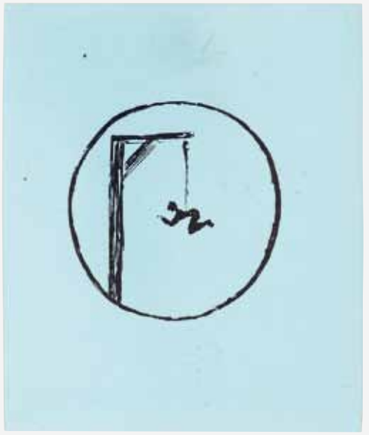
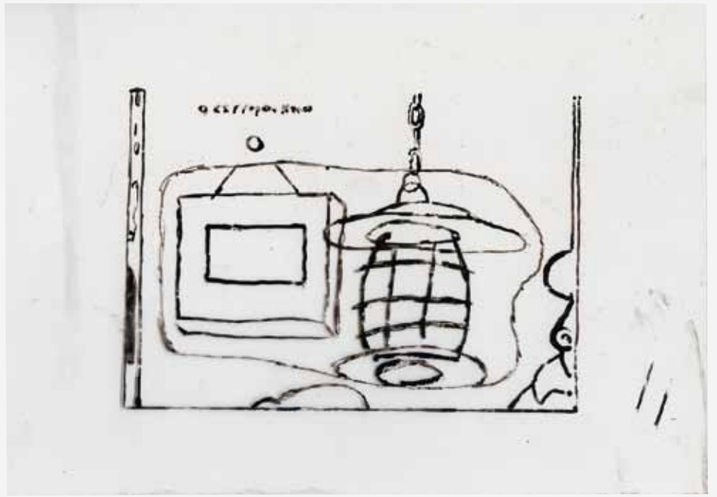
Walter Swennen
Hic Haec Hoc

II





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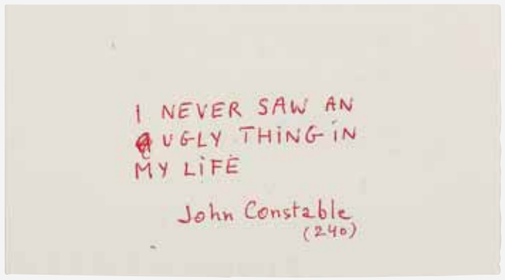
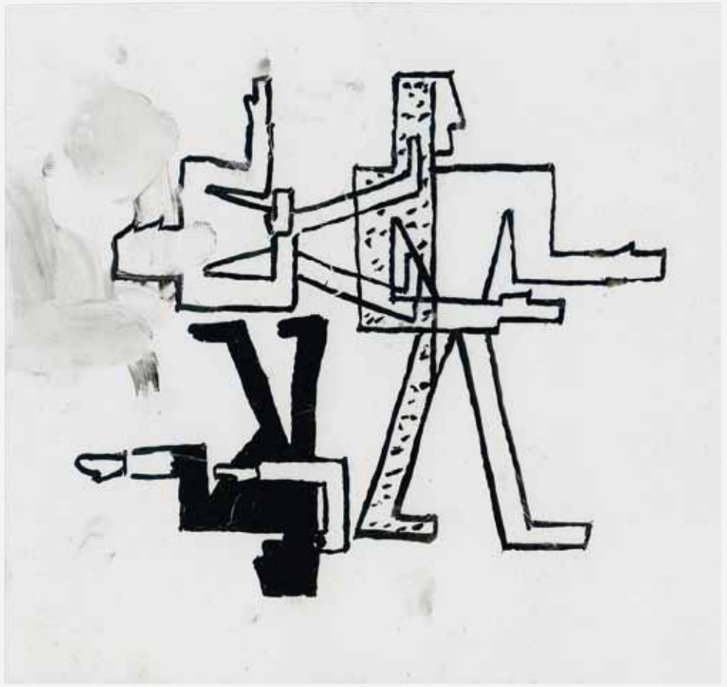

I NEVER SAW AN
UGLY THING IN
MY LIFE
John Constable
(240)



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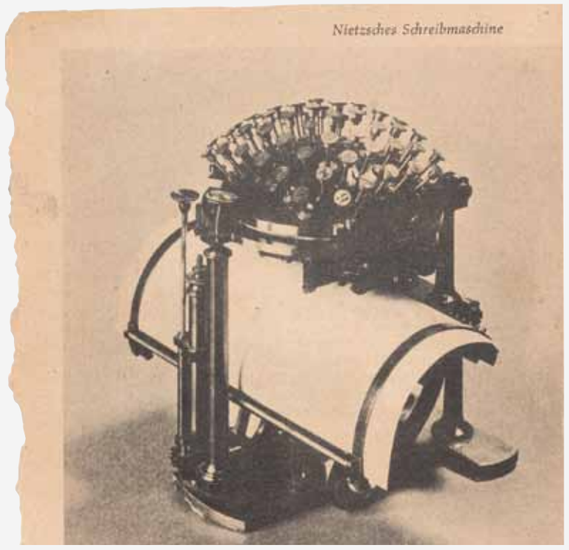
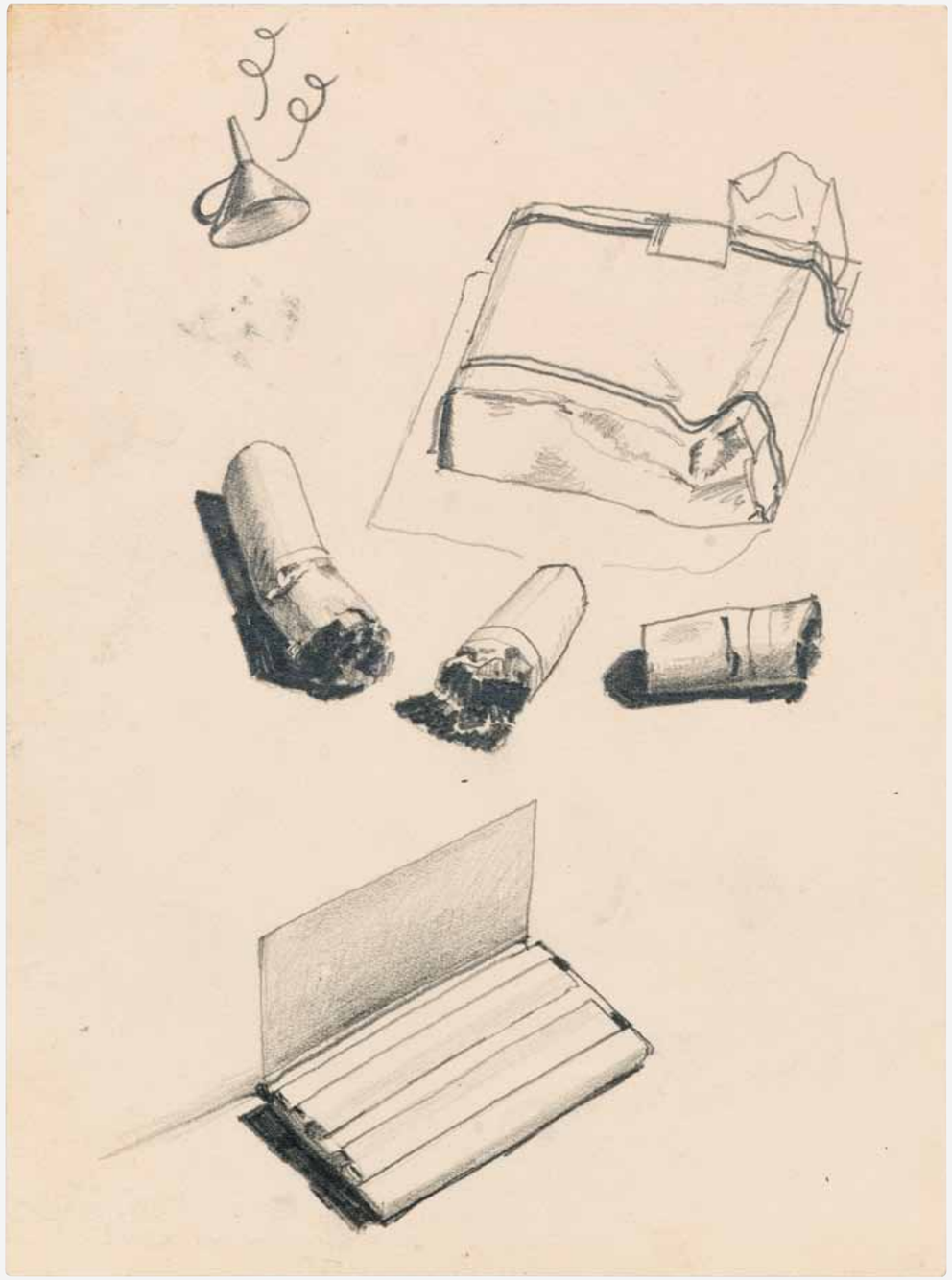
VIII






« A horse ! A horse ! My kingdom for a horse ! » schreeuwde ik. Moeder schonk mij een ezel. Zo is het afgelopen. Misverstand, dus. Schilder geworden. BTW 505441165. Stillevens, landschap, groenten en fruit, paardekop. Iedereen komen kijken. Braaf zijn.
Walter Swennen

IX

X


RESTORE
HOPE


Die vlek is te groot! Nu moeten we de hele vloer maar schilderen!
De hele vloer?
Vlug, Flupke! De schilder mag er niets van merken!!

