

MAI 36 GALERIE

Irma Blank
Being Here

June 12 – August 08, 2026

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On the occasion of Zurich Art Weekend, Mai 36 Galerie is proud to present *Being Here*, the second solo exhibition by Irma Blank.

Irma Blank was born in Northern Germany (Celle) in 1934 and passed away in 2023 in Milan, at the age of eighty-eight. Passionate about literature and language, she moved to Sicily in 1955 after meeting her Italian husband — a move that uprooted her and became the foundation of her work. A stranger to the language around her, she taught drawing at a local high school by day and made art at night, working alone in her studio. The distance between two countries and two languages led her to a realisation: there is no such thing as the right word. Rather than filling the page with meaning, she empties it, replacing legible words with drawn lines that look like writing but resist being read. “I try to retrieve the space of silence, the unsaid.”

As a woman building an artistic practice in postwar Italy, she developed her work slowly, privately, on her own terms. Working in solitude, she grew acutely attuned to the physical act of mark-making: the sound of her breath, the scratch of a pen on paper. The result is something deeply physical: writing as a form of presence, of being here, of marking time.

Her first series, *Eigenschriften* (1968–1973), meaning “self-writings”, was an intimate exploration of the act of writing without words and a practice of self-reflection. These intimate works gave way to *Trascrizioni* (1973–1979), in which Blank copied the typographic layouts of newspapers, novels, and poetry books, transposing their visual rhythms while stripping away all content and emphasizing its mechanical forms, reflecting mass communication. In the *Radical Writings* series (early 1980s–mid-1990s), the meditative nature of Irma Blank’s practice is enhanced, the breath becomes the unit of measurement. Blank literally paints “in one breath”, with absolute concentration and without hesitation. Each band of colour (first in rose and rose-violet, later she turned to blue) has the length of one breath, from left to right, from beginning to end, from emptiness to fullness. Writing is breathing, painting is breathing, working is living.

Horizont (2007) is a series of diptychs arranged as a single, continuous work. Across the wall, the panels build a horizon. The spacing between each surface is as deliberate as the script itself. Emptiness is not absence here, it is part of the composition. Blank returns to an early, embodied form of writing. Through a two-handed rotary movement, the body inscribes itself into the work. The result is not legible script but a dense, vibrating web of signs, alive with rhythm. What unfolds across Blank’s over 50 years long practice is a kind of universal writing, that belongs to no single language and therefore, in a sense, to all of them. Her works are both spiritual expression and physical experience. Blank’s notations are ultimately a means of recording and and at the same time result from existential connection between life and work.

Irma Blank’s exhibition history includes numerous solo shows at renowned institutions such as: Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Milan, 1984; Artothek, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, 1989; Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea, Milan, 1992; Mostyn Museum, Llandudno, 2014; Museo d’Arte Contemporanea di Bolzano, 2017; Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv 2020; MAMCO, Genève, 2019; Museo Villa Dei Cedri, Bellinzona, 2021; Fondazione ICA Milano, 2022. She has also participated in group exhibitions at Palazzo della Ragione, Mantova, 1998; Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Città di Castello, 2011; Salon für Kunstbuch, Vienna, 2015; FM Centro per l’Arte Contemporanea, Milano, 2019; Bombas Gens Centre d’Art, València, 2020; S.M.A.K., Gent, 2022.

Blank has been part of Documenta 6, Kassel, 1977 and the 57 Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 2017.

A passionate reader and lover of language, Irma Blank was born in 1934 in Northern Germany. In 1955 she met her Italian husband with whom she moved to Sicily. The gap between the two countries and the two languages was immense – it led her to question the adequacy or rather the inadequacy of any language. She then realized ‘that there’s no such thing as the right word’ – even in one’s mother tongue – to really convey meaning/feeling. Blank’s entire body of work, that crystallized into series, is based on language and therefore literature – whether emptying books from their meaning or creating a new form of nonverbal, asemantic writing, for instance by creating drawings that mimic the layout of existing books/newspapers or using a utopian alphabet. Closely linked to her personal story, but simultaneously emanating from the migrant and displaced condition, her work is the result of a matured conceptuality, but asserts itself in the corporality of production; it engages with a utopic community of hypothetical readers, but it is also in its nature, a soliloquy.



Irma Blank in her studio in Milan, 1973. Photo: Gian Sinigaglia

IRMA BLANK

Born in 1934 in Celle, Germany.
† 2023 in Milan, Italy.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2026 Irma Blank, Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich
- 2023 IRMA BLANK. Tra segno e silenzio, Fondazione Cosso, San Secondo di Pinerolo, IT
Gehen, P420, Bologna, IT
- 2022 Irma Blank – Works 1980-2017, Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich, CH
Blank, Neves, ICA, Milano, IT
- 2021 Blank, Neves, Bombas Gens Centre d'art, Valencia, ES
Museo Villa Dei Cedri, Bellinzona, CH
- 2020 Blank, Neves, CCA – Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv and the Bauhaus Foundation, Tel Aviv, IL
CAPC contemporary art museum of Bordeaux, FR
- 2019 Blank, Neves, Culturgest, Lisboa, PT
MAMCO, Genève, CH
Painting Between the Lines, Luxembourg & Dayan, New York, US
- 2017 Irma Blank, works from the collection of Museion, Museion, Bolzano, IT
Global Writings, Galerie Gregor Podnar, Berlin, DE
Irma Blank, Life Time, Alison Jacques Gallery, London, UK
Irma Blank, Life Line, P420, Bologna, IT
- 2015 Pink Writings, Lucie Fontaine, Milano, IT
- 2014 Breath Paintings, Mostyn Museum, Llandudno, UK
Irma Blank: To be, Alison Jacques Gallery, London, UK
Irma Blank, Artist's books. Editions and originals, P420, Bologna, IT
Blank Archive, Galerie Gregor Podnar, Berlin, DE
Frammenti, SpazioA - project space, Pistoia, IT

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2026 Festival du Dessin, Viva l'Italia!, curated by Melania Gazzotti and Irina Zucca Alessandrelli, Museon Arlaten, Arles, FR
- 2025 15 years, P420, Bologna
Katarzyna Wiesiolek / Irma Blank - Milano Drawing week 2025, Szydlowski Gallery, Milano, IT (duo)
- 2024 Monochromy. On the Aesthetics of Published Art, curated by Anne Thurmann-Thurmann-Jajes Weserburg, Museum für moderne Kunst, Bremen, DE
Artists Making Books: Pages of Refuge, curated by Ilaria Puri Purini, American Academy, Roma, IT
- 2023 World Framed, Contemporary Drawing Art of the Schering Stiftung Collection, curated by Jenny Graser, Kupferstichkabinett, Museum of Prints and Drawings, National Museums, Berlin, DE
Donne artiste. Percorsi nella grafica dal Novecento ad oggi, curated by Luisa De Marinis and Iliaria Fiumi Sermattei, Istituto Centrale per la Grafica, Roma, IT
- 2022 Splendid Isolation, S.M.A.K., Gent, BE
Earth: A Retrospective, curated by El Ultimo Grito, Bombas Gens Centre d'art, Valencia, ES
Vita Nuova. Nuove sfide per l'arte in Italia 1960-1975, MAMAC, Nice, FR
- 2021 Ecrire, c'est dessiner, Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz, FR
The self-taught enigma, MAMC+ Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, Saint-Étienne, FR
- 2020 Hyperspaces, Bombas Gens Centre d'Art, València, ES
Scrivere Disegnando. Quand la langue cherche son autre, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Genève, CH
- 2019 1978 Arte e Femminismo in Italia, FM Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Milano, IT
- 2018 Noi e il MASI. Donazione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati, Museo d'Arte della Svizzera Italiana, LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura, Lugano, CH
- 2017 VIVA ARTE VIVA, 57 Biennale di Venezia, IT

EIGENSCHRIFTEN
1968-1973

When I was very young I moved to Sicily, a faraway country by the standards of the time, with another language, another history, other traditions, habits and customs. A sunny, hospitable country, of generous, warm people. Yet something was lacking. This lack determined the evolution of my entire career. I recorded the distance between persons, the sense of the incommunicable, of impotence, for reasons of education, social and cultural reasons.

