

WALTER SWENNEN

In the early 1980, Walter Swennen was known as a painter of cartoon characters and his work included simple, 'banal' or 'naive' motifs drawn from everyday life. He was feted as one of the Vitalist painters who, with their 'new', or post-modern painting, offered an alternative to formalism and contemplative reduction. Swennen had, however, made the transition from poet to painter several years earlier, and begun to carve out a niche for himself with his penetrating presentations of poetic and rebus-like 'painted' texts, or 'written' paintings. Using romantic-philosophical imagery and word play, he gave himself the freedom to experiment in a very eclectic and improvisational way with all of the previous strands of his life to date, and to both translate and question them. Swennen soon began to enjoy a certain reputation and his work was the subject of two major exhibitions in Belgium in the mid-80s: at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Charleroi (1991) and MuHKA in Antwerp (1996). He describes his practice as the manipulation of an unpredictable substance, an 'emulsion' that is governed by its own laws and which is capable of endless surprises:

Paintings. A canvas or board, sometimes already framed, a readymade with paint, and an image. It doesn't always have to happen in that order, that much is obvious. But even that way, it is not easy, because the painting is made by an image that does not yet exist, and the image, if it comes, depends on the paint. It's like an emulsion: if it is too brusque, then it doesn't form a stable whole -because it doesn't come from the same side of the board. The image is not soluble in the paint...

The word emulsion encompasses the impermeability and the materiality, as well as the language, of painting. Swennen's work explores the relationship between painting, image and abstraction, but it does this through instantly recognisable signs, emblems and motifs, rather than via photographic images, as in post-Pop aesthetics. After producing the 'written' paintings, in which language or writing played a primary role, and in which some texts were deleted and others not, Swennen altered his 'gestural' brushwork. There is a chronology to Swennen's work and certain recognisable phases disclose the way in which the artist came to define meaning as something futile and tragicomic. They also reveal his quest for all that is unpredictable, complex and contradictory in painting. Contrary to what he himself spent a long time downplaying, it was not a coincidence or a fortuitous set of circumstances that prompted him to stop being a poet and switch to being a painter/visual artist. Swennen originally trained as a graphic artist (engraver) and as a young man he was taught how to paint by a family friend. He also followed, at close hand, the increasing recognition Marcel Broodthaers enjoyed as an artist, whereas he was barely noticed as a poet. Swennen's development as a painter is a rich and complex one, and includes many junctures that contributed to a greater sense of freedom and adventure, and those that invariably undermined, and called into question, his authority as an author.

The trajectory of his career can be summarised as follows:

After his initial gestural 'action painting' period in **1980-81**, which was characterised by fragmentary and multilingual language-paintings (in which he wrote upon the painting, or in which writing acted as a pretext for painting), he seized the moment and used the art of translation to determine his subject matter. He

trawled bilingual dictionaries for descriptions and ideas for paintings or, for example, telephoned his children for instructions concerning the subject of a work and asked them 'what to paint' -this is known, in modernist parlance, as the problem of 'subject matter'.

Writing disappeared from his paintings in 1984. Swennen began using diverse conceptual signifiers in his work in the form of direct images, emblems and signs. In the mid-1980s he gleaned motifs from everyday life, particularly the lives of his children.

In 1987 he deliberately hampered his ability to paint as a form of mental exercise. He painted certain works in the dark - often *memento mori*, such as *Sirene*, a skull or an empty bottle - and sometimes painted with two hands, often over painting his work with violent, angular, horizontal brushstrokes.

In 1988 he concluded that the problem of representation versus abstraction was a red herring, and that 'a painting is always an image of a painting'. He decided to over paint sections of his representational figurative works with solid, rectangular, beam-like shapes. The end result was a palimpsest of overlapping paintings that gave deeper meaning to the formalist adage that a painting should reflect its own process.

From 1991, he occasionally applied a grid structure to the entire surface of the picture plane, both painted and found patterns, which, thanks to the complex background (that was no longer easily readable but given as much attention as the more recognisable image in the foreground), distracts the viewer from the subject. He thus redefined the modernist paradigm of the flat surface as a continuous perspectival space by creating a foreground-background and by presenting subjects that are either totally disconnected, or completely merged. He introduced iconography as a playful homage to Kazimir Malevich's constructivist images, but used figurative motifs or signifiers such as white, square-shaped washing machine lids. These have every appearance of being radically abstract forms on a flat surface but are presented under the guise of a household appliance. A well-known claim at the time was that absolutely anything could be used as a support for a painting; and also that a support did not equal the painting, or the image.

In 1997, Swennen concentrated on a series of works based on the popular and long-lived teenage fiction magazines produced by the Catholic publishing houses in Belgium that were known as *VT.aam.se Filmkens*. He was attracted by the ideas they contained in relation to the relative freedom of the authors, a freedom that arose directly as a result of their anonymity. This aspect of Swennen's work finds parallels in the undermining of the authority of the author, as described by Roland Barthes in his famous essay *What is an author*. Inspired by Victor Servranckx, he created a number of works around 1998 that incorporated circular prints taken from paint cans - these geometrically perfect circles have linear qualities that no human hand could reproduce. With these paintings, he called into question what can - and cannot - be described as a painting.