XI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Pleading
Lawsuit's speech
Speech for the defence
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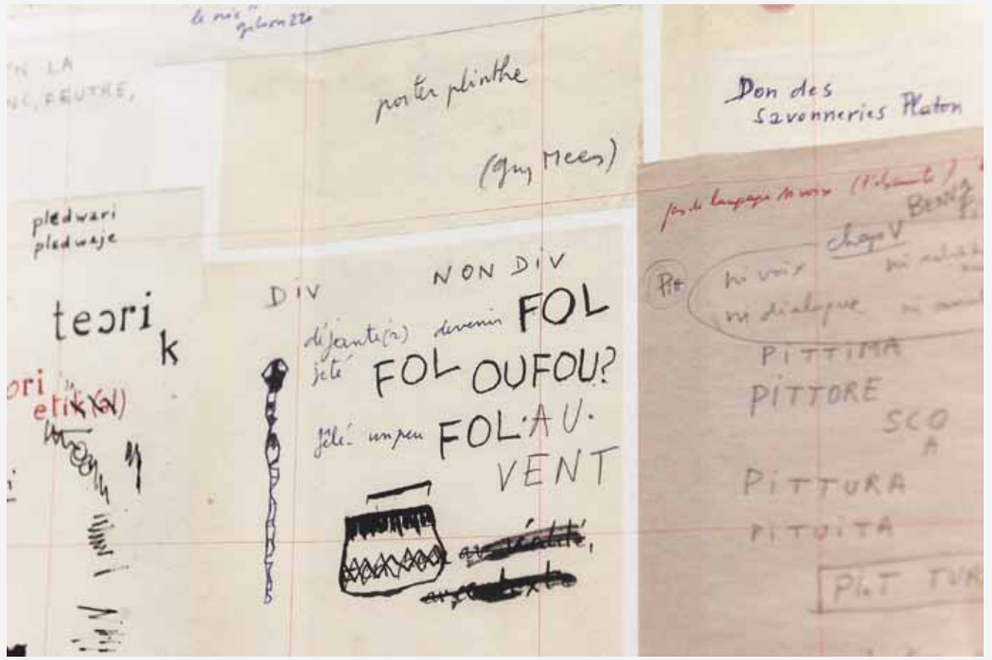
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XII

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MASTER OF ART

KABELJAUW ~~STOKVIS~~ HO

NORIS CAUSA

~~KABELJAUW~~

MAGNA CUM
LAUDE

~~CAUSA~~

M. A

33

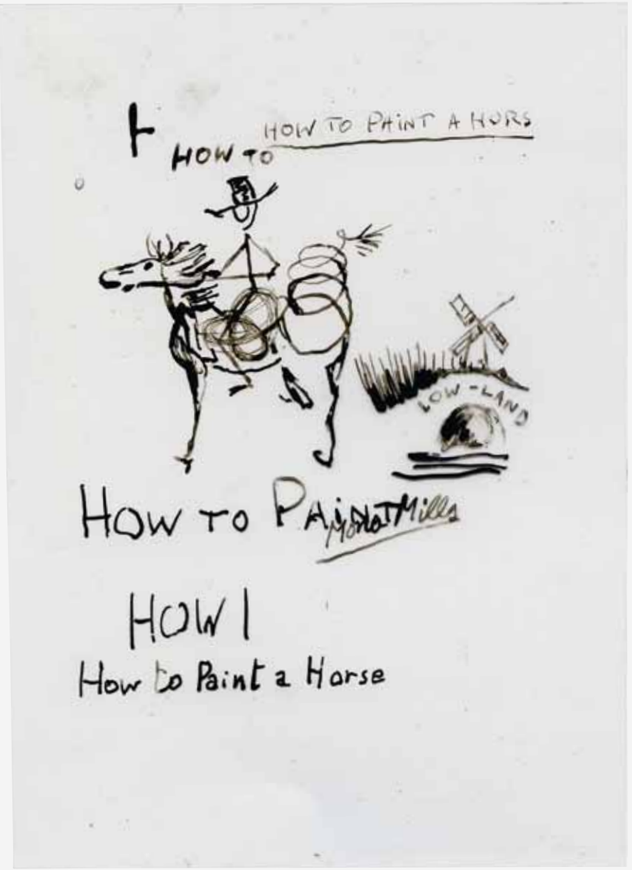
Il avait donné des noms à ses deux pantoufles.

Lichtenberg

XIII

XIV

XV



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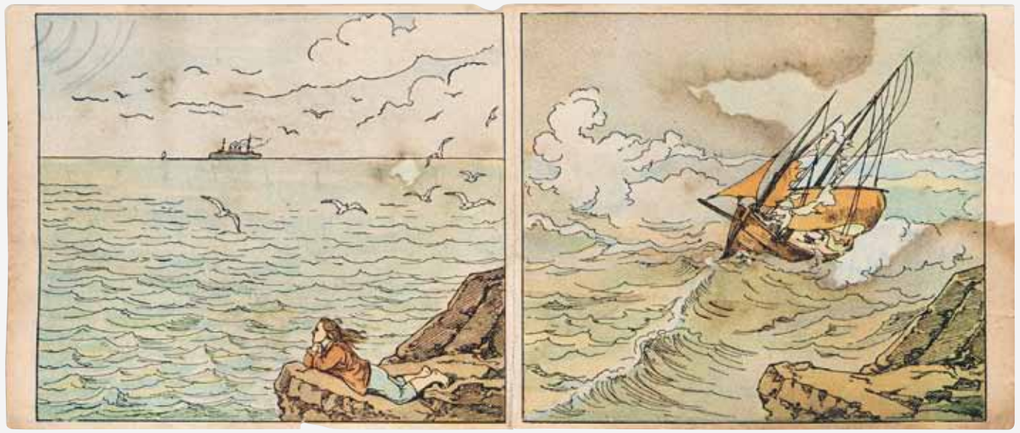