I suffered from this.

I began to fill this gap by covering pages and pages with small signs, micro-signs, fragments of imaginary alphabets. At the time I was not fully aware that I was creating a parallel world, filling the great void of linguistic inadequacy. The inward gaze, a voyage inside myself, a voyage in the world of questions that were lacking answers, a sort of diary, written by me, for me. So I called them *Eigenschriften*.

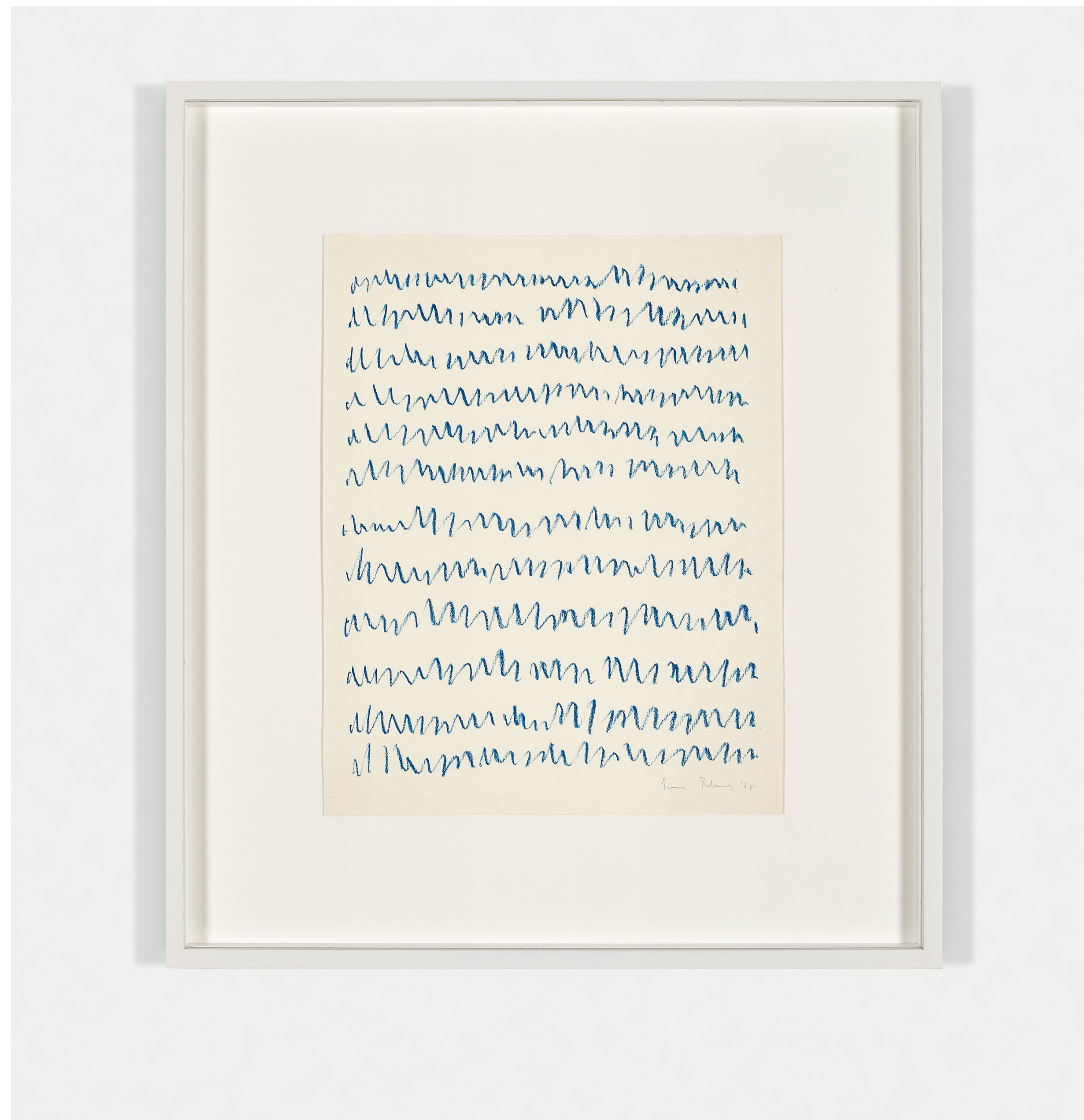
This practice of inscription became daily, necessary, and I soon realized that the incessant repetition of the same sign in a writing-like procedure became a spiritual exercise, a meditative practice. The doing, the repetition of the same gesture, the discipline, the concentration channel thought, non-thought, clearing the mind, emptying the mind.

— Irma Blank

Irma Blank

Eigenschriften, 1968
signed and dated recto
pastel on paper
23.5 x 19 cm

(IRB.0074.Z)



Irma Blank

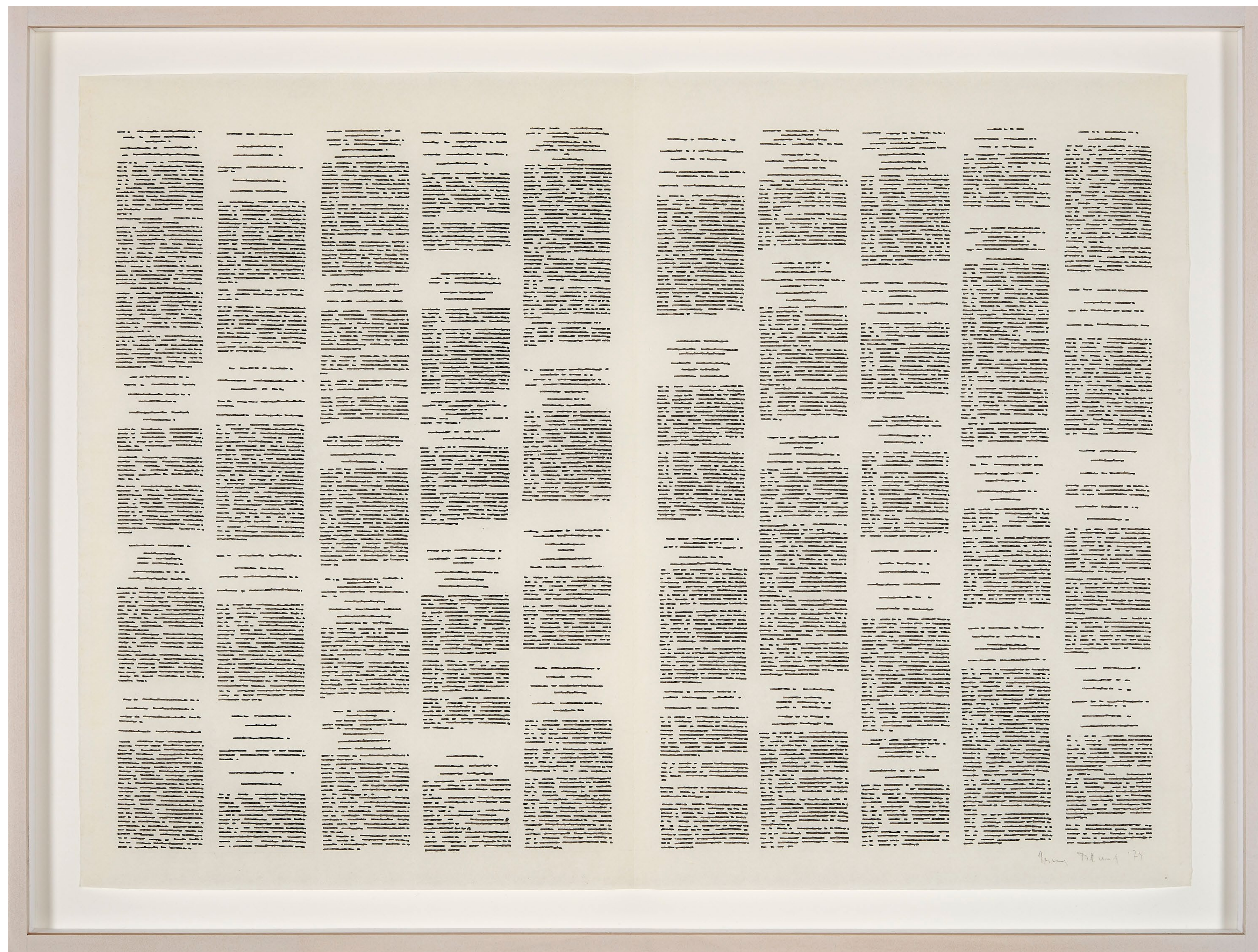
Eigenschriften, Schrift-felder, 1968
signed and dated recto
indian ink on paper
35 x 26 cm

