Paint

Director's Foreword · KATHLEEN S. BARTELS · 5

Introduction: Psychedelic as a Painting · MONIKA SZEWCZYK · 7

A Change of Mind · THOMAS LAWSON · 11

Transmission Difficulties: Vancouver Painting in the 1960s · SCOTT WATSON · 14

subject: painting blah blah blah · PETER SCHUYFF & MICHAEL MORRIS IN CORRESPONDENCE · 28

Characters and Gesture as People Do · JESSICA STOCKHOLDER & ELIZABETH MCINTOSH IN CONVERSATION · 34

Plates · 41

Fluid Means · NEIL CAMPBELL & MONIKA SZEWCZYK IN CONVERSATION · 58

Artists in the Exhibition · 69

Acknowledgments · 70

A Change of Mind

Thomas Lawson

I was a graduate student in Edinburgh in 1974, wrestling with ideas and information at quite a remove from any prolonged experience of recent art. The Central Library had an art and art history collection, a small hideaway on a top floor reached through a small door and secondary staircase. It was an odd, almost private room with a tantalizingly sparse recognition of the contemporary. I spent many winter mornings there puzzling through back issues of *Studio International*, at that time the only publicly available art magazine (I later found a stash of old *Artforums* in the University Gallery, but it appeared that someone had let the subscription lapse). What I was trying to figure out was how to make art that would be of the moment. The available options in Scotland were various types of expressionist painting, some based on observation, some on renditions of mythic figures. Joseph Beuys had exhibited and performed, and I had attended one of his lecture demonstrations. I couldn't make any sense of it, but it was a cold hall, we were sitting on the floor and he spoke in German.

I first visited New York that summer. To a young man coming from quiet, windswept Edinburgh, the big city seemed incredibly vibrant and passionate. People wore less and spoke and gesticulated more, especially on the day Nixon resigned. I happened to be in midtown, on 42nd Street, at the moment of the announcement. It had been expected, of course, and radios lined the sidewalk, from storefronts to transistor radios. As the news came across and Nixon could be heard making his farewell speech, people whooped and hollered and danced in the street. An entire political convention of behind-the-scenes deals had collapsed in the face of democratic transparency. It was a thrilling moment.

I don't remember whether this happened before or after my first visit to MoMA, but that too was a thrilling moment. Neither London nor Paris had ever given me such a full dose of modern art, straight up and between the eyes. Rooms upon rooms of amazing paintings, all laid out so a fool could follow the argument and see how certain paintings in Paris had led to other paintings, which in turn had led to an overpowering suite of paintings in New York. This was a purely visual primer, linked to a reductive logic that brooked no dissent. Here was a certainty to match that of Nixon and Kissinger. And just as the latter came to grief on an insignificant, nearly overlooked, willfully repressed act by a renegade bunch of zealots, so MoMA's fierce logic began to provoke a nagging feeling that something was missing, something was being suppressed. There were hints, in a side room under the staircase, of a differently written history. There was *Fresh Widow* (1920), Duchamp's mysteriously blacked-out window frame, a standing rebuke to all the soul-revealing paintings lining the walls. And a handful of Dadaist and Surrealist objects, smirking with secret knowledge and dirty jokes. The Museum had admitted this work, and had actually presented a Duchamp survey a few years earlier, but it was clearly shameful in some undefined sense, evidence of a secret life of modern art that we weren't supposed to know or care about.

Intimations of this secret were enough to send me to Penn Station to catch a train to Philadelphia to see the Arensberg Collection of Duchamp. At the Philadelphia Museum, Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (1915–32), with its broken glass the result of a felicitous accident, is the metaphoric end of painting's claim to transparency. The artwork no longer a window or a mirror, but a thing, an object to be looked at and through, a puzzle speaking volumes of uncertainty and doubt. This is the other legacy of Cézanne's notorious doubt, described so eloquently by Merleau-Ponty. If Picasso had taken the older painter's tough-minded reduction of painting

PABLO PICASSO
Green Still Life 1914
oil on canvas, 59.7 × 79.4 cm
Lillie P. Bliss Collection
Museum of Modern Art, New York
© 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso
/Artists Rights Society (ARS)
New York

to a series of fractured marks, and created a new armature, then Duchamp had come to see that what Cézanne had ushered in was the possibility of a different paradigm in which painting no longer ruled over a hierarchy of art, but instead a more generalized idea of "the work of art" would exist to interrogate the very idea of art. For me this was a liberating discovery.