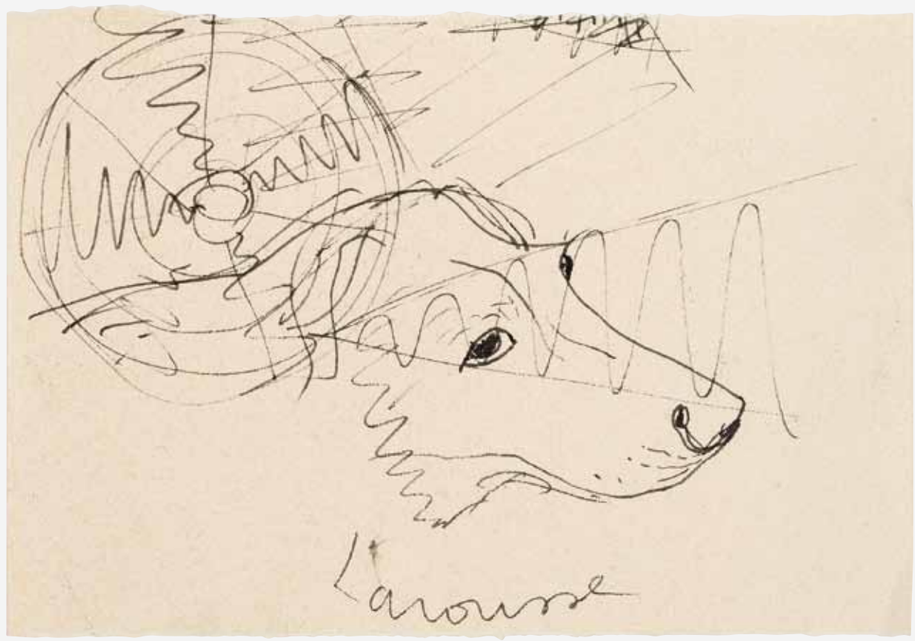

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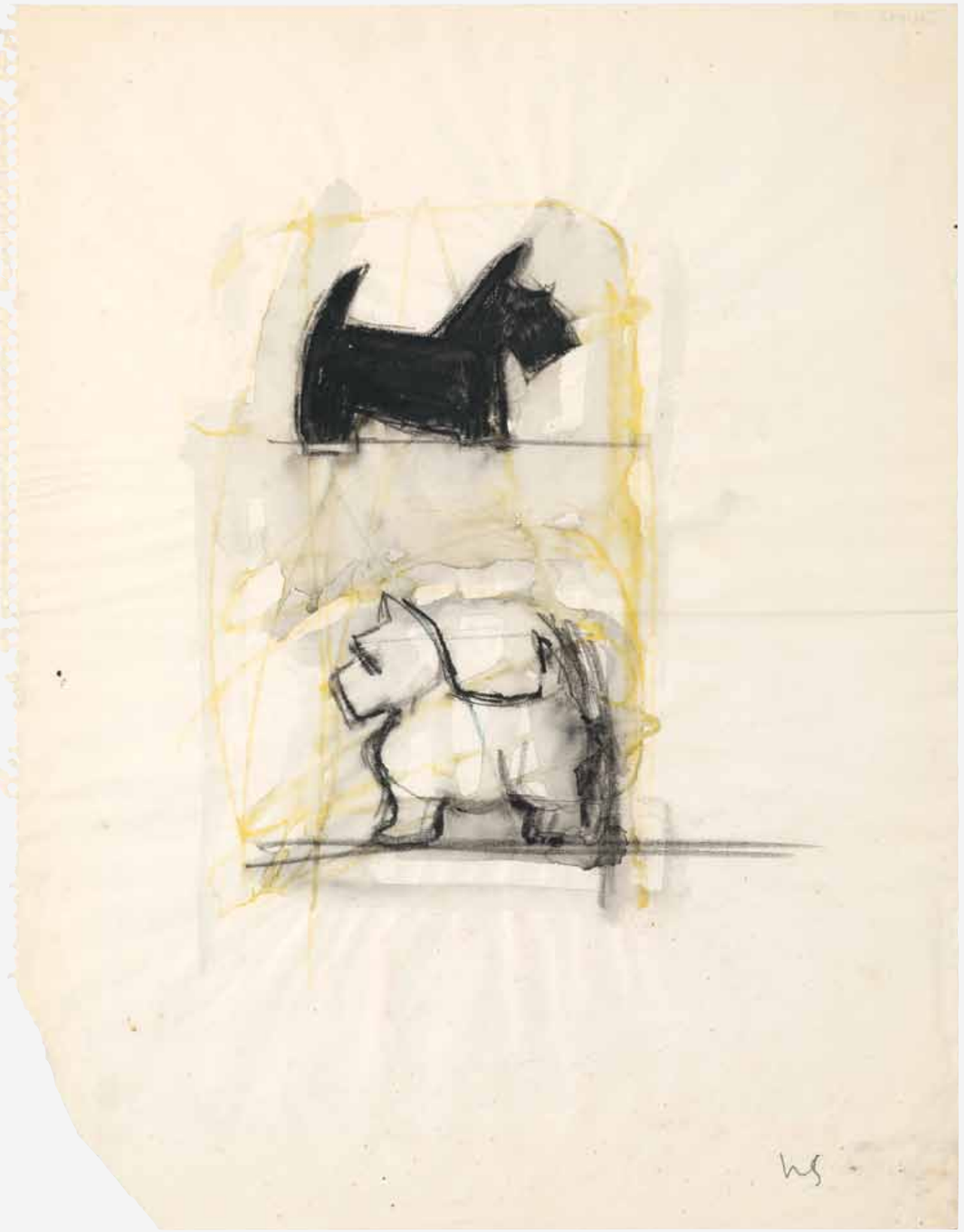


Walter Swennen
Hic Haec Hoc

A book by Hans Theys

With an introductory essay by Francis Nicomède

Xavier Hufkens

2016

Contents

Notes on W.S.

Władysław Strzemiński, a theoretician of Unism, advises painters exhausted by the constructivist effort to recharge their batteries by getting involved in a leisurely form of painting, in nature.

Walter Swennen, for his part, is a painter who paints every day. He likes constructing, and he takes a delight in painting; his painting seems heterogeneous and disconcerting.

If we are expecting meaning, coherence and a world made intelligible from art, Walter Swennen's oeuvre will leave us perplexed; it seems optimistic and merry; what it shows us has nothing known about it, it transforms the trivial and irony into witty remarks, and into aesthetic and intellectual pleasure.

Like a game of hide-and-seek, Walter Swennen speaks several languages: a vulgar, trivial, childish language which hails from a subculture, a culture itself forgotten, but he also speaks to what is most developed, to the memory of the greatness of his art.

In a suspended time-frame, hic et nunc, there appear the remnants of a vernacular language mixed with a scholarly language. Walter Swennen is on intimate terms with Piet, Kasimir, Jan and the others. The painter's infinite knowledge mixes the intimate, the social and the pictorial.

We can start looking at a painting by Walter Swennen from behind; the painting is a slow recovery of time; it offers many different layers, sometimes very old. The whole of history becomes visible and perceptible, revealed in a great continuum of being free from time and the laws of gravity.

Walter Swennen's paintings are often edged on the sides with coloured lines, and the corners are held in place by corner-stones; this is the creation of an enclosed space, no vanishing line escapes from the frame. From the introduction of a grid there emerge crossed images, letters, a spontaneous, popular imagery, of the sort that comes about from a free hand and creates enigmas.

Each square centimetre of the canvas stems from an archaeology of buried traces, signs of intimate stories which we recognize with a knowing smile, connivance, humour and humility, sweet melancholy of the person who knows, a sphinx's smile.

Each square centimetre has an identical density, which gives tension and clarity. A formal success (and not experimentation) which delights; visual authority and accomplished social project lend his painting the mysterious quietness of household interiors and the spirituality of the Flemish masters.

There is something irreconcilable between Walter Swennen's painting, and the work of painters of his day; everything is hand-made. Everything that can be discarded is retrievable; abstract expressionism, constructivism. On the scrap-heap he finds an enameled lid, a plastic stand, assembled planks, old paintings which he uses as a surface. All the 'isms' are on the move; beneath the flat tints appear transparencies, reminiscences of buried images, machines for going back in time, back and forth, past/present/childhood.

The painting is the object and the subject of Walter Swennen's preoccupations: a great trove of visual and mnemonic evocation gives a perception of felicitous immediacy.

A great effort of will, a desire to go beyond, and a desire for spirituality are necessary for constructing and unifying intimate and violent forces, thus wrenching them from chaos.

The work seems becalmed, incredibly gentle and strikingly powerful. It springs from an implacable desire and spirit. The exile of Antwerp and Brussels rubs shoulders with the exile of Bologna.

The only message is the moment of a possible harmony, work of a laconic dandy who, in a sleight of hand, reveals to us the substance of painting.

Francis Nicomède, April 2016

Hic Haec Hoc

A few wordings by Walter Swennen, provoked and distilled by Hans Theys

Childhood

Last week, there was a problem with the sewers and I realised that the smell of liquid manure is like a Proustian *Madeleine* for me. As a kid, when my mother was going to give birth, I was sent to a farm in Mollem. I liked to install myself in the manhole of the manure container, which was transported on a cart. I felt like a tank commander.

Between Mollem and Merchtem, there was a bend in the railway. You could see the plume of smoke getting closer, before you could see the train.

When my brother Franz and I went to Mollem by train, the compartments were like the inside of a stagecoach. The doors opened directly onto the compartments. There was no corridor. Indians attacked us. They came from Jette, and they chased us to the edge of the town. You could lower the windows using a leather strap, like the strop barbers use to sharpen their razors before shaving a customer. You had to watch out for the burning bits of coal coming from the chimney.

My late sister's name was Nadia Liesbeth Carola. She was born on 15 July 1944 and she died on 29 August that same year.

I was born in Forest, in 1946, in a house next to the prison, where my grandparents stayed. My grandmother had been the headmistress of a school in Ganshoren. My grandfather had worked for the government. They didn't have any contact with the Germans, but they were both members of VNV, a Flemish nationalist party. My father was an engineer. He worked for Siemens, before and during the war, in Dunkirk.

We had a double life: with two languages and two families: a visible and an invisible one.

When I was five, my parents switched languages to get rid of the past. From one day to the next I could not understand what anyone was saying. Because of that change of mother tongue, I realised that the world made no sense, and that I shouldn't let that bother me. Something I still can't manage...

I got my revenge during a family reunion. I was not yet ten. My father went to sit down at the head of the table, and I pulled his chair away. I thought everyone would laugh, but their sense of humour differed from mine.

After the war, my father must have felt he was the victim of an injustice because all he'd done was his work as an engineer. You can't leave a port without electricity, can you? He was a very serious person, but now and then he would clown around a bit, just for a few seconds. After that he became serious again. It wasn't preceded or followed by anything. He must have had a subterranean awareness of the nonsense of existence. Sometimes he'd recite a poem, which I still remember:

'ha ha
he laughs the beast with her yellow face
and it's not his turn
the station goes tutuut
And the train leaves without him'

We were stunned when he did that. I never asked where it came from.

He would also tell engineer jokes: 'Physics is when things fall. Electricity is when things rub. Chemistry is when things stink.'

One day, he bought a tape recorder and recorded his voice. When he heard his accent, he walked out of the room and never touched the recorder again. He had thought that people couldn't hear where he came from.

I really liked it when my father explained things. For example, the day when he explained to me that hot and cold were the same thing. Later on, I associated that with something I'd read about Spinoza's substance. One commentator said: 'We are made of God the way a table is made of wood'.

My father enjoyed solving problems. Not everyday problems, but technical questions. He could imagine solutions people hadn't thought of.

One time, he saved my life. I was in hospital with a collapsed lung. To cure you they put a tube in your lung to re-inflate it. After three weeks, there was still no progress. The doctor made a new hole to put the tube in saying that if it didn't work this time, he'd have to saw my sternum and open me up. My sister, who'd come to visit me, had brought my father with her. Annoyed and absent, he looked at the air pump at the foot of the bed. And after twenty minutes, he said: 'This machine isn't working'. They gave me another room so they could hook me up to another machine, and I got better.

System D comes from him: it springs from a postwar economy.

My older brother was nicknamed 'pei ficelle' (Mr. String). He would fix everything with bits of string, and he always succeeded. System D is in our genes.

Yesterday I was talking to a singer, who told me he needed an audience in order to sing. I replied that I was unable to paint if someone else was there. It's as if painting were a clandestine act: you don't want to be caught at it red-handed.

My mother had great admiration for an uncle who painted and lived in Hasselt. His name was Gaston Wallaert. He wanted to be a sailor, but he was too frail. On the first day of a training course on a boat he broke a leg. His health was poor. He was supported by the village priest. When he was born, they thought he would die. His grandmother, who lived in the country, came to get him, wearing a black cloak. She took him with her and saved him. Above the fireplace there was a photo of my dead little sister and a painting by Gaston called *La jeune fille et la mort* (Death and the Maiden). I always thought my mother had posed for that painting. She left the matter vague. She must have had an Oedipal thing with that uncle. She was a daydreaming middle-class woman, fantasising about Bohemia. My uncle's life wasn't easy. He lost a child, and at the end of his life he went blind.