(IRB.0076.Z)



TRASCRIZIONI
1973-1974

In 1973, Irma Blank moved from Sicily to Milan, where she still lives and works and where the *Trascrizioni* (Abschriften, 1973–1979) series developed, based on her everyday readings (from novels to poetry and newspapers) of which she transcribed pages with her asemantic writing, copying with ink on paper the layout of text rather than its letters, words, and sentences.



Irma Blank

Trascrizioni, st (Zeitungsdoppelseite), 1974
signed and dated recto
china su carta pergamena/indian ink on parchment paper
37 x 49 cm

(IRB.0033.M)

GERMINAZIONI
1982-1983

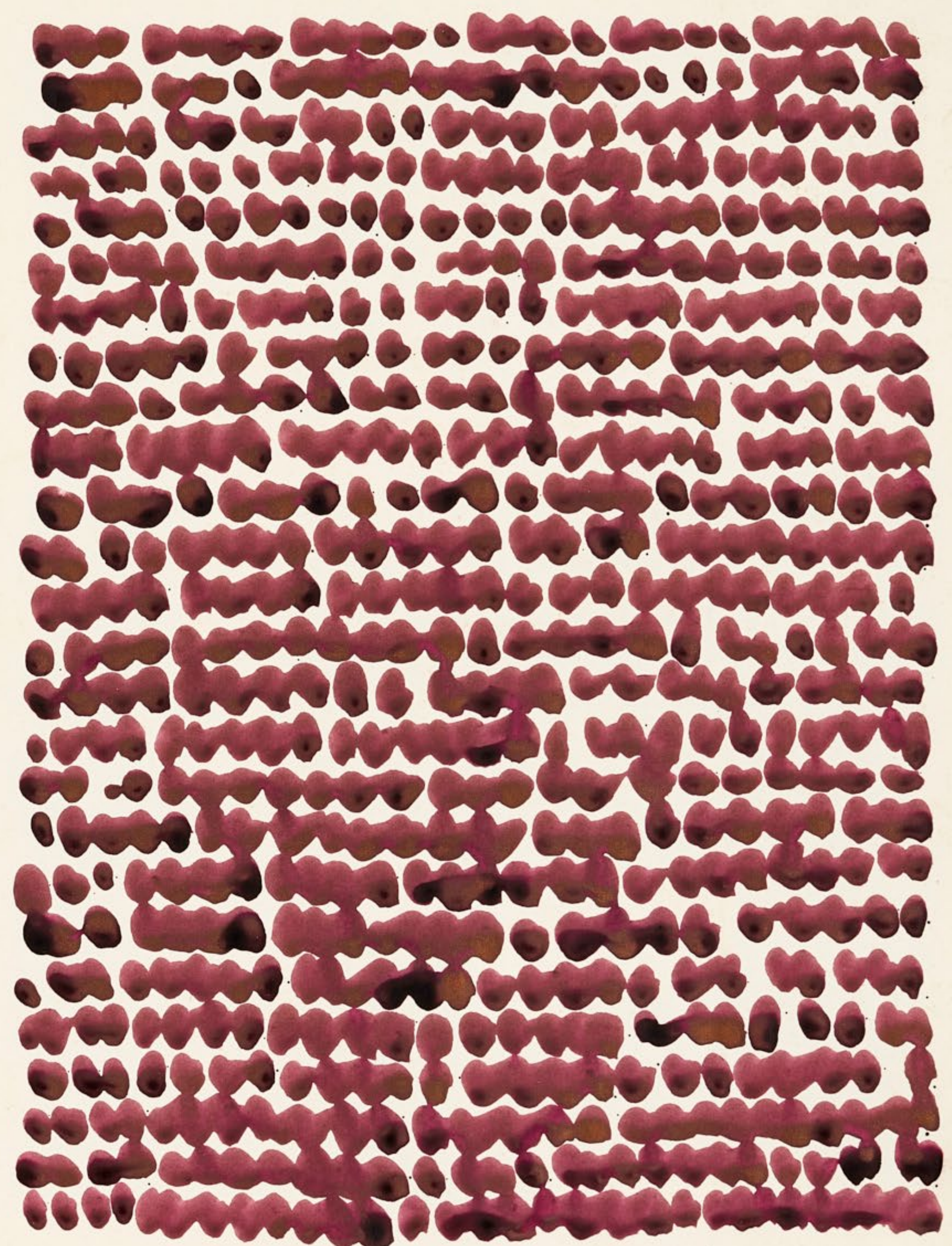
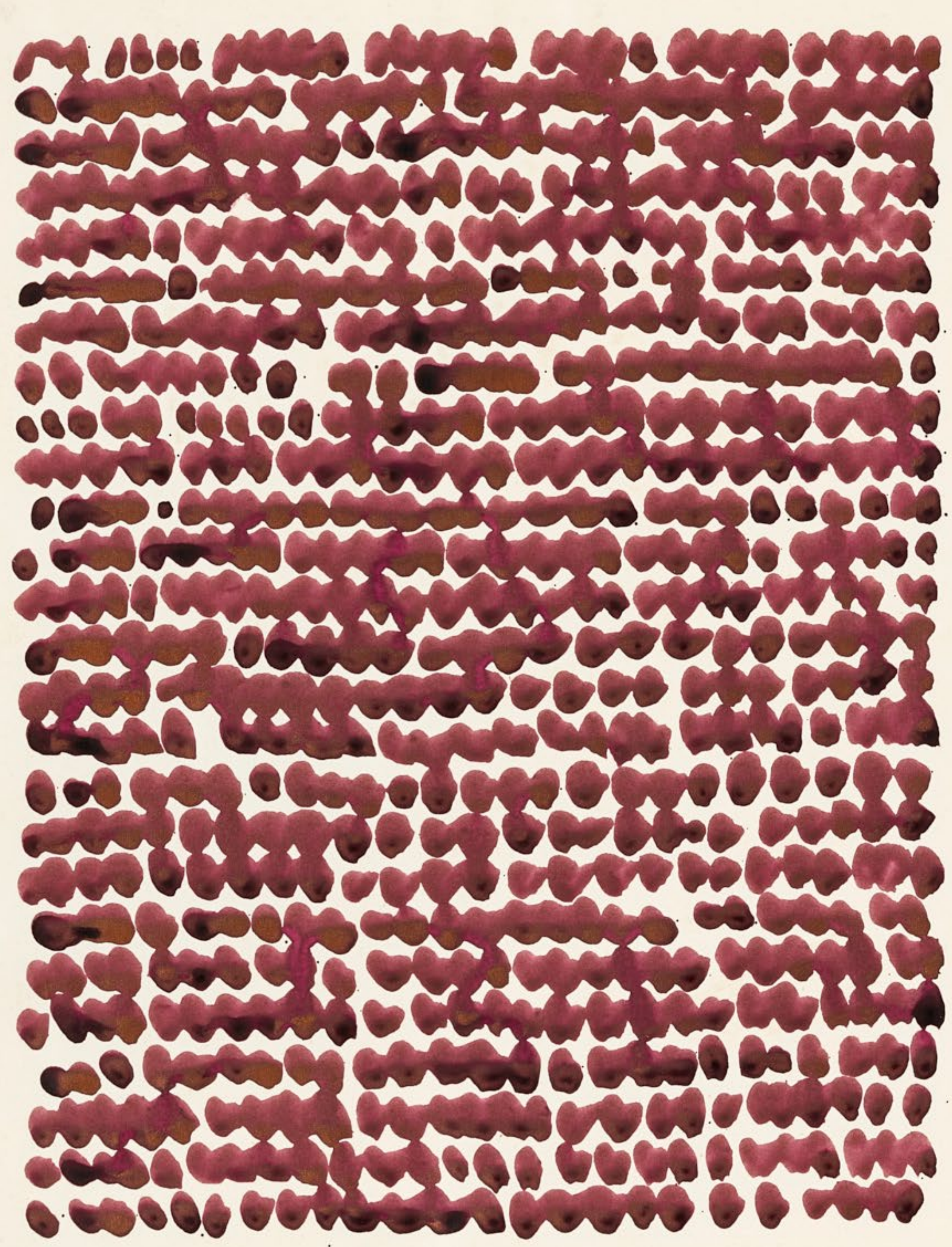
Irma Blank described *Germinazioni* as a form of “writing without words,” a space where language dissolves into rhythm, breath, and gesture. Speaking about the series, she explained that the repeated marks were not intended to communicate meaning in a conventional sense, but rather to create “a movement of life” — a silent flow unfolding across the page through time, concentration, and bodily presence.



