

1.

Autumn 2002. During a round-table discussion wrapping up a symposium on a Contemporary Art exhibition, Olivier Mosset caused quite a stir by suggesting that the artists' names should be taken off the invitations and replaced—if necessary—by those of the works. “Betrayed” colleagues got all worked up and museum directors clamored about artists' rights. Uproar. This was mockery, nihilism or—worse—cynicism.

The time is long past when Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni “intersigned” their pictures. Which doesn't stop Mosset, forty years later, from showing us that he's stuck to his early axiom: the effacement of the painter behind his painting is the guarantee of what he calls the “correction” of art practice. A correct painting is a discreet painting, one that effects a strict separation between “the man who suffers and the mind which creates.”¹

And the axiom lives on. Anonymity, neutrality and discretion are still among the characteristics of the Mosset *oeuvre*. But are we then to fall into the trap (the painting as trapdoor?) of making this formal reservation the key to his painting? What if it is, primarily, a tribute paid to the *zeitgeist*? A sign indicating the point where the extreme politeness his personal ethos is founded upon meets the collective myths of the “man without qualities,” the work without subject, or, in the American version, pure objecthood: “No subject, No image, No taste, No beauty, No message, No technique, No idea, No intention, No art, No feeling,” as John Cage said of Rauschenberg's white paintings. The *topos par excellence* of a certain modern tradition.

A *topos* in which Mosset has so elegantly draped himself, that with a single stroke he shaped a legend.

“Olivier Mosset is a legend,” Robert Fleck wrote in the issue of *KunstZeitung* that accompanied the retrospective of 1998. And he was right.

2.

According to Clement Greenberg a blank, stretched canvas bought at Pearl Paint can be considered a modern painting. An extreme example, yes, but admissible only if the picture is defined by flatness. The point once made, in the 1960s Greenberg's heirs put a lot of effort into deciding whether such a picture could be termed good or bad, interesting or not. But before this question came another, which can be formulated as follows: is such a picture actually a painting?

If, as Mosset has it, to paint is to efface oneself behind one's painting, the answer is no. For self-effacement presupposes an imprinting, which is to say at least two operations: firstly a marking, then a covering. And the blank canvas is, precisely, bare of both this trace and its disappearance. It is a thing, but not yet an object: it is the object of no subject. No subject has "passed through" here, or passed on. "A step, a track, Friday's footprint left on Crusoe's island: emotion, the heart racing at the sight of this trace. All this teaches us nothing, even if from this racing heart there results a whole lot of trampling around that trace; this could happen with any intersecting of animal tracks, but if I come across the trace of something that someone has tried to efface—then I'm sure that I'm dealing with a real subject," wrote Jacques Lacan², unwittingly providing an exact description of what, since the Paleolithic Era, has been the basic premise of the act of painting.

Mosset began with canvases bearing only marks: letters on some, numbers on others. Two works from this dual series merit particular attention: a red A on a white ground and the fourteenth of the numbered canvases, marked with the number 14. The figure became number, the marking became counting; then he abandoned his calculations: he destroyed the numbered canvases. During the same period he was painting white over canvases onto which he had previously glued cigarettes and cigarette packs: white reliefs complete the effacement. No more child's play.

The act of covering presents the act of marking with which the painter appropriates the canvas, just as the "I" presents his own name. An affirmation of what makes him individual, while also renouncing that which makes him identifiable and thus similar. Effacement is indissociable from affirmation. The discretion of Mosset's paintings is indissociable from his affirmation of painting itself. "Their pictorial force completely subsumes any sense of dependence on pictorial technique," as Frank Stella says about the old masters when seeking to define what twentieth-century abstract painting "will never be able to do."³ More or less imposing formats, more or less modern materials, media linked—or not—to technical reproducibility: initially this matters little. The beholder is confronted with a sense of certainty unique at a time when each art season celebrates the "return of painting," as if referring to a ghost: here we have painting (as one might say, here we have language).

“What I’m after: painting, pictures that are only painting.”⁴

“Maybe painting is only painting and nothing else. That interested me as much then as it does now.”⁵

“I’m interested in a material, formal *praxis*: the application of color on a canvas. I’m simply trying to paint and obtain pictures which are nothing other than pictures. They are usually rectangular and monochromatic. The surface is sometimes uneven or marked by the texture of the canvas. Other times the finish is smoother, more even. In the final analysis, though, their formal autonomy means they have a tendency to exist for and in themselves.”⁶

“I don’t know what art is. What interests me is painting.”⁷

“Monochrome doesn’t exist. I do painting.”⁸

“The important thing for me is to do painting and that this painting should exist as such.”⁹