My mother wanted me to become a painter, but I resisted until I was 35. It was part of a fantasy she had. She made me take painting classes with the painter Claire Fontaine. At the same time, my mother was worried about my future. The Bohemian lifestyle is okay, but not for a whole lifetime.

I have no memories of ever confiding in my mother. Everything that happened to me I kept to myself. She died in 1970, when I was 25.

Youth

At the age of 17, I started studying philosophy at the Saint-Louis faculty in Brussels. Because there was no building, they'd converted an old theatre into a classroom. It was quite baroque, a bit Fellini-esque. The girls were silly and hard to get, they wore gold and Chanel twinsets.

It was the 1963–64 school year. We had classes with Monseigneur Van Camp, whom we called the black widow. He was an avant-garde intellectual priest who made us read Heidegger, and also organised the Saint-Louis lectures. So in the month of March I attended a Michel Foucault lecture. The notes for that lecture were copied by me on stencils. They were recently published in Brazil on the instigation of my friend Jean-Robert 'Bob' Weisshaupt, who made his living as a professor in Brazil and describes me as an archivist in his dedication. I met Bob in a café next to the school. Apart from him there was also Robert Yves 'Boby' Gérard, a militant homosexual, which was still a dangerous thing to be in those days.

The goal of that school was to spend two years preparing as a candidate. Then you went to the University of Louvain. But after that first year of philosophy, I enrolled in the academy of fine arts, in the engraving section.

At the academy, there were no morning classes, which made me lazy, but I found things to do in no time. First of all, I found a job in a bookshop selling old books, on Rue du Trône. My work involved making bibliographical index cards. I worked upstairs with an old gentleman who read his newspaper and made comments. From those days I've still got a book that I found in the shop. It's there in the mysticism section of my library. (Which is quite small.) It's *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, by Padma-Sambhava, with a preface by that scoundrel Jung. I was very fond of that book, because it starts with these words: 'Samaya; gya, gya, gya/E-ma-ho!'. It also has lots of notes. And if you look at it from a distance with binoculars turned the wrong way round, it's almost Lacan.

Then my father suggested I make some polyester sheets to construct counters. With his partner he had a studio where they had isolated one part. There were some large fans. I had an assistant, an elderly Spaniard. There were Formica tables which acted as moulds for the sheets. First you poured a thin layer of polyester. Then, in a cart, I had to choose stones of every size, colour and quality to make a composition on the first layer which, in the end, was covered with a second.

The academy wasn't to my father's liking. We argued a lot. In principle, those studies lasted three years, but during the third year I dropped out and went to live in Louvain, to study psychology there, like my sister Liesbeth, who was a year younger than me. That gave me a chance to rediscover my ne'er-do-well Saint-Louis chums. It was like Pinocchio, who meets his two ne'er-do-well chums, who smoke cigars.

In the late 1960s, my friends in the Accuse group and I went to Amsterdam where we stayed on the Provos' barge. The first Provo I met didn't understand why I didn't speak Dutch, even though I lived in Brussels. That touched me. We also went to London, where I met Bob Cobbing, who was producing concrete poetry. Cobbing was very important for my work, if I may be permitted to say as much. For example, there was the magnificent poem:

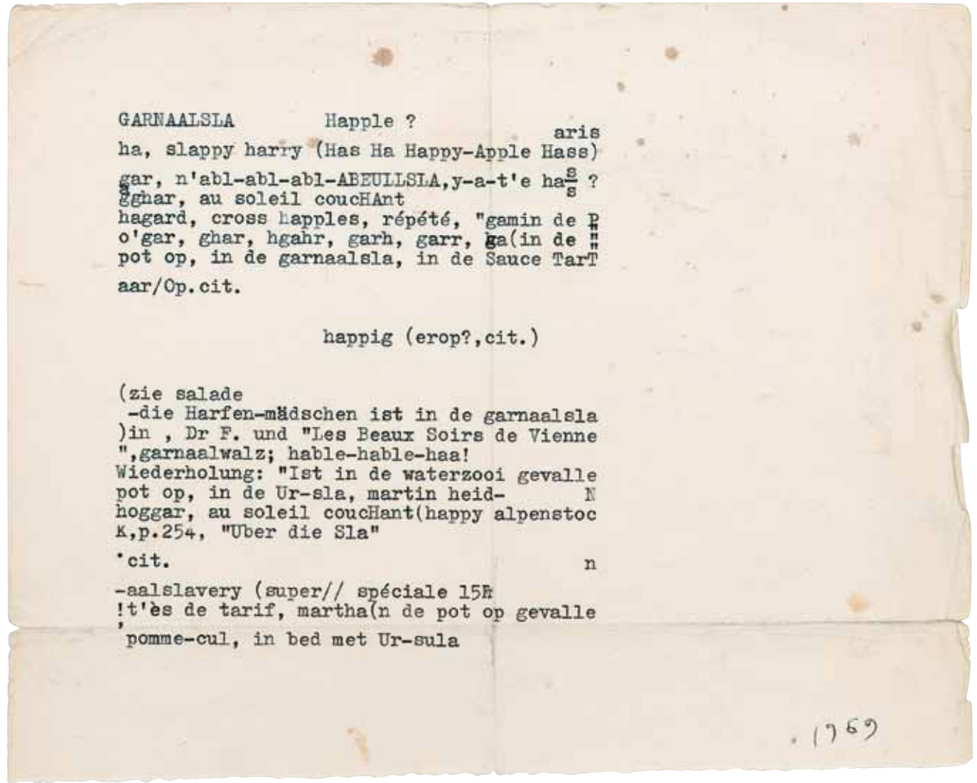
wan
do
tree
fear
fife
seeks
siphon
eat
neighing
den
elephan'
twirl

During that same visit I saw a Jim Dine show: 30 or 40 works on paper, water colours I think, and ordinary objects which he had covered in silver and bronze. The works on paper were all of the same format and they all depicted cocks. It was called: *Souvenirs of London*... I'd already seen a Dine painting in Brussels, but this was different...

Becoming a Painter

One day, Jan Sack reminded me of the old saying that art can save you from prison and the asylum. If you wanted to survive without stealing, you could become a painter and if you behaved well, people wouldn't think you were crazy.

When I was young, artists were considered to be irresponsible, shady people. These days an artist is a businessman.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When I was young I developed a certain disdain for painters. As stupid as a painter, I used to say. When I was a teenager, I myself painted, but it seemed much more honourable to write and to develop ideas.

For me, there wasn't a huge amount of prestige attached to painting, whereas philosophy!

Ancient paintings always bugged me. Art history was a pain in the arse. Those images got on my nerves.

One day my mother took me to see an exhibition in a gallery on Avenue Louise. Still lifes with flowers. At a certain moment I found myself just a few inches away from a painting. I saw a part of the painting that wasnt meant to depict anything, between the terra cotta saucer and the signature, where there was no longer any image, and all there was to see was paint. I was bedazzled, it was a discovery, another world, something you don't usually see.

At the age of 14, for three years, I attended painting classes with the painter Claire Fontaine. I went three or four times a week. She painted with a painter's knife. She was very fond of the effects of paint and fast ways of painting. At that time the great debate was still raging between the radical abstracts and those who followed the tradition of painting by reducing figurative forms to coloured surfaces. Claire Fontaine used the words: 'Abstraction, fine, but you've got to get to abstraction!' She painted very schematic landscapes, a bit like Nicolas de Staël and Maurice de Vlaminck. A tree was painted with the knife: there! A green surface measuring 3 by 10 centimetres... Yes, abstraction was in an 'agonistic' position at that time... Even though I liked painting landscapes... In other areas she taught me how to make a colour, how to create a thicker paint, how to use different brushes, etc. Then she taught me one or two rules about the incompatibility of certain colours because of their chemical composition...

