



In his silvery Swiss-French-inflected English, Olivier Mosset always answers the phone with a crisp and emphatic, 'Yes!' There's a magnanimity and enthusiasm in those greetings, heralding a genuine willingness to engage in a spirited reciprocal dialogue. At the zenith of the scorching Sonoran summer over a period of two afternoons, first at his studio, then the next day at his five-acre homestead south of Ajo Way, the casual conversations that have been distilled into this interview unfolded at a leisurely, discursive pace. At the cinder-block, high-ceilinged studio with its lengthened door that allows for the passage of substantially sized paintings, canvases face the wall, paint buckets, sticks, and swatches are on the floor, and a black and yellow composite 'special construction' Harley of a certain age rests on its kickstand. A mise en scène right out of one of Mosset's installations, an uncontrived summation of his concerns. On one side, minimal, flat, often just one colour, silent; on the other, intricate, machine-tooled, customised, maximal, and loud when activated. Polar

## OLIVIER MOSSET

opposites that, despite their apparent discrepancies, reach across chasms to walk hand in hand, so to speak. A couple of long-ago broken-in Eames chairs, a ladder or two, a Husky air compressor, and upstairs black and white snapshots of Mosset's childhood home and his great-grandmother in the 19th century. Outside up against the back wall there's a triangular assembly of paint-splattered 55-gallon steel drums that again look exactly like an extract from one of his exhibits but also might just be a stack of steels drums. All together an environment emblematic of a continual traverse through both the intentional and the found, where the two flow back and forth in an easy-going, nimble, and even mischievous manner. The fruits of that recurrent crossing over can be read about and viewed in scores of exhibition catalogues, scholarly articles, and videos, supplemented by assorted anecdotes and appreciations that steadily circulate among confidantes, aficionados, and art history PhD candidates. Amalgamated it's a widely acknowledged formal inquiry, now approaching canonical status, a rigorous exploration of painterly non-objectivity as it is most broadly defined.



Mosset's long-running arc of probing inquisitiveness, from its beginnings on the Impasse Ronsin up to the present, appear more germane each passing day, grounded in early stints as assistant to countrymen Jean Tinguely and Daniel Spoerri, and his intrinsic role in the iconoclastic BMPT group with Daniel Buren, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni during the ferment of late 1960s Paris. Along with the following eight-year undertaking of painting 200 or so black circles on white canvases, round shapes that are intriguingly in but also on a square, well, that's just the beginning. Whatever Mosset did collectively with BMPT and later on his own, it has always embodied strongly held convictions perennially in opposition to entrenched traditions and moribund though still sacred notions of originality, value, and artistic relevance. Mosset moved to the US in 1977, participated prolifically in the lively New York scene of the late '70s and '80s, and then decamped to Tucson, Arizona, where he has lived since 1996. Between the Santa Catalinas and Cat Mountain, cartoon Saguars droopily wave from the hillsides, monsoons spontaneously flood arroyos, and wide-open roads where helmet laws don't apply act as asphalt arenas for freewheeling outlaw pleasures. He has also produced readymade-esque sculptures in cardboard, wood, metal, concrete, and ice and sets for ballets, all the while consistently remaining attentive to developments far and wide. Steadily active and visible, with a comprehensive retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain currently on view in Geneva, a concurrent show with fellow traveller Mike Bidlo at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers, Florida, and, upcoming, two architecturally scaled projects on the sides of quite large buildings in Oro Valley, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico.

Out in Drexel Heights, the second day, another spare habitation, formerly a garage, next to a carport where a 1964 Galaxie 500 and the most excellent primer grey 1964 El Camino rest with their hoods up to deter desert pack rats from taking up residence and chewing through engine wiring. A cow skull over the door, and inside an immaculate in-progress pan shovel, a lush metallic green composite made up of parts from different models and eras and a return to Olivier's original 1945 suicide shifter Harley. A decommissioned refrigerator opens to reveal timeworn hardcov-

er copies of Balzac, Proust, and Apollinaire, Jean-Claude Milner's *Relire la Révolution*, The Mammoth Book of Bikers, and sundry other volumes. Mentions of crossing paths with Jean Genet, Jean Seberg, Tom Hayden, along with a plethora of other luminaries piques one's curiosity, though lesser-known but no less legendary figures such as Fab 5 Freddy, Indian Larry, Al Foul, Al Perry, and Anne-Marie Russell's appearances in his expansive accounts are just as significant. That unselfish outlook towards others' efforts and interests is certainly a basis for the undisguised respect he garners from many quarters, which of course is contingent on the respect he extends in kind, whether the person in question is famous or not. The warm, hearty laughter mingles with serious contemplation, and it's no coincidence the formulation 'It's funny, that' comes up so often. There's been an undeniable consistency and integrity to Mosset's work, and within a far-reaching spectrum of interests, activities, and attitudes lies a staunch commitment to his own art as he has passed through a fascinating multitude of artistic, social, and political milieus. Which, though manifested in an ostensibly abstract fashion, also functions as a very concrete and evocative commentary on his times and, by extension, an acutely perceptive reflection on a collective, expansive time shared by us all.