“The idea of a painting as such, that’s what I’m looking for.”¹⁰

“There isn’t really a series, there isn’t really any transition. It’s always about the same thing: painting, what it is to really paint, and how to paint.”¹¹

“Yes, I try to paint: to paint a picture, and as Howard Smith puts it, ‘If you think it’s easy, you’re crazy.’”¹²

“My personal opinion is that you paint against the fact of not being able to paint.”¹³

Contemporary Art specialists consider painting as a minority—not to say minor—genre. And the matter of artistic power is now taboo, as if just mentioning it one runs the risk of magically provoking the politicizing of art which has recently and ostentatiously been so prevalent. In 1981 Mosset pointed out the misunderstandings stemming from this ideological false modesty in his article “Two or Three Things I Know about Her,” in *Cover Magazine*. He was talking about painting, of course, and of the power that would be stigmatized by Robert Morris: “One of the central aspects of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism is the projection of an aura of power and domination over the viewer... the main characteristics of American abstraction—its scale, its presence, its ‘severity’ reflect (a trust in) a desire for authoritarian presence.”¹⁴ Mosset’s reaction was, “I have some doubts about these statements. Didn’t Newman say he was making his paintings large so that they could be intimate?”¹⁵

For anyone who recalls the paintings Mosset showed at the Venice Biennial in 1990—six of them, each 6 x 4 meters—this comment makes sense. You have to “make pictures big to be intimate”: pictures whose size is synonymous with intimacy. Sufficiently big for a viewing subject to feel *intus*, within, sheltered; endowed with that protection originally lacking for the human animal and which painting has always provided him with: carapace, feathers, hair, fur (Titian), lace, tulle, velvet, satin (Vermeer), and sky, clouds, the vault of heaven, night (Poussin). The motif is variable to infinity, or almost. For this insideness, this intimacy which has nothing to do with interiority, does not exist of itself. It has to be made, feigned, painted, for space to close in as place, for the vision to be reflected in the gaze, for nudes not to look *écorchés* (skinned).

The painting has to be big because intimacy—the here and now, the somewhere, the home—is an artifact. Such is even the very first feint, the first hypothesis. This is the fictional antecedent to every

image, the grid upon which the figures will be stamped, and the precondition for any narrative. Fresco, tapestry, mosaic, stained glass, painting, film: all these names refer to the same act, the act of marking and effacement. The act that consists simply in stretching the canvas whose French equivalent, *toile*, has its roots in a single Latin word, *celare*, which can mean cover, helmet, hell, envelope, hiding place, cellar, sanctuary, eyelid, eyelash, dye, pretext, poetry and, lastly, color. The painter as concealer.

The definition of painting must be as broad as the appropriation of reality by humankind requires, whether this reality be a given or a fabrication. Mosset paints very big pictures, but is also prepared to paint abandoned quarries, Swiss Army anti-tank barricades, the doors of the National Library in Bern, a disused gas station on France's Highway 6, and so on. In this way he reinstates the fiction which has made these artifacts our reality, the very reality that determines the work we put into producing them. He makes them enter or re-enter by force the history of human activity. In this sense all painting is history painting.

5.

June 1963: the opening of the first Salon International des Galeries-Pilotes by René Berger, director of the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne. "What particularly interested me at the time," says Mosset, "was a piece by Del Pezzo, a kind of white molding on a white ground. I was doing white reliefs in 1962 and it was doubtless the coincidence that struck me. I remember Spoerri too, not so much his chamber pot (*Le réveil du Lion*) as *Ci-gît Jean Onnertz*: there was a relationship with language that must have caught my attention, and the spatial singularity of the object itself, which was flat but freestanding. I still remember Jacquet's 'camouflage' paintings hanging in the staircase during that first art fair." So that set him off. But into what adventure? Which part? The list of reminiscences which, years later, remind him of his own work is less eloquent, though, than the remark preceding it, "To see in 1963, in a museum in Lausanne—i.e. on your home turf—a Jasper Johns American flag on an orange ground beside a shaped canvas by Stella, was just incredible."¹⁶

From that day Mosset became a painter irrevocably linked to the history of American painting, as soon as he had become aware of the decline of School of Paris abstraction and Surrealist figuration (which nonetheless between them accounted for most of the works being shown at the fair). Thanks to the famed neutrality that makes Switzerland an ideal locus for artistic confrontation, he saw immediately that the action was elsewhere, on the other side of the Atlantic. Above all, though, he recognized that the happening thing, even in painting, had to do with Warhol. Whence his interest in Alain Jacquet, and in Daniel Spoerri's conceptualism, i.e. in the aspect of the Duchamp heritage he would shortly get to know via the "New Realists."

What he failed to see fully at the time, and what must be remembered if we are to understand his later gambits, is the extent to which