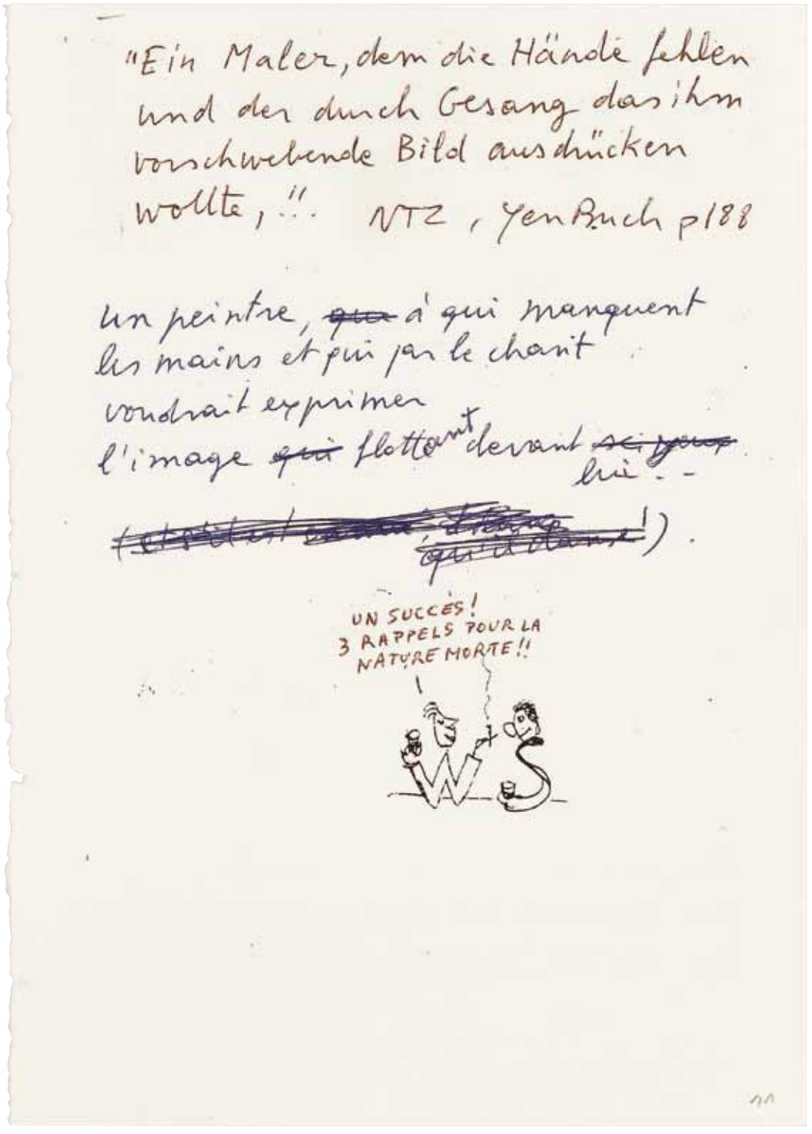
The first abstract painting I saw in the flesh was by Jean-Paul Riopelle (1923–2002). He was a Canadian painter, a Tachist, belonging to the same generation as lyrical abstraction. He puzzled people because he only worked with a knife. The leaves of trees in his paintings had the shape of knives. I'd just finished college and had run away to Paris. I'd taken a cardboard suitcase with a blanket. While hitchhiking I met a man who advised me to stay there. 'It's not difficult', he said, 'you tell your parents and you come and live in Paris'. Another thing I've escaped from... Viktor von Weizsäcker says that our behaviour can be guided by things we avoid: you cross the street and you walk slightly slower, because if you carry on at the same speed, you'll be knocked

over by a car. We often do things to prevent something from happening. You go to work, get off a bus, you know it's that way, but you set off in the opposite direction, without any hesitation, without having the impression of having made any decision. That's why you're never sure about what has really happened when you paint. Have you really made decisions? And why? To arrive at something, or to avoid something else?

It's like Stirner's 'Widerwille', I find, 'disinclination' in English, or 'mauvaise volonté' in French, 'unwillingness', or 'lack of goodwill'. Running away is also a way of realising your disinclination. And then there's the refusal of stylistic devices, the clandestine life, lying, Broodthaers' insincerity, and Titian's double life, pretending as he did to paint portraits and traditional scenes, when he was having fun by freely painting Diana's tunic. He pretended to create images, but he made paintings.

I'd already made a few objects and some paintings. I had a room in my parents' house which I could use as a studio, and in that room there was a small easel which some friends of my parents had given me. There was a board that went with it. On that board I painted a portrait of Brigitte Bardot and I stuck a cylindrical box of VIM on it and a small thing with a suction cup (which people used in their cars), where you could put just one flower. So Bardot had a vase with a flower on her face. I also made a painting of a very big pink telephone. And there was a crate with beer bottles painted in different colours. Mrs. Rona's son saw it. He said it was interesting, but not enough for an exhibition. At that particular moment came Broodthaers's proposal to have a show in the basement of a club between Place Stephanie and the Porte de Namur, but it never saw the light of day. He'd just given some lectures about national pop art, and he liked my objects.

I gave my poems to Broodthaers and he showed them to Marcel Lecompte, who said there were two verses which were good... That confirmed something: that everything I was doing was pretty phoney. I wrote those poems as if I were someone else. I tried to keep those two particular verses and forget about all the rest.



Painting

My grandfather used to say: 'It's good when it's painted'.

My masters in painting are Quick and Flupke, who knock over a pot of paint and try to cover up what they've done by painting the whole floor. That's the first example I saw of all-over painting.

In his essay *On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense*, Nietzsche writes that a painter with no hands can always sing the landscape, because all he's doing is giving form to an idea. It's a good plan. 'How was your show? Very good, I received three standing ovations for the landscape!' That's a mistake that we also find in Schopenhauer: the artistic idea would be expressed in accordance with the artist's talent, be it as painting, or as music... Because it's the idea that matters, the form is interchangeable. This is the Platonic side of aesthetics. We also find this with Colonel Badiou, who writes crooked French. 'A painting', he says, 'is the trace of the passage of the eternal idea.' That's what you have to say to painting students: 'Understood? Make me two by tomorrow...'

For them the ideal thing would be a transparent medium. Do you know how angels communicate? 'Mente ad mente', said Thomas Aquinas, 'from soul to soul'. They use a very transparent medium... They don't know any language. They don't need artists because they don't have bodies.

The fantasy of writers is a transparent language. Hence, the myth of the ideal, transparent medium where all you have is the referent... But painting is not ideal and transparent. It's totally impure, it's a mixture... What's more, the same thing goes for writing. As a boy, I thought that writing was playing the part of the thread between the head and the paper, but there is no transparent medium. It already starts with the resistance of the paper.

There's also Jacques Rancière, a former student of Althusser. What made abstract art possible, he says, is a certain conjunction of discourse, a certain aesthetic system. According to him, it's literature that sets the tone. If you have changes in art, he says, they are not inner changes, there are new aesthetic constellations which emerge. He quotes a passage from the Goncourt brothers, where they describe a bunch of flowers. And in that he sees the whole of Impressionism in the offing. As if painters were reading books in order to know what they ought to paint. 'Everything is in everything, but there is nevertheless a vegetable which gives the taste, and that's literature...' It's claptrap. Speeches on the level of high school. When in fact he knows exactly nothing about painting. Nothing at all.

Obviously, without discourse or speech, there's no world. As Lacan put it, a child who bangs its head against a table during a family reunion bangs against a pack of words. When you learn how to draw, you talk a lot. You need someone to tell you: look at that. Viktor von Weizsäcker said that what you haven't learnt to see, you won't see. It's true, all that, but I find people go too far. What's missing is the consciousness that painting is a material thing. When Leonardo da Vinci said that 'la pittura è cosa mentale', he wanted to be different from craftsmen and artisans. It wasn't a plea for conceptual art. Art without form doesn't exist.

The linguist Émile Benveniste said that the only possible realisation of human communication is the word. He excluded art. Of all the symbolic systems we know about (including road signs), there's just one which can explain and interpret the others: that's language.

There's no language of art. Semiotics sank like the Titanic.

If painting is a language, one wonders what deaf people see in it.

A painting is not a trace. It's a mark.

I don't like people who attack formalism.

You can't create anything without form.

I think that modern painting started after the invention of photography, because photography made representation and the function of the painting as image obsolete. At that particular moment, painters decided to continue with things which they previously did almost in secret, like Diana's tunic painted by Titian.

Photography freed painters from the obligation to live a double life.

If you think of Diana's tunic in Titian's *Death of Actaeon*, with all those reds of differing densities, sometimes very fluid, you understand that it wasn't the image that interested him, but the way of going about it. That's why I say that there's always an element of swindling in art. I think that painters have always led a double life: that of the commission and that of the painting. They haven't all been so reverent and so gaga. We don't give two hoots about the Madonna. When you visit Tate Britain, you can savour portraits of the entire English aristocracy. But for all that there's never been a painter who said to himself one fine morning: 'Okay, for once I'm going to do a beautiful series of portraits of the English aristocracy'.

When Titian painted *The Death of Actaeon*, he was the same age as I am today: 70. If you see the freedom with which he painted Diana's tunic, you realise he was further on.

Cézanne said somewhere that all of modern painting comes from Titian. I'm starting to see why he said that.

If they need a yellow spot, why paint a lemon?

Bernd Lohaus said that artistic success is 50% genius and 50% deceit.

Turner is pure kitsch… It's like Bernard Buffet: they are painters of adolescence. Turner was a cheat. He made calendar paintings. He'd found the trick of the cloth, and he repeated it ad infinitum. On top of this, he was always bullying Constable.

Constable made thick, voluptuous textures. And tremendous light.

To save Turner, I say to myself, with reference to Spinoza, that one could say that each painting is a modus of the substance of painting, even the biggest flop.

While you look at the painting, the painting does its work.