Irma Blank

Germinazioni, doppia pagina, 1982
signed and dated recto
mixed media on paper
33 x 50 cm

(IRB.0079.Z)



Irma Blank

Germinazioni MN-3, 1982
signed and dated recto
mixed media on paper
28 x 19 cm

(IRB.0078.Z)



RADICAL WRITING
1983-1996

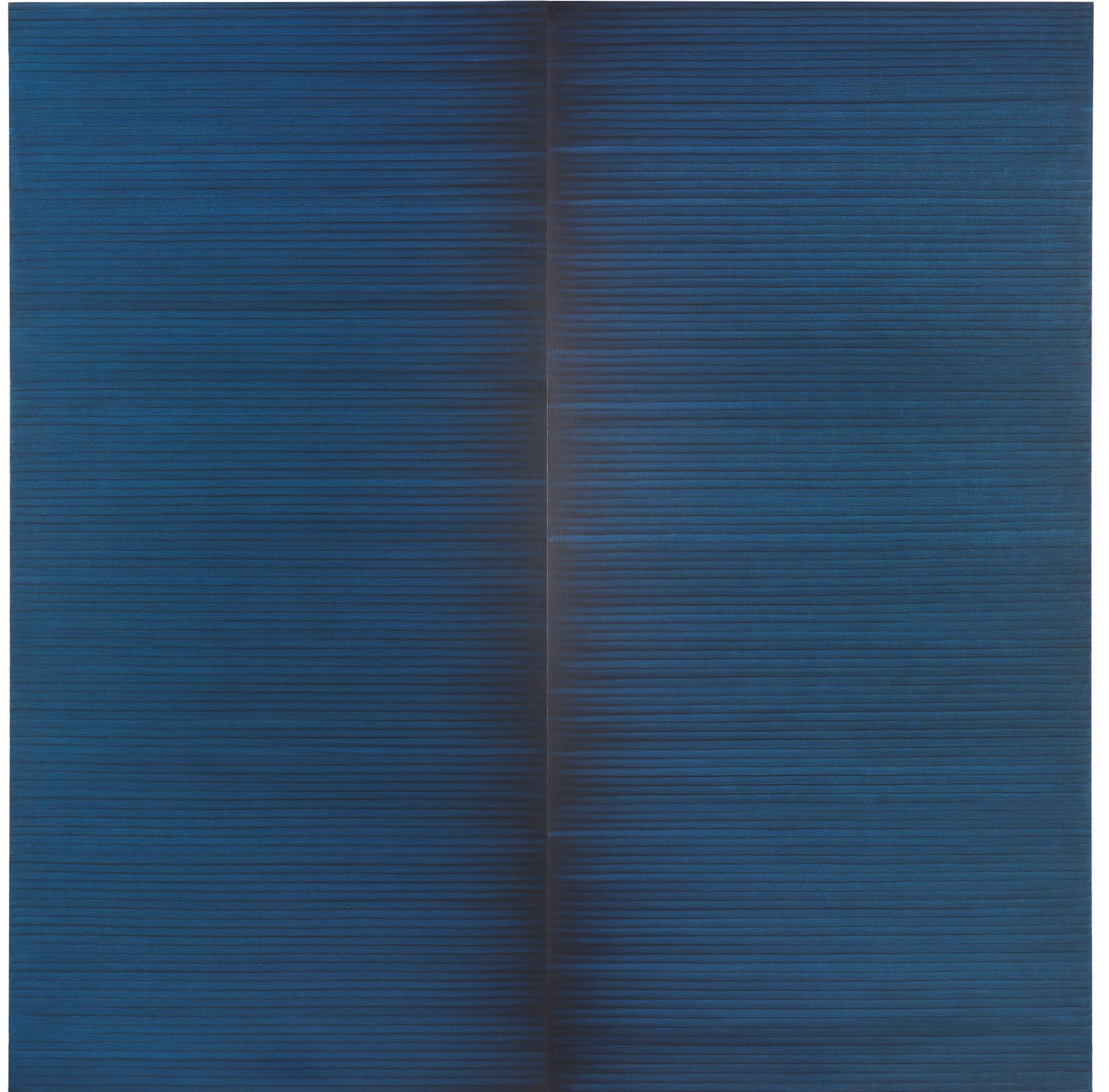
I needed an extensive, radical sign, in tension between two poles, beginning and end, full and empty, birth and death. The tension towards fulfilment. My experiments convinced me that only the paintbrush could be the suitable tool. With the flat brush I went slowly, with extreme concentration, from edge to edge, left to right, full to empty, without stopping. I worked vertically, always at eye level. For the large pieces I had built a system of steps to go up, first me, then the work. Large size represented the main challenge. As the size gradually increased, I realized that the extension of the sign corresponded to exhaling. These two movements were inseparably linked; the engagement of the body was total. Mind-body synthesis. The limit imposed by the breath of 130 cm, doubled in the diptych, set the maximum size of the large diptychs, Schriftzug=Atemzug (Writing=Breathing). Each time it was an adventure, unknown, a crossing of life, repeated, in suffering and joy, with traces of the smallest events, like light hesitations along the way, imponderable differences of pressure of the hand, irregularities in the weave of the canvas

— Irma Blank

Irma Blank

Radical Writings, Schriftzug=Atemzug, 29-5-1988, 1988
signed & dated verso
acrylic on canvas,
200 x 200 cm

(IRB.0071.M)



