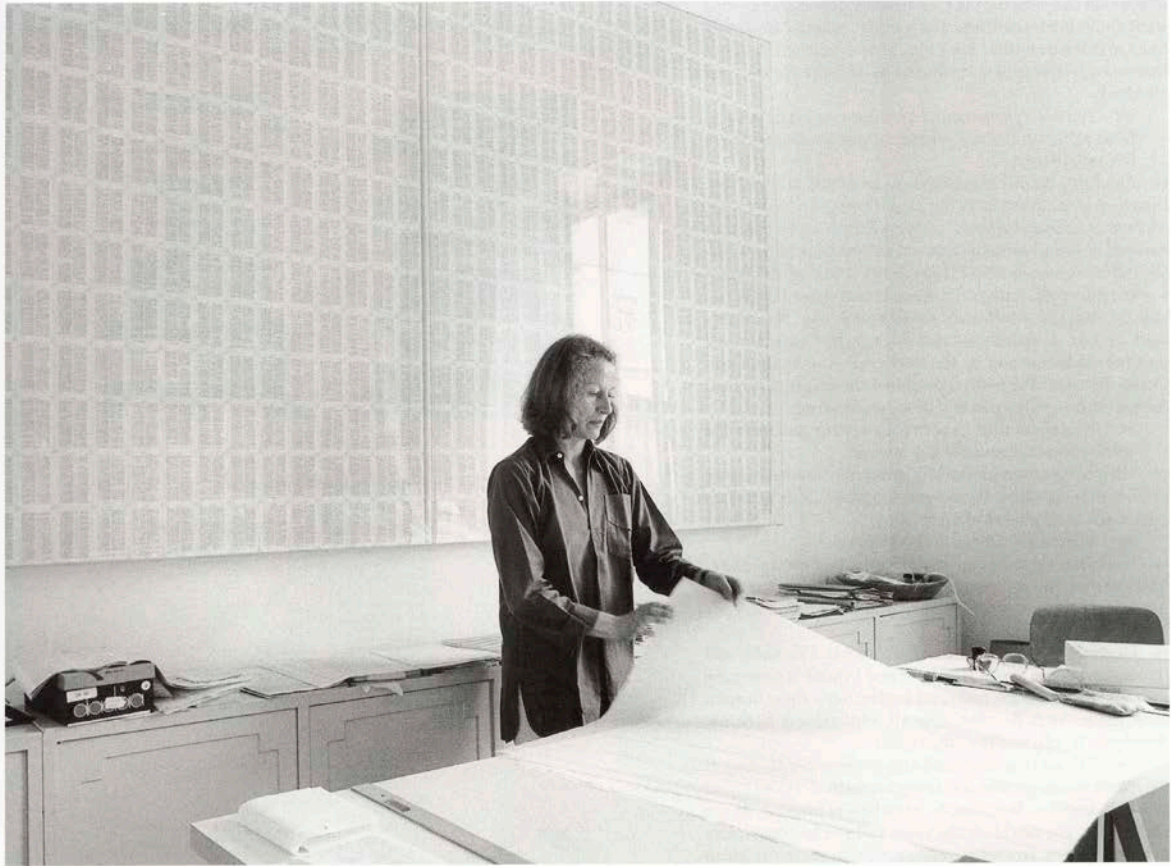


OPPOSITE PAGE
*Ur-schrift ovvero
Avant-testo (Ur-Writing
or Avant-Text) 12-10-1999
(above) and 26-8-1999
(below), 1999, ballpoint
pen on canvas,
each 95 × 200 cm*

THIS PAGE ABOVE
*Osmotic Drawings D-7,
1996, acrylic on paper,
23 × 30 cm. Photograph:
C. Favero*

RIGHT
*(), 1975, booklet
published by
Edizioni Geiger, Turin,
16 × 11 cm*





*“Writing is an extension of myself.
I like to find and lose myself in it.”*

IRMA BLANK

bc Or like our left and right hands, which might appear equal but work in different ways.

ib Left-handed people always fascinate me. When I started to explore making freer, more circular marks in blue ballpoint pen on polyester for the series 'Avant-testo' (Avant-Text, late 1990s), I created a number of large works with my left hand.

bc What does the role of colour play in your writings?

ib For 'Eigenschriften', I used pastels and coloured pencils, in tones ranging from red to pink and violet. Pink is a colour that I associate with analysis, orientation, identification. I've also used a lot of blue – the colour of ink, sky, infinity and utopia – but there are other colours I have never touched, such as green, which makes me think of nature and vegetation. On paper, I love using graphite pencil: it's practically colourless, a non-colour that reflects light.

bc You've always worked for yourself, following your own pace, rather than that of the market, which has only recently started paying attention.

ib I have never worked on commission. I simply wanted to do what was right, what was mine. When I created something new, first of all I doubted it, but then also I often found myself thinking: 'What a beautiful result, Irma.' Everything that was not part of me, I discarded. I have always been a rigorous editor of my own work.

bc What gives you pleasure?

ib To work, for me, is a pleasure: being at my desk to make, to write. After all, writing is an extension of myself. I like to find and lose myself in it.

bc Your works, I feel, provide great visual pleasure.

ib I think it's simply because of what they say: I am; here I am. They are statements of presence. If I look back, I think I could have, or should have, made other works, other variations. But I am insatiable and cannot stop. Even at the end of a long day in my studio, I prepare the paper on the drafting board for the next day's work. I pick my colours and have them ready, pencils sharpened, so as not to waste any time. ●

Translated by Barbara Casavecchia

OPPOSITE PAGE

Irma Blank photographed in her studio, Milan, 1977, in front of *Law I* and *Law II*, 1975, ink on parchment-like paper. Photograph: Maria Mulas

BELOW

'Breath Paintings', 2014–15, installation view at MOSTYN, Llandudno. Photograph: L. Cummins

BARBARA CASAVECCHIA lives in Milan, Italy. She is a contributing editor of *Frieze*.

IRMA BLANK lives in Milan, Italy. Earlier this year, she had solo shows at Alison Jacques Gallery, London, UK, and P420, Bologna, Italy. Her work is included in 'Colori', Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Italy, until 23 July, and the 57th Venice Biennale, Italy, until 26 November.

