

changing the rules of the Game

"To-day is not yesterday: we ourselves change; how can our Works and Thoughts, if they are always to be the fittest, continue always the same?"¹

For historians, the principle focus is the study of change, for without change, history does not exist. Changes in art are generally expected, even if not always accepted. Art historians name changes in art by movements--Impressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism to name just a few. Artists change their work when there is a shift in their thinking. Some may alter their work drastically. Consider Marcel Duchamp's passage from painting to readymade², or Kazimir Malevich's and Phillip Guston's³ journeys from figurative to abstract and back⁴. Reflect on Jackson Pollock's acceleration from figurative to abstract. Moreover, Piet Mondrian's works have "been in turn impressionist, romantic, lyrical, visionary and symbolic; and in his last years, at seventy, after that strictly intellectual style, his paintings became surprisingly sensuous and elated."⁵ Changes are often seen as development towards "the signature." However, artistic progression is not always linear and aimed at one focus. Hans-Ulrich Obrist commenting on Gerhard Richter notes that the artist's works "allow, even demand, perpetual change and mutation." Tracing Pablo Picasso's work reveals it constantly metamorphosed, from his early Blue and Rose Periods to his benchmark *Les Femmes d'Alger* of 1907. Comparing his flat, cut paper style in *Three Musicians*, 1921, to his monumental, neo-classical,

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Essays*.

² When Duchamp was asked in 1936 to design the cover of issue 26 *Transition* magazine, he selected his comb *Readymade* (a readymade).

³ For further information on the changes in the styles of these artists see A Critical Study of Philip Guston, Dore Ashton; Philip Guston, Robert Storr, Abbeville Press; and Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935, catalog- National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

⁴ "In the fifteen years since his death, Guston has represented to many young artists the integrity of change.", Fay Hirsch, *Contemporary Art*, vol. 3, #2 Spring 1996.

⁵ Mondrian, On the Humanity of Abstract Painting Meyer Shapiro (New York, George Braziller, Inc., 1995).

sculptural figures of *Three Women at the Spring*, painted that same summer; we see distinctly different approaches. The plurality of concurrent styles provokes the psychological question of multiple personalities. Artistic leaps are a bit like exploring a new frontier where speaking a new language is vital. However, fluency may be difficult if the language has not been previously uttered.

Periodically something alters the direction of an artist's work. Art, like life, depends on the road taken, the choices made. The decision to wander off the well-worn path and leave the comfort of the familiar courts the possibility of losing one's way. Once the choice is adopted, the possibility of returning is no longer there. Experience has a way of changing things. Changes within an artist's oeuvre may be propelled by different intentions, procedures, accidents, materials, inspirations, travels or events. Pivotal works affect, sometimes profoundly, the approach of an artist. Evolution can shape and drive growth. Sometimes these works are singular but lead to something new, other times they develop into a body of work themselves. Though not all change is progress, change contains the *potential* for something of value.

This exhibition is exploratory rather than a summary, meant to highlight some seldom seen departures. *changing the rules of the Game* does not aim to present any particular style or direction. Rather than using stylistic criteria for our selection, we relied on the artists to expand and define the subject. They represent themselves rather than any group or movement. The mixture of generations, purposes, methods, ways of thinking, images and styles complicates attitudes and ideas. Our intention is to give viewers a glimpse into the studio at work that perhaps might not otherwise be seen and insight into the workings of the creative mind.

We asked artists to look at their art from the perspective of personal history and to choose a pivotal/transitional piece that had a strong influence on their work. The request forced the artists to dig deeply, sometimes back to painful or confusing times. By revealing the basis of their transitional works they opened themselves up to critical scrutiny of a different kind. Consider their courage to expose themselves in such a vulnerable way. The criteria for the work requested presented the possibility of exposing work normally kept in the studio, stored away, work deemed "bad," unfinished, not ready for public view or so aberrant as to be counterproductive to marketing.

Paramount to the exhibition is the works' strong influence on the artists, not salability. Agnes Martin said "Inspiration is really just the guide to the next thing and may be what we call success or failure. The bad paintings have to be painted and to the artist these are more valuable than those brought to the public."⁶ "... Picasso held on to a number of his important paintings, the preponderant weight of his own holdings lay in those areas of his art most associated with experiment and process. . ." ⁷ Picasso needed to have contact with his work's exploration. Ultimately, artists must be open to change, and have the pliancy of vision to recognize signs that may lead to development of their work. Inspiration may come from unexpected sources. Flexibility contributes indirectly to change by its openness.