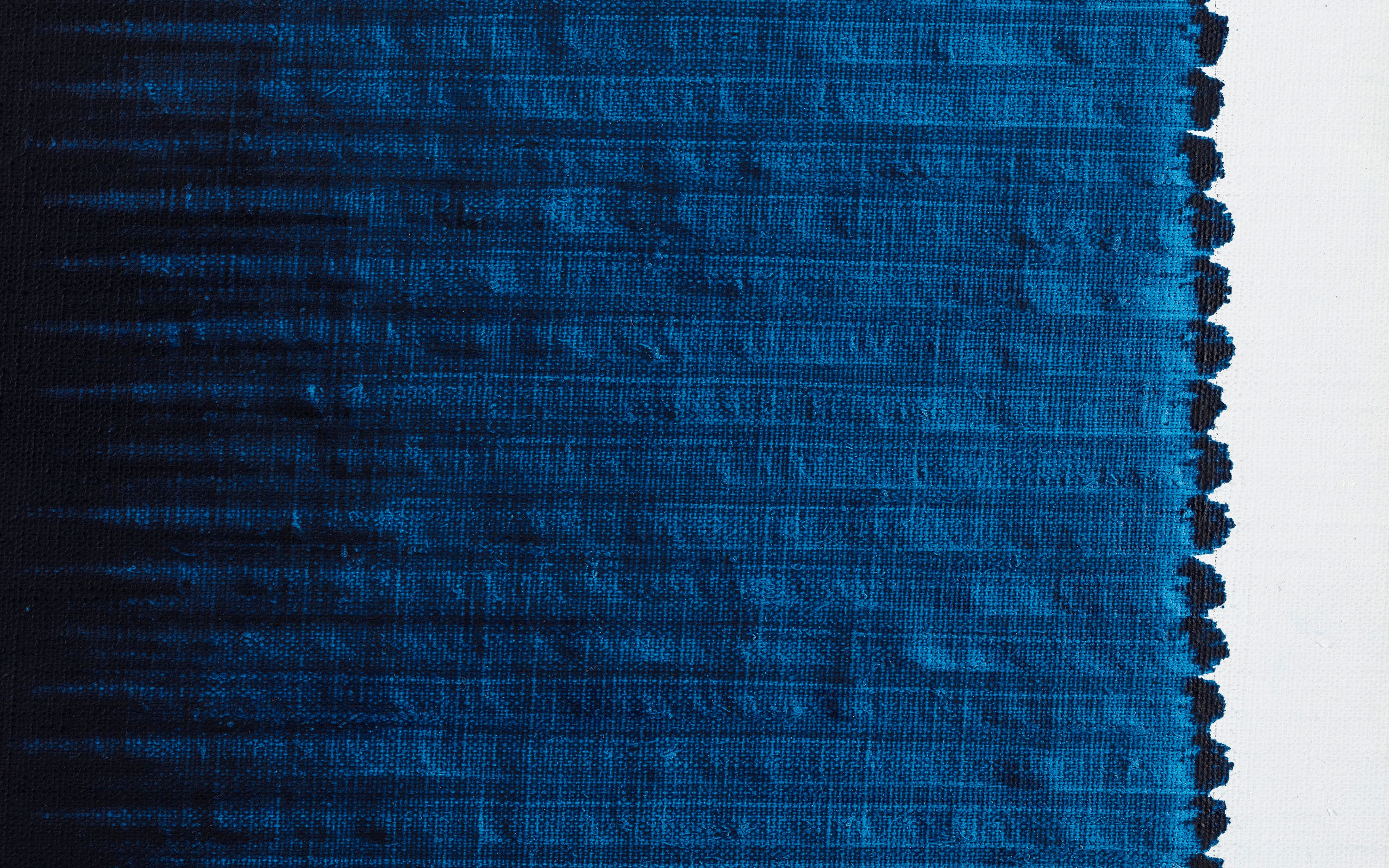


Irma Blank

Radical Writings, Abecedarium 8-4-91, 1991
signed and dated verso
oil on canvas
208 x 60 cm

(IRB.0092.M)







Irma Blank

Radical Writings, La pagina e il suo doppio, 5-8-87, 1987
signed and dated verso
acrylic on canvas, diptych
each 24 x 17.5 cm
total 24 x 35 cm

(IRB.0099.M)



Irma Blank

Radical Writings, Exercitium, 1989
signed and dated verso
oil on canvas
35 x 25 cm

(IRB.0097.M)





Irma Blank

Radical Writings, Il corpo del silenzio, 1983
signed and dated verso
oil on canvas
30 x 30 cm