Revisiting MoMA some thirty years later after its reopening, I was struck by a new sense of spectacle. The old building had a serene elegance, a sense of restraint. The new is much grander, more public in that it is clearly designed to attract and hold vast crowds. And entertain them rather than lecture them: the juxtapositions of large, imposing works in the main gallery seem designed for effect rather than to build an argument. In this new environment the rehang of the collection gives much more space to the Surrealist tradition. We are now collectively invited to consider the fate of art, to puzzle over the condition of Western civilization while confronting the evidence that a museum, this museum, is proposing that we take a serious look at fragments of a store-display mannequin, a bowler hat and some machine parts.

Duchamp's questioning of art had been fuelled by a disdain for the vulgarity of an art tradition that seemed to have been reduced to no more than ostentatious display and a speculative market. It came from a high-minded elitism. But ever since the 1960s, the mantra "Question authority" has become commonplace, a mainstream idea suitable for advertising campaigns. The art world now embraces the Duchampian question as if it were a self-evident truth, and as a result it has become cliché. Revisiting MoMA, I found I had been quizzed once too often and I turned away from the gathered witticisms with impatience. Instead, my attention was taken by a painting by Picasso, entitled *Green Still Life*, from the summer of 1914.

It is quite a small painting, the kind of work long reviled as easel painting (as if the support an artist used to hold up a board or a canvas or a piece of paper somehow cast a moral character on the subsequent work). It is not a realistic picture, but neither is it abstract; a group of easily identifiable objects in an understandable space can be described. It is quite small, but the scale is appropriately intimate, since the picture depicts a tabletop in the corner of a room. What looks to be a side table, narrow, has a fringed cloth laid on it, and gathered on that, in casual disarray, is an empty fruit bowl, a newspaper, a cigarette packet, a bottle and glass, a pear and some grapes. Behind, perhaps also on the table, leaning against the wall, or maybe hanging just where the table meets the wall, is a framed mirror. The ensemble suggests the end of a meal, the remains pushed to the side for later cleanup. It is a space of no great significance, but the continuation of everyday life.

As its title suggests, the painting is mostly green, with various shades enlivened by pointillist dots of yellow, red, black and white. This stippling seems brighter than the rest, and is executed in enamel paint rather than oil. There are also some scumbled areas in which white has been introduced, perhaps to suggest the fall of sunlight against wall and tabletop. The bottle and bowl are given body with some more white and some black, and the bottle is further given shape and mass with some stripes in variegated yellows and reds. The effect of these greens and various passages of white and bright colour is to suggest a cool corner on a bright day in the Midi. A bland, accepting glance at the painting rewards the viewer with a sense of well-being and sunny comfort. A longer look and the colour renders everything unstable: things seem to be jostling for attention, edging each other out of focus. The brashness of the commercial paint clashes with the subtler variations of the studio oil. The *trompe-l'oeil* effect used to render the cigarette box brings another note of dissonance to the surface. The perspective suggested by the drawn outline of the table has the viewer looking down vertiginously at this tabletop, as though leaning uncertainly over it. The pervasive green, penetrating all surfaces, makes the solid turn to mist. A hangover view. And since the picture of the glass here resembles that famous three-dimensional *Glass of Absinthe*, it may be a hallucinatory absinthe hangover.