The title of his 2008 retrospective, *How to Paint a Horse*, referred to a series of handbooks for amateur artists, a particularly well-known series of which was entitled *Painting Lessons in Oils* by Mona Mills. The discrepancy between the formulaic genre images contained in the books (out of which it was possible to

manufacture 'successful' paintings according to the tradition of so-called 'popular' and 'kitsch' art), and all that is authentic, or original, innovative and unique, presents a dilemma that Swennen has never shied away from.

In addition to the imagery that is present in his work today, mottos, curses or commands began to appear in various paintings around **aon** - in both typographical variations and in different languages. He also introduces 'graphic', but unreadable, Chinese characters as pure plastic signifiers divorced from their meaning, and several works refer to the grotesque motifs and visceral 'surfaces' present in the work of Philip Guston.

Yet at no point during any of these phases did Swennen paint according to the prevailing 'style of the day' or adopt the subjects typically expected of an artist. He has thus created his own distinct place in the world while invariably subjecting, albeit in a lucid and humorous way, other aspects of an artist's life to closer scrutiny: the role of the 'author', the role played by 'fashions in art' and the expectations of the market and the public. In his early activities as a poet and happening-artist, and in accordance with the radical views about language and typography expressed through beat-poetry and art, Swennen experimented with a wide range of associative, musical and critical texts and metaphors. The modernist slant of these experiments - inspired by the improvisations, rhythms and musicality of Free Jazz - were combined with highly melancholic and romantic images related to his scholarly interest in literature and art. The notion of 'automatic' or 'hidden' authorship finds its beginnings in this period, a period when Swennen was an enthusiast promoter of happenings - a loosely defined artistic genre in which literally anything could 'happen' and which integrated all of the senses and artistic disciplines. He is known to have participated in one of Marcel Broodthaers happenings, but new research has established that he took part in many others. Swennen not only participated in various other transitory groups by contributing poetry but also invariably confounded expectations by performing disruptive acts. These were imbued with a sense of playfulness and discovery but were deliberately intended to turn perceptions of form and content, marks, meanings and methods of communication upside down. The artist did not play a central role in a happening, unlike in performance art. A happening was a type of event that relied upon movements, fragments, symbolic motifs, contemporary objects and conventional storylines for its power. In addition to his fondness for absurd linguistic associations and Free Jazz, there is also another foundation to Swennen's improvisational-associative practice. By studying psychology, he discovered the attendant, theoretical foundations of its destructive experiments with language, particularly in relation to psychoanalytic 'analysis' - the practice of free and uninhibited discussion that relates to Jacques Lacan's insights into language and subjectivity. During the 1970S, moreover, Swennen also taught the ideas and the theories of Freud and Lacan for several years at the Ecole de Recherche Graphique (ERG) in Brussels. The undermining of authorial authority in an in a rapidly evolving world of mass culture is also evidenced in the proliferation of images drawn from the worlds of commerce and advertising, and from Pop Art. In this, Swennen not only describes the 'product' and the possible experiences and subjects but also lays bare the impersonal and mechanical way in which an author works. The 'Nouveau Roman' texts also experiment with narrative perspectives from that particular decade and shed light on the cultural climate that existed when Swennen emerged as artist, long before he actually 'practiced' as a painter.

The poetic thought processes that lie behind the 'open-ended' and 'concluded but unfinished' works of

those particular years are obviously much more than a tantalising product of the 1990 Pop or neo-Pop aesthetics. Furthermore, his scepticism about 'recognised' as opposed to 'hidden' or 'anonymous' authors explains why his work also had little to do with the heroic 'wild' or 'new' painters. Swennen is a man of understatement and continual self-relativisation.

A consequence of this is that he is often compared with the provocative unpredictability and hyper-eclecticism of Martin Kippenberger, although Swennen is much less confrontational and totally unconcerned with the creation of an oeuvre based on the 'cult of personality'. He prefers to focus instead upon the futility and tragicomic aspect of his endeavours, and upon the illusionary nature of form and meaning. Swennen is perhaps better compared to an artist such as Rene Daniels, who also works with poetic-associative imagery that alludes to the conceptual analysis of painting. Daniels is known for the poetic thought processes that inform his paintings, often coupled with a good dose of black humour and sealed with pictorially inventive backgrounds — in other words, a European translation of 'painting after the end of the painting'. This refers to the point at which every possible subject and sensitivity has been annexed by advertising and the media, and which every painterly act only seems to emphasise (even the most unlikely archaic or nostalgic ones). It is possible to view his decades-long investigation into the potential freedom and constraints inherent within the medium of painting as a sequence of 'accidents' (as he himself calls them). His attitude, and the unpredictable and whimsical way in which he works, is incompatible with a modernist 'individualistic formula' and is resistant to the type of success that is achieved via marketing. For this reason, Swennen happens to be one of the painters most admired by a younger generation of artists.

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