What happened with the guy here on Grant Road who had the tattoo parlour that no longer exists, where the studio parking lot is now?

What was his name?

He was called 'The Scary Guy', but when asked, they would just say, 'Oh, The Ugly Guy'. We rented him the building and he pissed someone off, so they burnt it down when he wasn't there. That's when I decided to build the studio using the insurance money. But before that I was using the former Poblano Hot Sauce factory as a place to work.

I remember seeing you there one night The Pork Torta were playing, right after I moved here in 2013. Dusty and hot, Tecates, cow-punks, and chickens playing bingo, and I thought, 'Yeah, Tucson is special'. Also it's right by the Pasqua Yaqui reservation. So have you been here this whole time? It must be strange because usually you travel a lot, and summer here can be pretty extreme; it feels like you're standing in front of an open pizza oven.

I came back in early March. I was in Geneva before that for this retrospective at MAMCO that opened in late February. At the opening there was a concert by Christophe, who's a French pop star, and part of the generation of Johnny Hallyday. And you know, once when someone asked John Lennon about French rock 'n' roll his response was, 'Well, it's like English wine'. But Christophe got interested in art, Lou Reed, and Alan Vega, and did some electronic-type music of his own. Anyway, in Geneva we met and he lived at night, like a real rock star, big piano, nice big apartment, he said there's a little Vietnamese restaurant nearby, we should go there. Though it's 11pm and closed, 'But, oh,

Tucson, in 2010. Where did that come from? Because as far as I know, you didn't have any connection to skating.

No, not at all. But John Armleder, he's Swiss and a very good old friend, and he and his son and I did a road trip. John doesn't drive so I said, 'If you need a driver I'll come with you'. We went to Death Valley and all around California. His son was nine or ten and really into skating and wanted to see skaters, so we went to San Francisco, to this place called the Embarcadero.

In the mid-'90s that was ground zero for innovation as part of the total ascendency of



'OK, we'll stay open', because it's Christophe. Anyway, he was cool, and it's pretty dramatic because he passed away right after, in April. What's nice in Geneva is it's not only me, it's Fab 5 Freddy, Steven Parrino, Tinguely, Spoerri, Cady Noland, Marcia Hafif, Joseph Marioni, and others. For me what's interesting in such a show is just to put up a good show, and if the show is interesting it's good.

People from all your circles over the years, that seems appropriate. And there are sculptural works too, represented by the ice walls. That reminds me the first thing of yours I ever saw was that baby blue spine ramp at MOCA,

street skating. Maybe you didn't know it, but you found Mecca.

And we went to Venice and all these parks, and the way I saw it was minimal, Donald Judd-like, an aesthetic reading of that type of architecture.

Abused and abraded Donald Judds. Minimal forms. It's completely understandable that you saw them as sculpture.

For this biennale in Lyon, I don't know why, but for some reason after going on that trip I said, 'You know what, I want to do a skate ramp'. It happened, and I said we should put it outside the museum. 'What about the skat-





An interpretation of an Olivier Mosset retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva, 2020.

ers?' I asked. At first they wouldn't let people use it, but then they did and it became a meeting point and truly collaborative.

That's a jumping off point to Agnes Martin and bringing together disparate interests that broach your painting and sculpture and other diverse matters and your relationship to kindred spirits. There's a skate park in Santa Fe that was built when she was still alive and she donated money, and my friend who worked on it told me she'd come from the nursing home to check on the construction and tell people, proudly, 'I helped, I contributed to this'. I thought that was one of the best sto-

artists, and not just those whose work mimics yours, it's much more extensive than that. Do you have a specific philosophy of generosity, of helping out other artists?

No, well, I'm not against art! Borderline, yes, but there are people doing things, so come on. The first piece I had of Sylvie Fleury's was her first ever, a shopping bag. She was always saying, 'If I were an artist I'd do this', so I said, 'Well, do it', and she did. And Cady Noland was interesting to me because she was Kenneth Noland's daughter and doing these beer cans, this type of new realism. And Steven Parrino and a lot of others. But I'm not so much into possessions.



ries, because you look at her paintings and a skatepark and they couldn't be more different, but maybe in some ineffable way there is a resonance between the two.