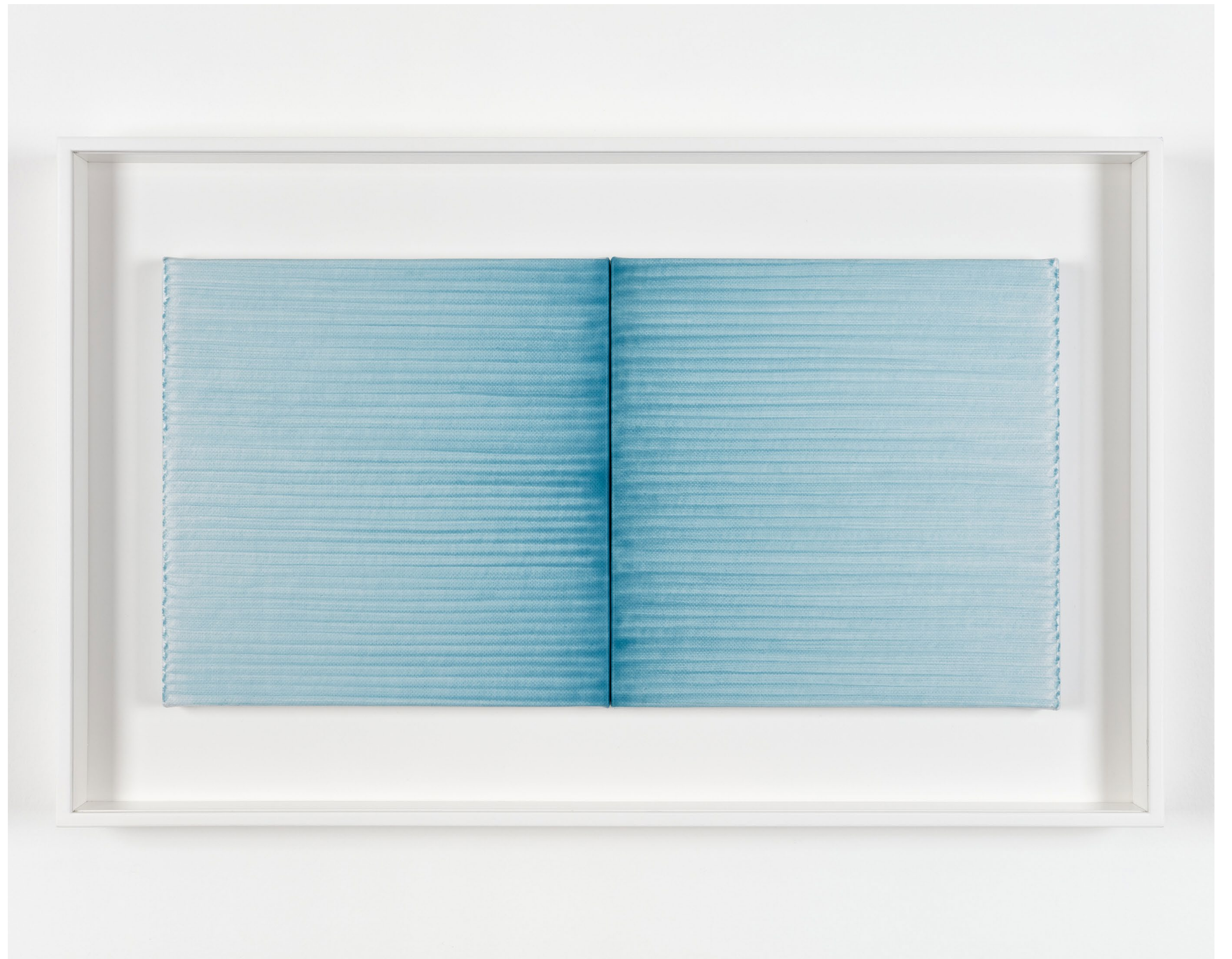
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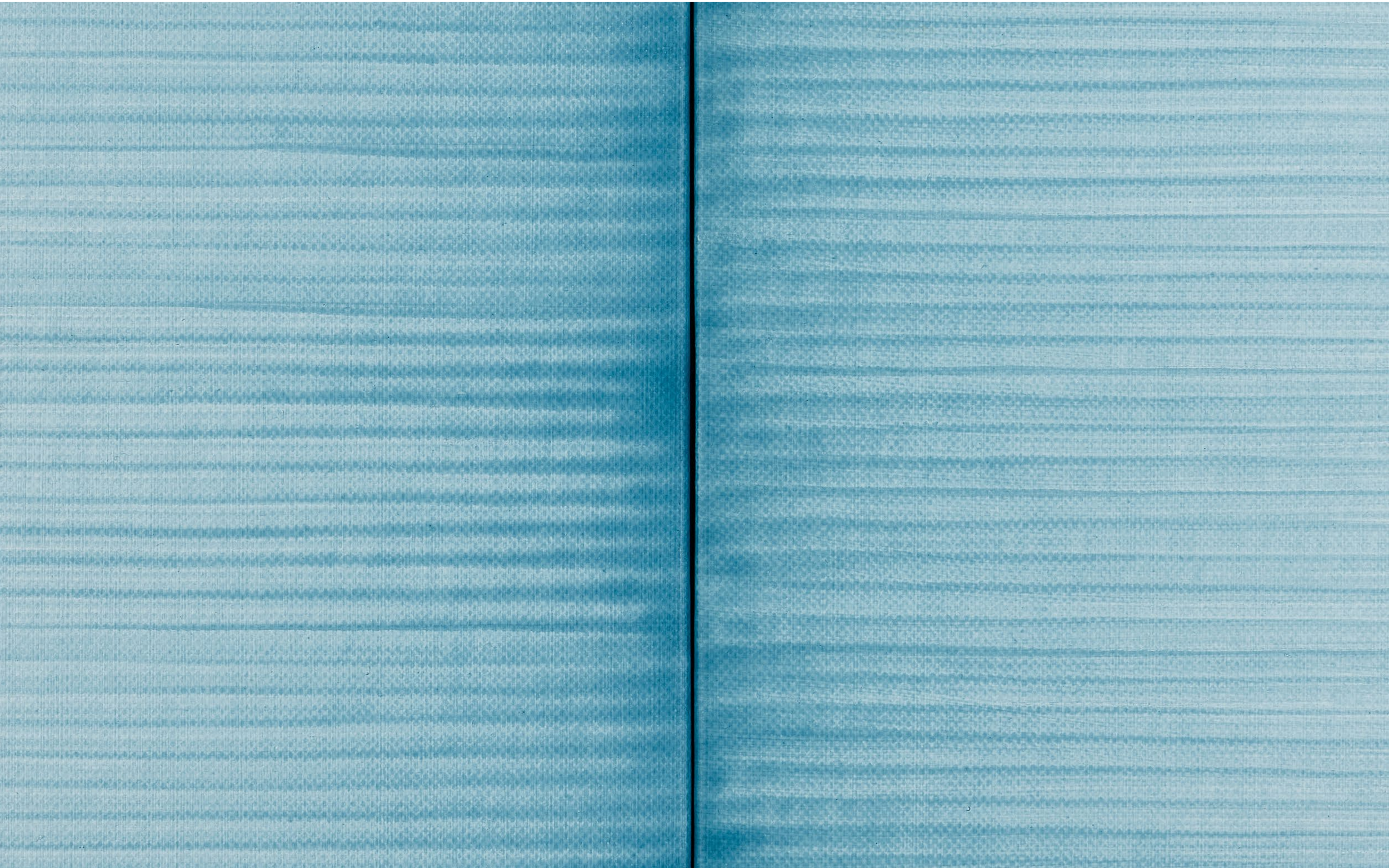


Irma Blank

Radical Writings, 1989
signed and dated verso
acrylic on canvas
25 x 50 cm

(IRB.0091.M)





AVANT-TESTO
1998-2006

HORIZONT
2007

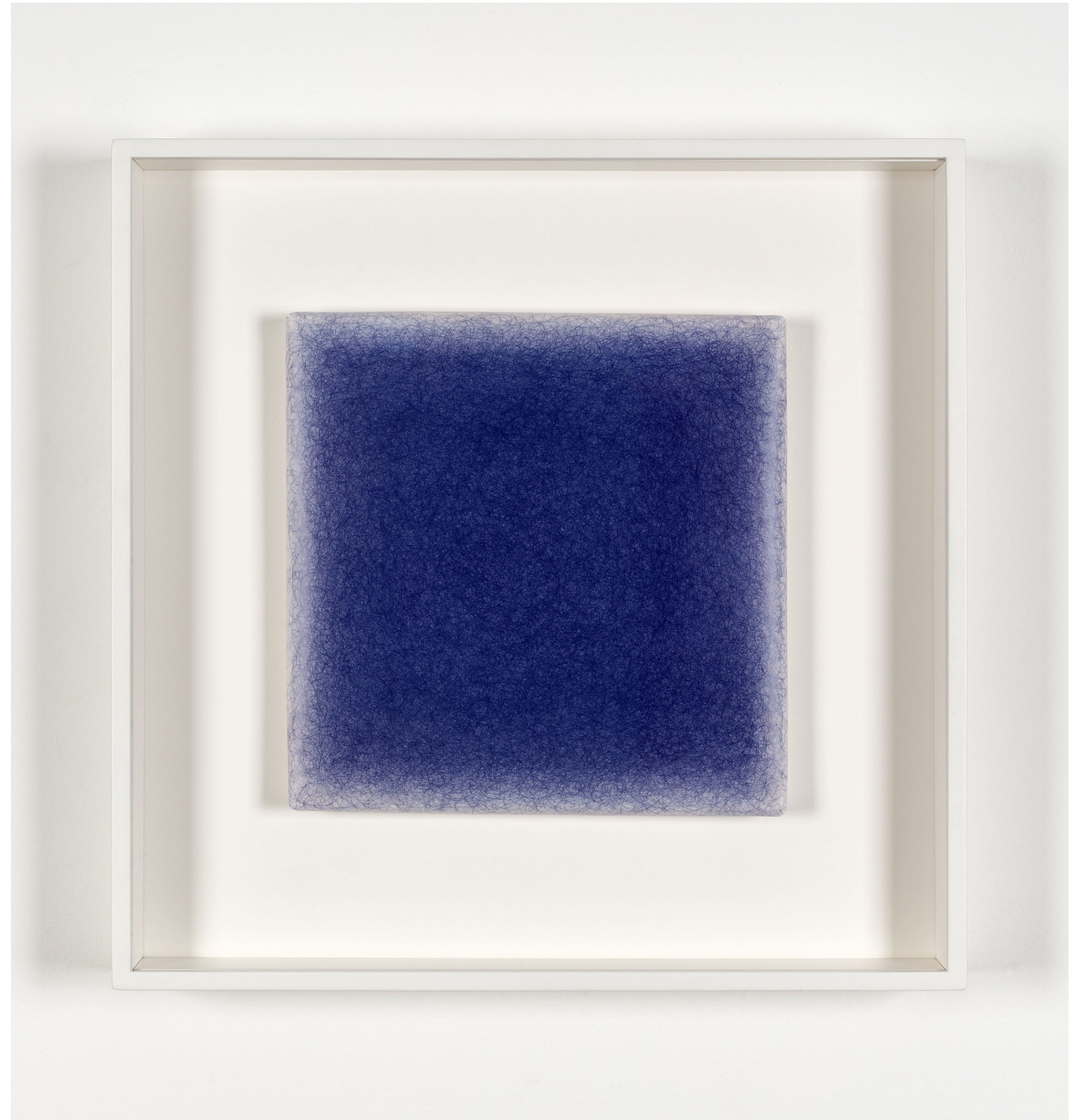
With two hands, clutching bunches of ballpoint pens, I wrote with a rotating motion, the essence of life. Illegible, impenetrable. The mirror of the unconscious, and frozen time.