Psychoanalysis

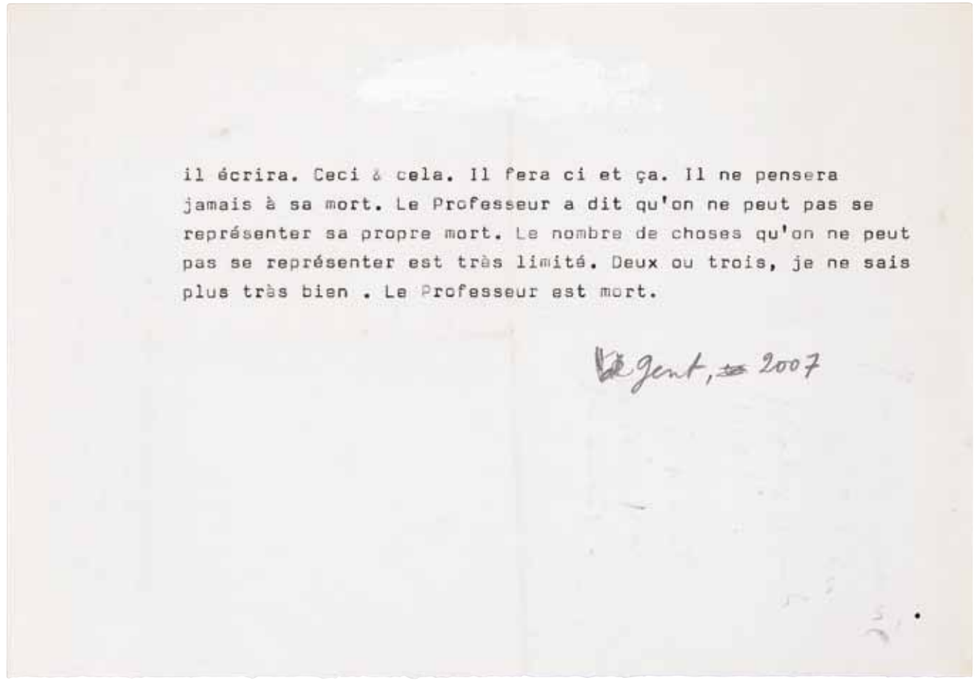
All the categories of psychology, ordinary and scholarly alike, crumble when confronted with psychoanalysis: the ego is hot air, *flatus vocis*—a mere name.

Psychoanalysis is also 50% genius and 50% deceit. Lacan knew very well that humanity can't be healed and that psychoanalysis is something that makes this bearable and perhaps even useful.

I stopped my analysis. I couldn't talk, mine was a case of massive resistance.

There's an unconscious way of thinking, but that doesn't mean that there's an Unconscious. All we can say is that *there's thinking*. In its day it was a scandalous idea, and it still is.

As Lacan said: 'There's only one symbol'.


il écrira. Ceci à cela. Il fera ci et ça. Il ne pensera jamais à sa mort. Le Professeur a dit qu'on ne peut pas se représenter sa propre mort. Le nombre de choses qu'on ne peut pas se représenter est très limité. Deux ou trois, je ne sais plus très bien . Le Professeur est mort.

Gent, 2007

The symbolic consists essentially of language, which governs the relation of kinship and social structure. For example; before you're born, you already have a symbolic place which is designated by the social structure and by language. The imaginary is the whole life of the mind. It's what Freud called the ego, or self. In his early period, Lacan was interested in the relation between the imaginary and the symbolic, connections, the father's name, and so on. He invariably made a distinction between the real and reality, which is our imaginary structured by the symbolic. The real is the unimaginable, what's impossible to express. It makes a hole in reality. It's connected with the idea that truth cannot be grasped entirely. It's what he called the not-all, the *pas-tout*.

Freud counted on Jung, who was a psychiatrist in a famous institute in Switzerland, to get psychoanalysis out of the ghetto, and detach it from Jewish intellectualism. More precisely, he counted on him to further investigate psychosis and schizophrenia, but Jung preferred to produce a book about the metamorphoses of the soul and its symbols. Freud was looking for causal relationships, while Jung was happy to play with analogies. This is the difference between science and non-science. Somewhere here I've got a text by Jung in which he compares the Jewish unconscious with the Aryan unconscious. The latter would always win, because the Jewish unconscious was too old. The Aryan unconscious was still young and wild, it had millennia ahead of it. That text isn't included in his complete works.

It's not possible to visualise the things of the unconscious. This is the watershed between Freud and Jung. Jung started from the content of dreams, from the story they told. For Freud, everything was in the words that you used to describe your dream: the dream's narrative. Lacan borrowed that idea by telling himself that psychoanalysis can only be based on the spoken word. When someone tells you: I dreamed this and that, you don't take his dream as a myth or an allegory, but you focus on the discourse he uses to relate about his dream. Lacan linked Freud to de Saussure, by proposing to consider the spoken word ('la parole') as a sequence of signifiers. This is the opposite of the idea of the unconscious as a reservoir of memories and meanings. It might be such a reservoir, but we don't know. The only thing we do know is that you can't base yourself just on the current meaning of the words used. Derrida pushed this even further by considering everything we write as 'la parole'. What does this have to do with painting? Nothing at all, because painting is not a language. As Émile Benveniste said, there is no language in painting, because there are no differential signs, there are just qualities.

When I was studying philosophy at the Saint-Louis faculty, Mannoni came to talk about his book *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène* (1969). For us this shed light on what Lacan was saying: that there is an interplay with the signifier in the word,

that the signified can play the role of a new signifier, that words hide other words. What is put aside immediately is the meaning of words, it's the relation of the sign to its referent. The meaning doesn't matter, not necessarily in any event.

From the outset, the whole history of psychoanalysis has been marked by forms of savagery, incredible brawls to win Freud's affection, and it's never stopped. This is because the subject of their passion is in relation with their unconscious. It's dynamite, and it's quite normal that this explodes all the time... They publish a great deal in rival journals with a limited distribution. They create polemics over words. It's not very interesting. It's all a bit Byzantine.

After a psychoanalysts' conference I was invited to—a conference that seemed to be addressed above all to well-educated ladies—without knowing why, I suddenly had the impression that psychoanalysis was greatly idealised. And when I was asked to add something, I said that, obviously, an artist was concerned with the real and the imaginary, and that, obviously, he was looking for a symbolic reward: money. Because if an artist doesn't show his or her works, and if the works aren't for sale, it's not art.

There is in fact a link between psychoanalysis and painting: what you do changes the ideas you use. You can discover things by accident. Then you try to re-discover them by doing experiments. That's what Freud did. First he discovered the transfer: the fact that the patient can take the analyst for his father. Then the patient says to himself: 'If this fellow thinks I'm going to take him for my father...' People are quick to learn, there is resistance. With Freud that's fine: he discovers something, it resists, he wants to know why it resists and so on and so forth.

Meaning

In his book on the joke, Freud says that one of the greatest pleasures is nonsense.

The basis of jokes is nonsense. Children play with words as if they were objects.

We lose things because of our education and it just so happens that art consists of playing with what you've lost.

I really like what Mannoni says about meaning in Mallarmé's poems. He says that it's important to put something readable in a poem, a small recognizable ingredient, something concrete, a flower for example, so that the reader will say to himself: 'I've read a poem about a flower.' And if you do that, you are

entitled to play with words. So the author is satisfied, and so is the reader; both parties leave satisfied. I think I perhaps put images in my paintings for the same reason: so that everyone finds something to their liking in them.

According to Freud, the meaning of a joke is a construct which must remain hidden for the person it's addressed to.

Lacan said that people who make jokes and who play with words are unbearable in society.

In *The Birth of Philosophy*, Giorgio Colli says that there's always something hostile in the enigma. Basically, the enigma is an act of hostility by the gods against men, because they pose a problem which men don't understand, but which they must solve if they don't want to die. According to Colli, the enigma lies at the root of Greek culture which is agonistic: based on combat and intellectual dispute. There are two adversaries and one of them must win. Socratic dialogue is the last version of that culture of the enigma. Enigma drives dialectic, it's a question of finding a solution and thus destroying the adversary's arguments. What strikes me is that at the basis of aesthetics there is the conviction that the work of art is an enigma which must be solved, and which we must find the key to. This brings us back to the supposition that there is meaning. Of course, in the wings, we chuckle about it. And at the same time, when I say that I want to paint whatever, I'm taking a shortcut, and I'm fooling myself.

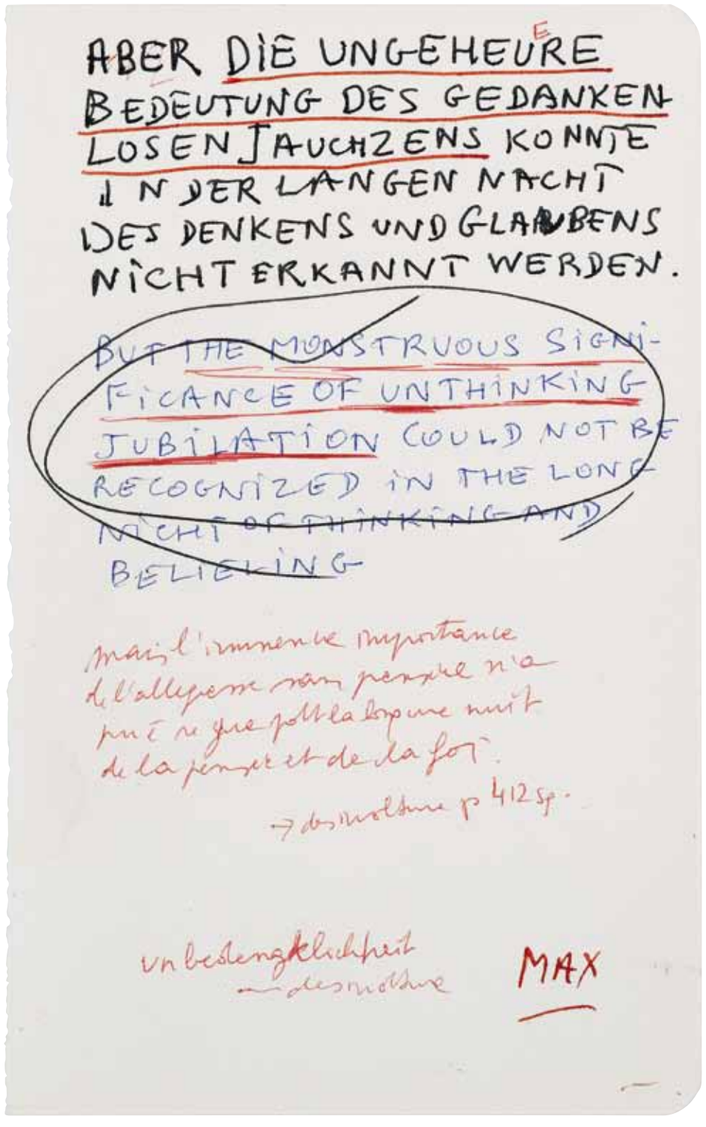
Spinoza said that religion has meaning because it makes people obey. The Catholic religion gives meaning to everything, with obedience to the father as the result.