Well, I went to SITE Santa Fe and Agnes Martin was there. We had a conversation and she said, 'No, it's the best time of my life because I'm in a retirement community, in the morning I go to paint, then they make my bed, they cook for me, and then I can paint again'. And after somebody said, 'So, you're into old ladies?' No, that's not it, it's Agnes Martin, come on.

I think you are known and perceived as being somebody who's really supportive of other

Your studio on Grant Road and your house in Drexel Heights, it's very spare. So all this work you have it's not up in your place.

I have a couple of paintings that were left at the house when we moved in, with Indians on horses.

Let's talk about the Impasse Ronsin in Paris. Brancusi, Max Ernst, William N. Copley, Yves Klein, Jean Tingueley, and Niki de Saint Phalle all had studios there at various times. How did you know about it when you got off the train from Neuchâtel at age 19 in 1961?

When I arrived I looked in the phone book under 'artists', because they were listed by

profession, and saw Tinguely's number. He's Swiss and I'd seen a show of his, but he wasn't there, he was travelling. There was an American artist though, a sculptor, James Metcalf, and I said hello. You do things when you are young; I was talking way better than I do now, I was more articulate. Also I looked really young and probably lost.

When you're 18 it's the oldest you've ever been and that's your reality. You're not a kid in your own mind, but to this person 20 years older you're still a child.

Metcalf had lost three fingers fighting in Pisa during World War II; he told me about being trapped in a cemetery that was getting bombed, and you had a mixture of dead people under the ground and people dying on top. He said, 'Jean isn't here, but if you give me a hand you can stay at my place', because he was living somewhere else. Now they talk about the squalor and how there was only one bathroom for the whole alley, but it was OK. There were public baths, so you would sleep wherever and in the morning go to the baths and there was soap and a towel. Then Tinguely came back and I said hello and he started paying me, picking up metal and junk for his sculptures, and we'd talk.

After the summer, I went back to Switzerland and my parents put me in a private school in Lausanne. I had good grades, but my dad was not happy with me. But then when my dad died soon thereafter, he had a life insurance policy that said if I went on studying until 25, I'd get something. I went back to Paris and registered at the École du Louvre. But I didn't understand nothing. I mean, I studied some Egyptian stuff, and I remember modern art ended with Cézanne. Now, it's different. I met somebody recently who said, 'My daughter told me they're talking about you at her school'. I did that for one year and then reconnected with Tinguely and met his first wife, who was friends with Daniel Spoerri. He would cook. Basically, he was interested in cooking, and I became his assistant. He's still alive and I think he's a bit bitter about me because all the nouveaux realists were very critical of painting.

Arman, people like that. They looked at painting as being regressive and old-fashioned. They were trying to kill off painting. And with BMPT we were bringing back painting. Then

Tinguely and Niki did the roof of the French pavilion at the world expo in Montreal in 1967 and I went with them. I was paid pretty well as a worker and with that money I travelled to New York for the first time. And I went see Warhol. You're able to go to see Warhol just like that, hello, and later I went with Andy to the Chock Full o'Nuts diner and had a coffee and English muffins for the first time. It was the first Factory, the one with the silver paper, and he told me about The Velvet Underground playing at the Gymnasium, so I went, and there was hardly anyone there. I saw them again the next night at his club, the Electric Circus, on St. Mark's. Much later, in 1985 or so—you know Maripol? She had this painting of mine in her apartment and said, 'Andy is collaborating with Basquiat, you should do a collaboration too'. Anyway, Warhol signed that yellow painting. Actually, I wasn't even there when he signed it, but I know he had the marker in his pocket. Also in 1967 I saw a Robert Ryman exhibition. In fact, I talked with him much later and he said, 'I thought nobody else had seen that show'. It was his first. At the time I was not that impressed, but I thought, 'Oh, there are people doing the same thing we're doing', with Buren and the others. In Switzerland earlier there was a national exhibition of the Swiss collection, and in the middle of the Bonnards you had this Mondrian that made a big impression. Also the early Frank Stella took me a while to get, but when he said, 'What you see is what you see', I said, 'Sure'. Then Jasper Johns, the flag, the target, and the paintings with letters. And then I did the circle paintings. Certain people said it's an O. I don't know.

A circle, but also it's a zero, and it's the letter too. O, the first letter of your name; I never thought of that. That's funny. There are at least three main meanings, right?