— Irma Blank

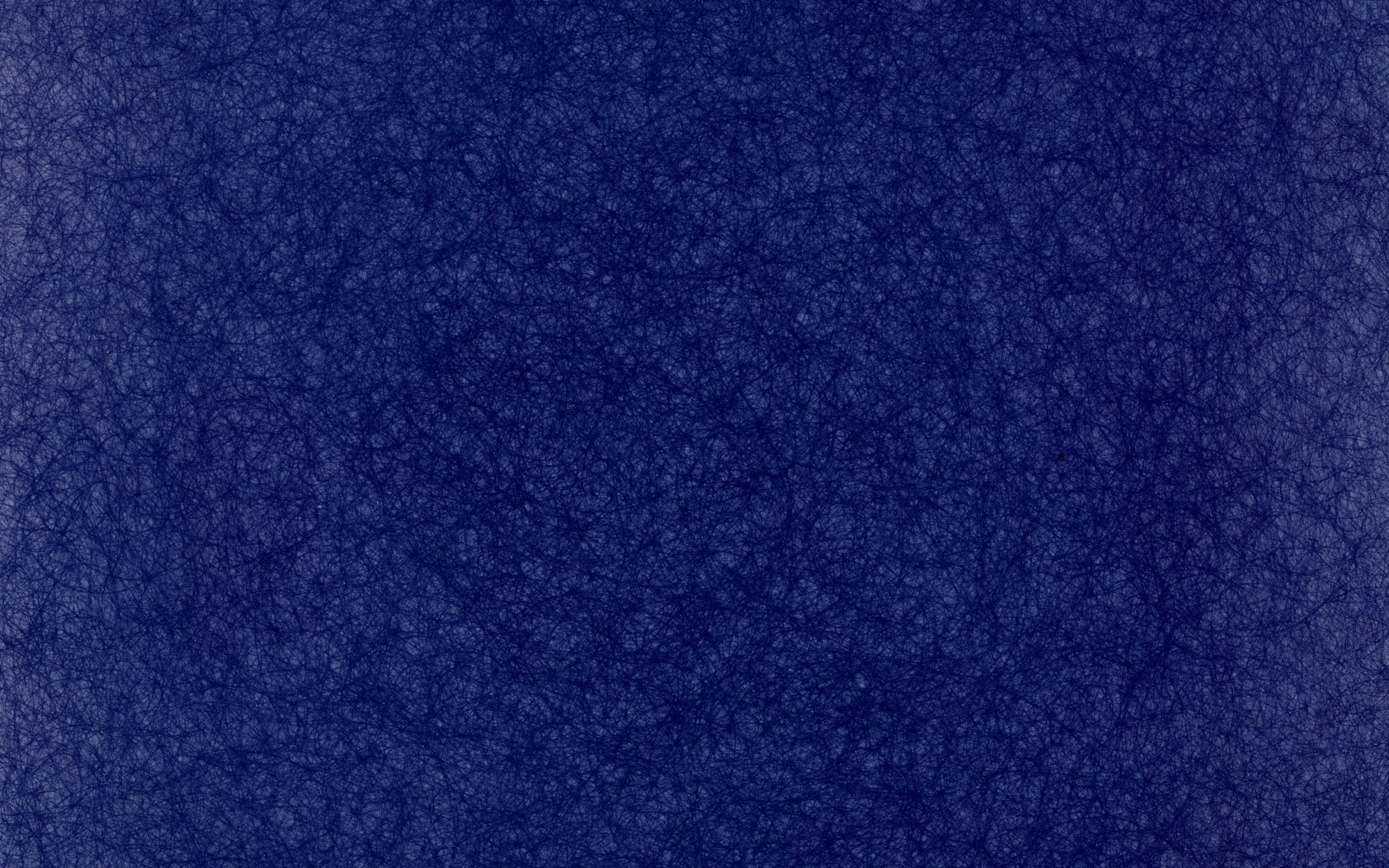
Irma Blank

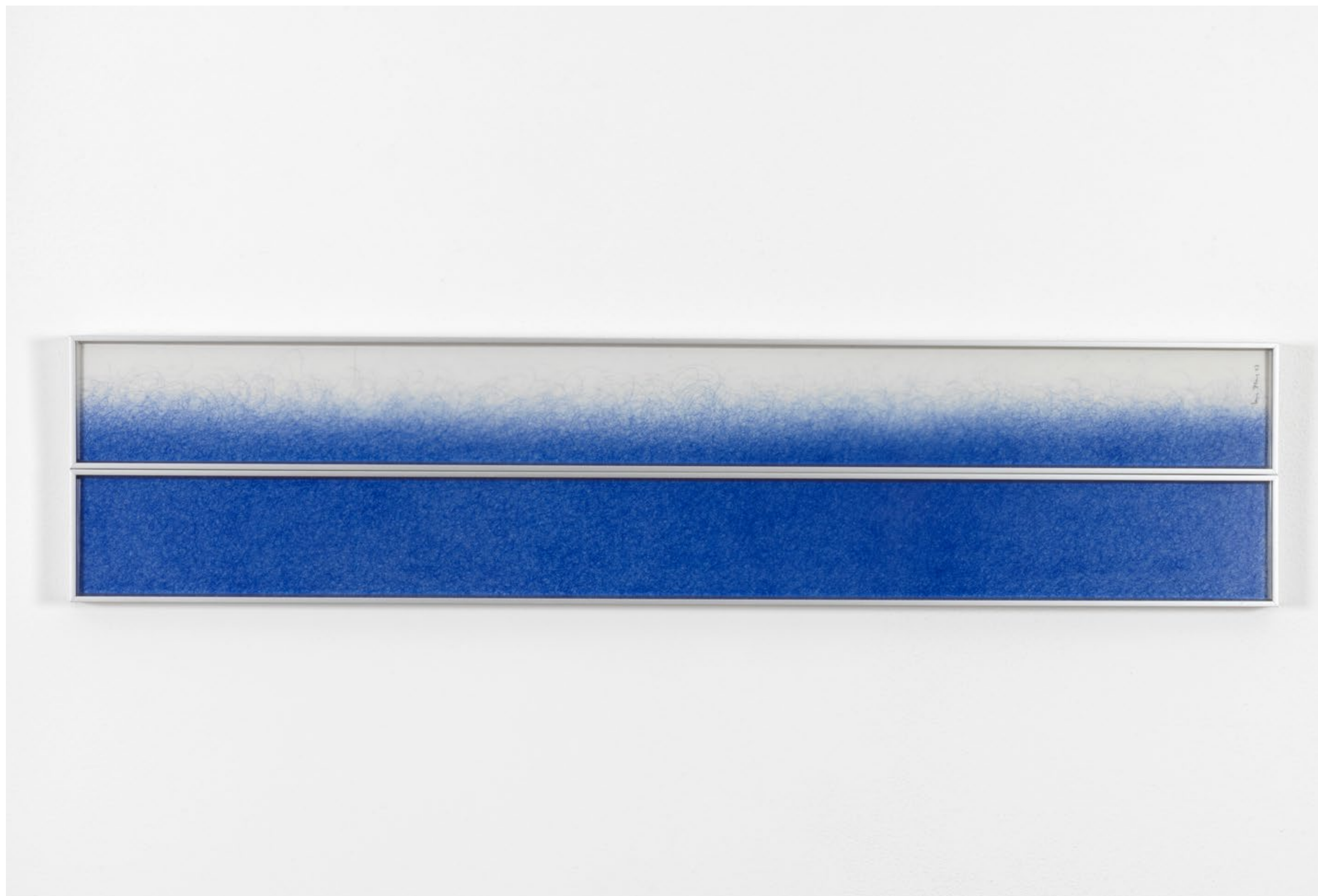
Ur-schrift ovvero Avant-testo, 28-11-02, 2002
signed and dated verso
ballpoint pen on polyester on wooden stretcher
21 x 21 cm