These works, by their creators' definition are important. Changing the rules, or the structure, entails choices made, risks taken, and often, strength found. Some changes are seen as a maturing and development of a signature style. The relevance of a transitional work might be found in its immediate effect on subsequent pieces and their development. However, periodically, an art work falls into an area where an artist may or may not have been consciously heading. The focus of work being done prior to the transitional work's creation may develop rapidly because of surfacing of obvious keys or conversely, it may be so shrouded in unknowns, the artist may spend years deciphering the clues and applying them.

Additionally, artists were asked to write a statement explaining the significance of the work and to further place it in context with other work through black and white photographs documenting pre- and post-transitional works. The changes vary from artist to artist--some are abrupt, others barely perceptible, and some extending over a prolonged period.

A common factor of all of these transitional works is their change of focus. "The vision which enables the artist to visualize reality is a supreme form of concentration." ⁸ Concentration directs toward a common center or objective focus but growth is an expansion outward. To indicate the age of a tree, concentric circles, growth rings, are counted. Pivotal works provide growth spurts to artists. Do individual artists' turning

⁶ *Writings/ Schriften*, Agnes Martin (Ostfildern, Cantz Verlag, 1991) .

⁷ *Pablo Picasso, A Retrospective*, William Rubin (New York, MOMA, 1980).

⁸ *Tantra Art, Its Philosophy & Physics*, Ajit Mookerjee (Basel:NY, R. Kumar, 1971).

points express a universal visual? Would there be parities in the transitional works selected by the participating artists? Surprisingly there *were* visual similarities. This gathering into one body, mass, or force surprisingly seems to manifest itself in many of these works as a common denominator for change. In many of the works, dots, spots, spheres, and ellipses become visible and insistent signifiers.

Circles, spheres, spirals and ellipses are filled with timeless, universal associations. "The circle is found at the origin of almost all the alphabets or ideograms. These signs are common to the writing of many prehistoric and ancient peoples in the East, in Europe, in America, and in the Canary Islands."⁹ The image is persistent, from some of the oldest known paintings, the red dot paintings at Chauvet Cave,¹⁰ to Jasper John's target paintings and from the Stonehenge circles ca. 1900-1400 BC to Richard Long's contemporary stone circles. The circle is eternal. It has no beginning and no end; it is beyond time. It is a powerful image in religion, from the halo to the mandala.¹¹ In art of esoteric Tantric Hinduism, the bindu, dot or sphere came to be seen as the symbol for the creative matrix for the universe. In one 18th century Rajasthan painting, two spheres, one white and one red, contain two poles: zero and infinity. The white sphere represents "...the fundamental point of repose out of which emerge[s] transformation and evolution." In diverse cultures the circle symbolizes God, Creation, and the World. Muslim whirling dervishes spin rising and descending, revolving precisely the same way each time silently repeating the name of God moving closer with each turn to a trance-like state, physically putting the spirit into their lives. The sphere seen as flawless perfection, is filled with spiritual connotations and mystery. The energy of a sphere is constant whether representing centripetal force moving in on itself or centrifugally expanding out.

"A convex surface partaking of the nature of a sphere, expresses growth, progression, fullness, expansion, radiation of energy from within."¹²

⁹ Bruno Munari, Discovery of the Circle (Tiranti, 1966).

¹⁰ "...Radiocarbon tests established them to be over 30,000 years old." This quote is from Jean Marie Chauvet, Eliette Brunel Deschamps, Christian Hillaire The Dawn of Art: The Chauvet Cave, The Oldest Known Paintings in the World, (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996).

¹¹ Jung thought that artwork within a circle promotes psychological healing. Maralynn Hagood Slegelis, "A Study of Jung's Mandala and Its Relationship to Art Psychotherapy", *Arts in Psychotherapy*, Vol. 14, Winter 1987.

¹² "The Symbolic Aspect of Form", Alice Bonner, *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* Vol. XVII, 1949.

Is it a coincidence of images or is there an explanation for the circular in so many of these pivotal works? "Mandalas most appear in connection with chaotic, psychic states of disorientation or panic."¹³ Do spots, dots, ellipses and "pours" indicate a search for an internal centering? They recur throughout much of the exhibition. Is it merely an odd coincidence? Could there be an underlying structure to change?

© Kocot and Hatton September 1997

¹³ Maralynn Hagood Slegelis, "A Study of Jung's Mandala and its Relationship to Art Psychotherapy," *Arts in Psychotherapy*, Vol. 14, Winter 1987.