Yes. Anyway, in 1968 or 1967, we had a couple of shows with BMPT, and then 1968 happened.

Did you walk out in your street one day and it's like, they're throwing bricks? That almost sounds like a cartoon of Paris in May 1968. It's exactly like that. Yes, yes, I was in Saint-Germain and there are cops on one side and people throwing bricks and barricades on the other. Like, I walked out the door one day and there's a revolution going on. January, February 1968, I did this catalogue without





an exhibition, which was interesting because conceptual artists started doing these types of things around 1969. There was an article saying the best show in Paris at that time was this catalogue.

Then as part of the Zanzibar film group, Serge Bard made *Fun and Games for Everyone*, shot at my opening, and Dalí came. He was very generous and he knew a lot. He said, 'Come to see me at the hotel'. I didn't care that much, but one time I was in front of it, so why not. 'Well, can I see Mr Dalí?' And the person at the desk said, 'Do you have an appointment with the master?' I said, 'No, but he told me to drop by'. He had done TV commercials for Lanvin Chocolate and had this very strong Spanish accent in those, but when we spoke he had no accent at all—perfect French. He also told me he was not a good painter because he was too intelligent. Later the Zanzibar people had this plan to drive to the actual place, Zanzibar, with four Land Rovers. In Algeria it was a really interesting time because you had the Black Panthers and the Pan-African jazz concerts. But there were differences and disagreements among us and eventually we split, and I stayed for a week by myself with some Tuaregs out in the desert.

Back in Paris with all these little groups, there

was a lot of infighting and splintering, and they were being infiltrated or manipulated. It

was tough, and the police were after us. I was

questioned at a sort of higher level once, and

they knew everything.

I wanted to ask, with Zanzibar and these Maoists and anarchists, these far-left tendencies, how much did anybody really know about what was going on in China?

Nothing. But the text, to me, made sense. I knew the *Little Red Book* by heart. But it's complicated. The real thing is that man creates whatever the situation, but then the situation creates man. You're born at a certain point, you are raised a certain way, and that forms your thought. But, yes, the Cultural Revolution we didn't know about at all. You know, this one idea I really loved—at one point the Red Guards said, 'We see circulation in the street, it's wrong, we should pass when it's red and stop when it's green'.

Upside-down brigades and struggle meetings. At that time, some guy came to me trying to get money for a leftist motorcycle club. He

was working as a conductor in the subway and had been kicked out of the union and I said, 'You know, why not?' I was looking for a studio, and I don't know how this happened, but we talked and said maybe we could share. We found a little store for my studio and in the back was a courtyard, which could be a garage. These people didn't have Harleys, they had Moto Guzzis and BSAs. Three were kind of politicised and the others just wanted to ride. I'm doing the paintings, and of course we talk to each other in this old cafe, which is now a fancy restaurant, and then at one point, some guy comes with a Harley from 1945, like that one over there, with what they called a suicide shift.

You have to take your hand off the handlebar to shift? No wonder it's called that.

This guy comes through and wants to sell it for 2,000 francs because he wants to buy a BMW. I sold a painting the same day for 2,000 francs and thought I should buy that motorcycle. We made a deal, but with that bike I couldn't go as fast as the other guys with the BSAs. We went to Normandy and I had to leave first, because mine was slower.

That's sort of comical. Had you been on a motorcycle before that?

No. I'd had a moped way back when I was in Switzerland in school.

Was it specifically the aesthetics of the Harley that attracted you?

The object itself. Think about it, the way it looks. And then, yeah, in fact, I remember, 'Whoa, now that I have a motorcycle, these girls are asking, "Can you bring me back home?"' So, you just need a motorcycle. Then because I had this Harley I needed to meet people who had Harleys, because in Paris you couldn't find parts. To get parts you had to go to Belgium because the king's guard had Harleys. At one point we met these girls at a meeting of bikers, kind of crazy girls, and they said, 'You should come see us', so we said, 'Let's go'. Of course we didn't ride together because my bike was so much slower, but then we met them and through that met other people with Harleys.

It must have been a small scene, but the club got some kind of notoriety or people heard about it?

Exactly. The group was called 69 because there was a club in London called 59, so we called ourselves 69. But then we went to this Elvis Presley show in the outskirts of Paris, they showed an Elvis movie, and they had Elvis lookalikes. I encountered some other people from the outskirts and they had real rules, wearing a leather jacket, with Levi's jeans. And they knew about the Hells Angels. There was another gang called Crimea, after a street of that name in Paris; they had tattoos on their backs that said 'Angel Crimea', and they were half-Nazis and organised and in and out of jail. There was another group also called the Black Angels.