(IRB.0102.Z)









Irma Blank

Horizont n.16, 2007
signed and dated recto
ballpoint pen on polyester, diptych
each 10 x 96 cm

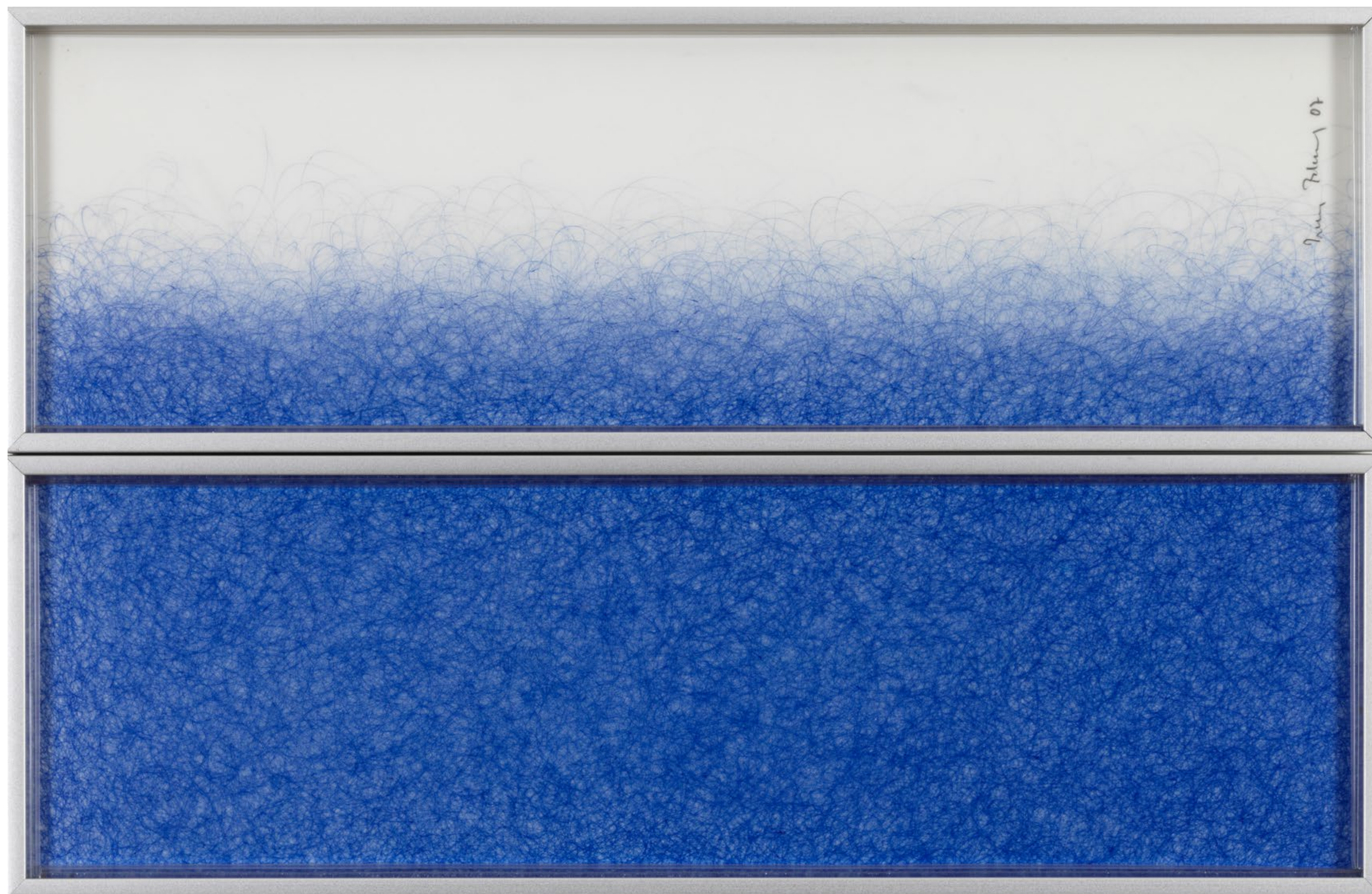
(IRB.0088.Z)



Irma Blank

Horizont n.23, 2007
signed and dated recto
ballpoint pen on polyester, diptych
each 10 x 33 cm

(IRB.0089.Z)





Technological development has changed our existence. Distances have gotten smaller, languages and customs have lost some of their weight, the virus of general standardization has spread. I have constructed a new alphabet. An alphabet reduced to eight letters, only consonants, no vowels. Pronounceable, legible, but not understandable in the conventional sense. *Global Writings*. A text for everyone.

— Irma Blank

Irma Blank

Global Writings A3, 2000-2022
signed and dated verso
digital writing and silkscreen printing on steel
185 x 125 x 2 cm

(IRB.0052.M)



Irma Blank

Global Writings, La lingua ritrovata, poesia minima, 10-2-04, 2004
signed and dated verso
digital writing and silkscreen printing on canvas
20 x 34 x 2 cm

(IRB.0082.M)



hrj rtjd rdj hljtjr hj

Irma Blank

Global Writings, Splitter B, 2009
signed and dated verso
marker on canvas
30 x 30 cm

(IRB.0084.M)



Handwritten text in Urdu script, appearing as a dense, overlapping collection of characters and words. The text is written in blue ink on a light-colored background. The characters are highly stylized and interconnected, making it difficult to discern individual words or sentences. The overall appearance is that of a chaotic or abstract scribble.

Handwritten text in Urdu script, located in the bottom left corner of the page. It consists of a few characters, possibly a signature or a small note.

Irma Blank

Global Writings, Poesia minima, 14-4-04, n.7, 2004
signed and dated recto
pastel on paper
29 x 21 cm

(IRB.0083.Z)



GEHEN, SECOND LIFE
2017-2023

Beginning in 2017, following a health issue that left the right side of her body immobilized and led her to relearn drawing with her left hand, Irma Blank developed the *Gehen, Second Life* series as an ongoing meditation on movement, time, and bodily rhythm. Through repetitive linear gestures, the works transform writing into silent traces situated between language and abstraction.



Irma Blank

Gehen, Second life n.17, giugno 2018, 2018
signed and dated recto
felt pen on transparent paper, double page
25 x 34 cm

(IRB.0077.Z)

Irma Blank

Gehen, Second life D1, dicembre 2018, 2018
signed and dated recto
felt pen on transparent paper
29.8 x 22.6 cm

(IRB.0103.Z)



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