In *The Triumph of Religion*, a lecture at the Saint-Louis faculty about the question whether being an atheist necessarily prevents you from leading a rational and moral life, Lacan says that religion gives meaning to everything.

Colli says that wise men aren't taken in by enigmas. Lacan calls them non-dupes.

This week I re-read Tristan Tzara. It's very beautiful. The Dadaists didn't make the mistake of the Surrealists by looking for a meaning in Freud. Dada doesn't mean anything. Tzara said that thinking happens in the mouth. The Dadaists experienced the return of meaning in its most aggressive form: the public trials of the Surrealists.

There is no meaning, there is just the secret. And the secret is to be found in the making of art.



To Paint

As Mao Zedong said: 'You advance and then you look.'

Watching a video in which Deleuze talks about painting, I saw a short passage where he quotes Cézanne, who explains that the painter's work starts well before applying the first brush stroke. In fact, you first have to get rid of everything that you're not going to do on the canvas. It's mental work. I myself call it killing ghosts. After the fact, it seems like a necessary stage, but in the midst of it, you're ashamed and you have the impression of wasting your time.

My only tactic consists of disentangling myself from what I've made.

My work evolves from accident to accident, from repair to repair. I see that somewhere it's not working, so something has to be done.

The problem with aesthetics—the analysis of a work of art from the viewer's angle—is that you always end up by finding a meaning, and then you wonder where it comes from. For example, I know that I've made paintings that were dictated to me by my daughter Els. But how did they take shape? When you talk about painting, you're obliged to reconstruct gestures, concordances and circumstances...

When I explain it, I have the impression of lying.

When I explain it, I feel that things happened differently.

You're not in the eye that surveys, but in the hand that works.

I don't know how I come to a painting. I say to myself: it can't stay like that. And I react. I don't have any model in mind. I always think that others know better what they're doing.

Van Gogh writes to Theo that when Zola and Balzac put themselves in the painter's place, they got it wrong.

What interests me with Titian is that in working with glazes, he was obliged to let his paintings dry. For this reason, they were turned against the wall, to prevent them from gathering dust. This discontinuous way of working must have influenced the way he worked, I think. In any event, that's what happens in my studio. I often don't see my paintings for a long period of time. So when I turn them round, I see more clearly if it's necessary to add or remove

something or accept the painting as it is. In four weeks, things change, and we change as well. This is way of working is undoubtedly linked to the fact that Titian, who drew directly on the canvas, with a brush, sometimes tried several positions for his figures. For Diana's arm, for example. I would like to know more about it.

When you repair the holes in the walls of a gallery, you just do rectangles. This always produces beautiful spontaneous compositions.

Titian worked a lot with the knife, which has always been regarded as a minor instrument by painters. Probably because it does not record the hand's 'sensibilities' subtly enough... Apart from that, the knife calls to mind the mason's trowel, which seems to diminish the painter's status: from being a practitioner of the liberal arts, he becomes just a plasterer.

When you make mixtures of colours, by dint of adding colours, you always make too much. This is why I've had blue and grey periods.

The Painting

Making a painting is to transform nonsense into an enigma.

The Greeks had gods who devised enigmas to be solved by human beings.

Seeing a painting depicting a blue pig, the housecleaner said: 'I've always liked stuffed animals'.

I find the same form of inversion in that woman who wrote that one of my paintings had been inspired by Krazy Kat, solely because I'd told her that the drawing made me think of that comic strip. It's as if she invented a ghost which was the painting's model.

The other day, I said to myself that when Sartre said that paintings are unreal, he reduced them to objects of perception. It's as if he were unglueing the image from its surface and placing it behind the painting, saying that it's the painting's model. He has difficulty in realizing that behind the painting, there's nothing: that it starts on the canvas and that there's a sequence, which will lead to an object in which people will read intentions, etc.

The intellectual talks of art like something that's 'already done' (Constable). He can't admit that before the painting there was nothing, or not much.

A'pen, 6 octobre 86

faire de l'art, en soi, quand on n'est pas capable de suivre une pente qui semble à tant naturelle, de s'exprimer, est une chose révoltante, "per se".

arriver à peindre n'importe quoi, voilà l'idéal. Pour ceux qui ne sont pas passé par l'expérience de dire n'importe quoi, cela paraît juste un bon mot. Pourtant, c'est mon idéal, la difficulté extrême.

faire un mauvais tableau n'est pas plus difficile que faire un bon tableau. La clé : la préméditation est toujours une circonstance aggravante.

Chère Pascale, comme tu vois il m'arrive de soli-grandi-loquer. plus souvent qu'à mon tour, comme dit l'aléseur. Envoie-moi de tes nouvelles. Ici ça vase un peu (d'alesia).

Walter

Before the painting, there's nothing. Or perhaps there's less than nothing, as Žižek says.

For the painter, the painting is not the expression of an idea already formed; it's something to make.

Why can't we foresee a painting? The painting is linked to the real and the real is unimaginable.

Painters make paintings to be able to look at them.

In Gilson's book about Duns Scotus, there are some funny things. Duns Scotus said there was only one thing to do with people who don't accept contingency: beat them until they admit that you might not have given them a beating.

A painting is made up of contingencies?

Yes. And that seems incomprehensible for certain people.

It's like those people who can't see any difference between the edge of a comic strip panel and the edge of a painting. A comic strip panel is like a photo: it is surrounded by a virtual world. A photo suggests things you can't see. A good painting only shows itself. In the photograph, the medium tends towards zero: you get the impression that there's nothing between you and the referent. It presents itself as transparent. But a painting isn't transparent. It's impure. Everything is intermingled…

From time to time, to comfort myself, I open Gilson again. With the Thomists, at least, things are clearer… He says, for example: 'The image takes its being from something other than itself, a painting takes its being from itself.'

The Image

With a magnifying glass, you can see that the illustrations in the Unigro catalogues are painted. It's the painter Filip Denis who taught me that.

In Ghent, on a walk, I saw the Lys with its very flat banks. Beside the river there was a country lane, a bicycle track, and a bridle path. A bit further there was a flying club. Now and then you could see an airplane taking off. There was also a railway bridge and a bridge which the road passed over. So all at once you could see walkers, cyclists, riders, cars, trucks, trains and airplanes all passing. It made me think of those didactic landscapes in a geography book where you look down on a town to be able to show everything all at once… I loved those drawings. They were made with clear lines. Everybody drew like that, with outlines, and then they were coloured. I loved looking at those drawings through a magnifying glass. What's that person doing? Oh, he's unloading corn! But there are also less amusing pages, where there were drawings of so-called Negro types, for example.

When Constable said that you have to look at his paintings close up, people thought he meant that he wanted to be taken more seriously, and studied in detail, whereas what he really meant was that it was important to approach the painting.

If you look closely, you no longer see the image, but the way it's made.

After I discovered that paintings were made of paint, during a visit to a gallery on Avenue Louise, my mum thought I had an eye problem and she took me to see an ophthalmologist. And indeed the good doctor said that I shouldn't look at things that closely, that it was bad for my eyes.

It's by looking closely that I saw the way Titian had painted Diana's tunic: painted with glazes, containing all the shades of red, from pink to the brightest red, everything a bit faded because of time, the painting's deterioration and the various restorations.

I've always thought there was a contradiction between images and language. But in fact this is just a secondary contradiction, as Mao would have put it. The real contradiction lies between images and language, on the one hand, and painting, on the other.

One day Titian struck me with his saying that 'nothing must leave the canvas'. That means, for me, that the edge of the painting is real.

Malcolm Morley leaves white edges around the painted image to show that the image does not coincide with the painting. He paints an image like a still life: for example, an accordion of post cards. When he repainted *The School of Athens*, using a grid, he got one row wrong, but he carried on. 'I lobotomized Greek philosophy', he said.

I've wondered for a long time why ancient paintings didn't interest me. I think it's due to the fact that it's mainly a matter of images: the virgin Mary, a crucifixion, a chap with an open belly, whose guts are rolled up.

Literature

All I read is thrillers and philosophy. School put me right off French literature.

I'm in the process of looking for a title for a show. It's getting on my nerves. It's the imperialism of literature. You always have to have a title. I've never liked giving titles to my paintings, because they would suggest a subject or a theme which would have been at the origin of the painting. That's why I've always given my paintings the title *Untitled*, adding their name in brackets. Because people give names to paintings, which isn't the same thing as a title. You have to know what you're talking about. It's not very practical to call all your paintings *Untitled*.

I don't like Magritte because he painted anecdotes. Because of the literary titles, each painting becomes a sentence of which the second part is an image.

Words

J&B comes from Justerini and Brooks. I like names like that.

I don't like this language coming from the business world: self-management (the way you manage your capital), self-investment... Or the language coming from military life, like the word 'communication'.