Jumping ahead a couple of years, you went to the Isle of Wight, the famous Jimi Hendrix concert right before he died?

And The Doors, and Ten Years After. From Paris we went in a van and took the ferry. It's funny also because on the boat they were checking if people had enough money for a return ticket. The crew would ask people to show that they had money, so everyone passed their money from one person to the next. There was this actress, Delphine Seyrig, on the ferry—she was in Alain Resnais' film *Last Year in Marienbad* and was married to the artist Jack Youngerman—and she helped us out.

So to skip ahead more than a decade, I recall you once telling me you saw the Butthole Surfers play.

Because Steven Parrino said, 'You should go there' and I was sort of, 'You know what? I heard Hendrix, I don't think you can top that'. But then he took me, and they had two drummers and one was a girl, and I saw suddenly she took her jacket off and had nothing on underneath. The film's playing behind them with surgeries and the soldiers marching and it was, yeah, really good.

Teresa Nervosa, and she didn't talk for three years or something. A committed and authen-

tic performance artist who happened to be a great drummer too.

So way before that, in 1975, I went to New York and stayed there for three months at Vito Acconci's studio on Chrystie Street. It was super cool. Then I went back to Paris, and then in 1977 I said, 'You know what, I have to stay in New York', and went back. The first show I had there was with Tony Shafrazi, in 1977. And what's happening in New York at the time, it's postmodernist, neo-expressionism, Schnabel, Salle, and the rest. I said, 'Wow, this modernist business is over and I'm going to be in trouble, it's not going to work out'. I thought, 'I will have to teach to make a living'





and I just have this French baccalaureate, so I need more credentials'. I had to start again. I went back to school at Columbia. The visual art department at Columbia was not very good at the time, but the art history department was really good. Meyer Schapiro had given it momentum and now Irving Sandler was there; when he was teaching at New York University, he did one semester at Columbia. After a while I met Marcia Hafif, but what we were doing, this was not what was happening at the time with the East Village scene starting up and neo-expressionism and postmodernism. It wasn't clear if there was still space for other stuff besides that. Then I became friends with Sherrie Levine, and she's the one that made me see it in another way. I thought postmodernism was reactionary, and she made me understand that there was another postmodernism, which was the smart version. And, yes, she was correct.

Back to motorcycles, once you told me about riding out on East River Road by the Jewish Community Center in Tucson and it was a beautiful evening and you compared it to hallucinating, and I thought, 'OK, I get it'. Somehow this is connected, talking about Malevich, Mondrian, and Duchamp, painting and readymades, in some way they're getting mixed together, right, between the paintings and the motorcycles?

There's an essay about my work by the French artist Gwenaël Kerlidou. He has a very good line, 'Greenberg on the wall; Duchamp on the floor'.

Perfect. Through all this geometric abstraction, monochromes, many people would say they're dour or maybe even reductive and grim. But the colours are really fantastic, and with no image the colour makes a pure image of its own, in a sense.

There's an internal dialectic, the big red painting, and then the smaller green painting. That kind of contradiction and different things. When I did stripes—you know I did grey stripes, the stripes look off-white, and then I said I could do a red stripe and so on. Then when I did the blue, you know what, sometimes the red is pink, sometimes orange. I try these different things.

You have this quote, 'A painting doesn't have to say that it's art. There is a kind of silence to it, which is interesting to me'.

A criticism of Duchamp in a way. And the motorcycles, to be honest, it can also not be art. A motorcycle, we might say it's art, and you might show it as art, but to somebody else it's not art at all. It's totally a readymade. But painting is maybe the one thing that's just itself. Though it has contradictions. For instance, you do two colours, yes, but it could be a flag or something. I guess in a previous conversation I said that the idea was to make a painting just as a painting in order to have people look at what's not a painting.

To become aware of the world, while taking your eyes off everything else, stepping outside of all the static and visual noise. Many might say there's nothing to see in your paintings, but they have the effect of sending one somewhere else and perhaps that's almost utopian and idealistic. You're totally in the painting and the colour, but also your mind can travel elsewhere, and that's literally transporting and could be considered liberating and also somehow radical. Also there's a playful quality that many people wouldn't ascribe to, quote, unquote, serious art—humour, even joyousness. Art is interesting. But to be honest, I have difficulties. So I tried something, but I'm not happy with it. That's also what keeps you going. I remember once during the BMPT times there was this little girl at the opening, laughing, pointing at the circle paintings. And I said, 'Yeah'. There's the idea to try to do something. You don't even know, maybe you don't understand what you're doing, but it works somehow.