

## DOING DONUTS IN THE WHITE CUBE

The Two-Wheel Readymades of  
Renegade Minimalist Olivier Mosset

The Swiss visual artist Olivier Mosset originally became a biker after a gang of Maoists gathered near his studio. Seduced by the hum of liberty and leftist foment – this was on Paris's Rue de Lappe after the uprisings of May 1968 – biking granted the young minimalist and co-conspirator of Daniel Buren access to a new material and social world. At first, biking was a counter-life to art, but the

aesthetic quality of the object soon made itself felt in his work. In 1974, Mosset bought a 47" Shovelhead Harley-Davidson, a bike he rode to exhibition spaces across Europe, photographing it to use on invitation cards the way Le Corbusier took pictures of his car outside newly finished projects. In both cases, vehicles were symbols for technological modernity, but also the possibility of

progress. For Mosset, they became an aesthetic wormhole, a means of pushing and escaping the limits of art.

Motorbikes act as timestamps in Mosset's career. After leaving Paris for New York in 1977, he acquired another Harley: a 900cc 1969 Ironhead left in storage by Francois de Menil, architect of the Rothko Chapel in Houston. The first bike he presented as pure art – a readymade without

the necessary papers for road use – was a 74" Panshovel featuring a Jackson Pollock "drip" pattern on its tank and rear fender. Rolling the machine indoors was an invasion of the hermetic white cube, a move that collapsed the distinction between gallery, studio, and workshop. The art hog was a pivot in Mosset's personal collection, meticulously cataloged in *Wheels*, accompanied by essays, interviews, and a rich spectrum of archival photography from the 1960s to today.

"Except for the protective gear you're wearing, there's nothing between you and the rest of the world," wrote Honda Blackbird-rider John Berger in *Keeping a Rendezvous* (1992). "The air and the wind press directly on you. You are in the space through which you are travelling."

When Mosset relocated a third time to Tucson, Arizona, in 1996, the space he occupied was suddenly warm and dry, perfect for daily bike rides across vistas that appeared to have been plucked from the epic landscapes of the Hudson River School. He began collaborating with the artists Vincent Szarek and Jeffrey Schad, complementing early works in abstract painting with large shaped canvases that recalled the lonely billboards that line even the longest American highways. Szarek worked in a body shop before attending art school and incorporates a highly skilled air spray technique in his practice. The trio also worked on cars: mainly vintage Chevrolets in homage to Louis Chevrolet, born a mere ten miles from Mosset in Switzerland, who made a parallel migration, first to Paris, then across the Atlantic to found the Detroit-based Chevrolet Motor Car Company in 1911.

The art historian Philip Ursprung suggests "total urbanization" as Mosset's foremost concern. Parking lots, desert highways, the "boneyard" of decommissioned airplanes near his Tucson home – totems of industrialized society that stretch across the desert, a creeping finitude for which bikes are perhaps the most extreme metonym. Where else is the sensual rush of speed machines so closely linked to human frailty, the signs and symbols of a rebellious vernacular culture interchangeable with instances of high art? "I still believe that a painting or a 'chopper' is saying something," Mosset says, "either you get it or you don't."

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**Mosset and his 1969 Harley Davidson 900cc Ironhead  
Photo: Edo Bertoglio (1977)**