So this small painting, made during the summer months of a year in which Europe was heading into war, manages to raise a considerable number of questions about art, without the fury of endgaming it. These questions arise from the practice of painting itself, a critique in the form of a riff on the conventions of representation. Picasso dazzles us with a bravura display of painterly conventions, almost decorative in its elegance. Here non-illusionistic flatness is played off against various technical devices used to simulate three-dimensional space – yellow stipples suggest the light bouncing off the surface of a mirror whose frame is shaded in a typically Western fashion, while the bottle is given depth and volume in a Cubist manner, with fractured outlines and striated shading. We know the rectangle between bowl and bottle is a newspaper because we understand the three letters – *JOU* – to be a fragment of *Le Journal*; we also know they spell the word for "play." Light is transformed into a material, a physical interruption of the surface. The uncertain subjectivity of vision is made palpable.

Picasso asks us to consider the power of observation, and the consequences of perception on a state of mind. The colour green may be ascribed any number of meanings – emotional, psychological, spiritual; it may also be the prevailing atmospheric colour in a particular room on a particular day under particular conditions, or a reference to the Green Fairy of absinthe. This may be quite objective, a purely visual effect. Or it may be coloured by a mental state, a differently tuned awareness.

A small, decorative easel painting offering itself as picture, and object, and treatise on art.

Acknowledgements

The *PAINT* exhibition and parallel publication have benefited greatly from the generosity and dedication of many individuals, institutions and sponsors. The Toronto Dominion Bank came on board early as a presenting sponsor and further financial support was provided by a grant from The Vancouver Foundation. *Paint: a psychedelic primer* was additionally funded with proceeds from the Jack and Doris Shadbolt Endowment for Research and Publications at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

We are truly grateful to the lending institutions, especially their staff: Donna McAlear (former director) and Stephen Topfer of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; Martin Segger (director) and Kerry Mason at the Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery; Bill Jeffries (director) and Veronika Klaptocz at the Simon Fraser University Art Gallery; Scott Watson (director/curator), Keith Wallace (adjunct director/curator), Julie Bevan, Krisztina Laszlo, Naomi Sawada, Siobhan Smith, Owen Sopotiuk and Annette Wooff at The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery; and Josephine Mills (director/curator) and Lucie Linhart at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery in Alberta.

We are equally grateful to the private collectors who parted with their works for the benefit of public access to some of British Columbia's outstanding talent. They include David Allison/Chris Nicholson, Monty J. Cooper, the Lamoureaux Family, Marcia Goldenfeld Maiten/Barry David Maiten, the Neumann Family, Nicholaus Schafhausen, Penny Wright and one anonymous lender. We also extend our gratitude to gallerists who provided key support with loans: Natalia Tkachev and Sara Macaulay (Blanket Gallery), Catriona Jeffries (Catriona Jeffries Gallery), Andy Sylvester (Equinox Gallery), Monte Clark and Tahina Awhan (Monte Clark Gallery) in Vancouver; Mark Wehby (Kravets/Wehby Gallery), Jay Gorney (Mitchell Innes & Nash), Lisa Spellman, Mariko Munro and Simon Greenberg (303 Gallery) in New York; and Richard Heller (Richard Heller Gallery) in Santa Monica.

The staff at the Vancouver Art Gallery worked with great energy and dedication on all aspects of the exhibition and catalogue. We are grateful to Director, Kathleen S. Bartels, for her unwavering support and leadership and to colleagues in the departments of Curatorial, Photography, Preparation, Registration, Conservation, Development, Marketing and Public Programs who all showed grace under the constant pressures of exhibition-making. Special thanks to Trevor Mills for his fine photography and to Susan Currie and Liz Bruchet for securing transport for artworks, some of which had yet to be made when the planning for this exhibition began. Daina Augaitis, Grant Arnold and Ian Thom were invaluable sources of sage curatorial advice and energetic support throughout the last months.

Finally, a very special thank you to Thomas Lawson, Elizabeth McIntosh, Michael Morris, Peter Schuyff and Jessica Stockholder for their eloquent contributions to the catalogue and to Julian Gosper and Jennifer Nichols for their elegant design. Of course, this project would not have been possible without the artists in the exhibition, several of whom created ambitious new works for the occasion. We are deeply grateful for their bold contributions and look forward to the subsequent waves of enthusiasm they may inspire.

Neil Campbell/Monika Szewczyk