I've always liked the slang used in crime thrillers. I'd really like to make a chronological listing of the vocabulary used to see how it's evolved.

Music

We're listening to 'Ali Baba's Camel' by the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band.

We're listening to Lennie Tristano.

He's an assertive pianist with an unbelievable touch.

A while ago I knew a man in Brussels called Roberto. Everybody made fun of him. He only drank milk and he lived in a caravan. He sang American rock songs, but he didn't speak a word of English. He sang the way Christians used to sing in church, not knowing any Latin. He found that the meaning of the words didn't matter, because, he said, it was always about the same things.

We're listening to Eddie Cochran's 'Sittin' in the Balcony'.

He's my favourite rocker... My elder brother was a rocker. He was three years older than me. The first rock song we heard at home was Richard Berry's *Yama Yama Pretty Mama*. And my mother saying: 'Whatever's that?' That was in 1956. In a Sarma store in Ixelles, my brother and I found a bin full of 45s. I bought a 45 of Bach harpsichord music and my brother bought Richard Berry. I found it vulgar. I discovered rock a lot later, the way I'm discovering punk and the Ramones today on YouTube.

We're listening to Frankie Trumbauer's 'Trumbology', with Bix Beiderbecke.

People said Beiderbecke was the Rimbaud of jazz of the 1920s and 1930s. He's known for his composition *In a Mist*.

It's because the musicians didn't know when Lester Young was going to decide to wind up a piece that a lot of his pieces ended up rapidly, in chaos.

You've already heard the music I want played at my funeral? First, they'll hear Thelonius Monk's *This is My Story, This is My Song*. It's taken from the album *Straight, No Chaser*. Do you remember us going to see this documentary about Monk, 25 years ago? Nan was there as well. I really like the scene where his wife was putting empty bottles of Coca-Cola in their suitcase. Taking empties onto the plane! She wanted to bring them home.

And afterwards, at the end of the service, they'll play: *The Everywhere Calypso* by Sonny Rollins. He's one of the greatest, a giant. He's a musician who takes care of his listener. From time to time he quotes or paraphrases something from the theme to let you know that he's still in the same piece. As a listener, you feel you're being accompanied, you're not lost.

We're listening to the piece 'I'm an Old Cowhand' from the album 'Way Out West'.

They say that at a particular moment, Sonny Rollins retired and went to live on a small island near New York where, sitting in his little garden, he imitated the boats' sirens.

Miscellaneous

Building sites are beautiful. Yesterday I saw three Turkish hunks with moustaches. They were dusting each other off with a jet of compressed air, turning and raising their arms, like three graces... Do you know that joke? 'They're not doing a damn thing in that office. I know, because I've been watching them through the window for an hour.'

I like it when Žižek says that he's a true atheist because he belonged to the sect whose God committed suicide.

I've just seen *Victoria*, a film about a girl who meets four good-for-nothings —*pieds nickelés* in French—who stage a hold-up. When it's over, they're all dead and she makes off with the loot, hopping and skipping. Wonderful.

What are *pieds nickelés*? You know the word from a text by Broodthaers? It comes from an early 20th century comic strip. The heroes are three hobos called Croquignol, Ribouldingue and Filochard. They were a kind of ancestors of the Marx Brothers. They're guys who try to travel for nothing, people who get by with unsuccessful schemes and tricks. Things always go wrong, but they keep their sense of humour. They're nice louts. They've got lots of style, but a Parisian style... They are everything but professionals. I don't know why they got that name. If you say: That guy's a real *pied nickelé*, it means he's a lazy lout, clumsy, cunning, dishonest, and at the same time funny.

Fantômas? He was a very inelligent, elegant crook, who challenged the police and taunted society. He was a criminal with a chic side. He offered ladies flowers, he stole from the rich and never killed anyone. He was a much-loved character among the Surrealists and people like Marcel Lecompte, that generation.

My generation preferred thriller writers like Dashiell Hammett, Peter Cheyney, Jim Thompson and David Goodis; that was something quite different.

At the end of the 1950s, people started to set up bars in their own homes. Before that, they had a bottle of port at home for Sunday visitors. First there was the new idea of the aperitif. Then came the item of furniture, the bar, which you had to fill, needless to say. It was a new vogue which came from America.

One day Bernd Lohaus told me that you can neutralise the perfume of an aftershave lotion by filtering it with French bread. I tried. It's still just as nasty, but it's a nice ritual.

One day, unfortunately, I added water to my old man's pastis to hide the fact that I'd been drinking it.

At Stuivenberg hospital, a patient smuggled oranges which he spiked with alcohol, using a syringe.

In our house, if you came home on all fours, nobody talked about it the next day. Same thing for the war.

In stories and legends about the lives of artists, art and alcohol are often associated. That's where they seem to look for inspiration. As kids, we waited for the tram at Place Sainctelette, on a large empty platform, paved like a huge sidewalk. There wasn't a single tree or bench. In the middle of that big empty space was a drunk who kept falling over and who was talking to himself. 'Don't look, children', my mother would say, without any further comment about it. She obviously wasn't at ease with alcohol either, she drank her beer at ten in the morning.

Nan's favourite scent: *Mystère* by Rochas.

You remember that plan of Manhattan drawn by Patrick? I immediately saw a cow's head in it. That's perfect, I've always wanted to be a prehistoric painter... It makes me think of the desert.

New York State is like a funnel. Borders are funny: 'The Americans confuse maps with territories', said Ho Chi Minh.

What's remained most with me from Mickey Mouse comics is that, for each story, they invented another typography for the titles.

Marianne Berenhaut spreads smiles around her, in London.

Gilson tells an anecdote about Ingres. The painter is painting in his studio and there's a mover who arrives. He packs up the painting he has to take away, fits it on a contraption whose name I've forgotten (it's made of wood with two straps and a support), and when he goes, Ingres says: 'The idiot, he didn't say anything about the painting.' That's so naïve and so right. People are like that. And so Ingres was also like that. Irritated.

English red. Brick colour. I've always associated that colour with prisons, because the prison at Forest was made of brick. I remember that when I first arrived in London, I was surprised to see all those brick buildings. It was like a city full of prisons. Later on, the London painter Gerry Smith was surprised

by the fact that I knew the names of so many London prisons: Brixton, Fleet, Newgate, Pentonville... I know them through my reading of detective stories.

Have you heard of the 'gin riots'? When the people occupied London and freed all the prisoners? Almost nobody was hurt, everyone was drunk for ten days, until the rebellion was put down and the streets were awash in blood.

Malevich wrote a beautiful sentence: 'Thanks to speed, we're advancing more quickly'.

Sergei Nechaev's motto was: 'Full speed through the mud'. He was an individualistic terrorist. When I had a studio above the Entrepôt du Congo, my motto was: 'Head straight for the worst'. I've changed mottoes now. It's become: 'My disinclination remains free'.

You find the loveliest motto in Stephen Leacock, when an aristocrat who realises that he's ruined reads his family motto: 'Hic haec hoc huius huius huius'.

What I like about typewriters is that if you pull a bit on the carriage, you can, as in jazz, put the letter a bit too soon or too late.

As Chief Joseph said: 'I'm fed up with all these discussions which don't lead to anything concrete.'

The best hiding place for a knife is between your shoulders.

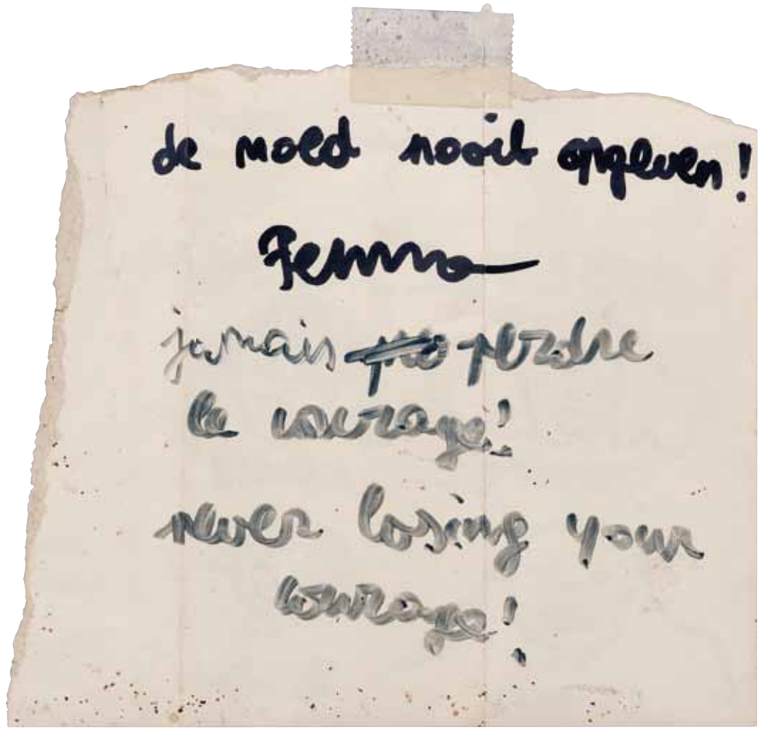
In his book *Asylums* (1961), Erving Goffman describes a *Moby Dick* character, who wears a coat where he can put everything. That fellow was perfectly equipped for running away. If you've got everything on you, all you need do is slam the door, don't you? My mother always said: 'If things go on like this, I will put on my hat and leave.'

Last winter, I fell in love with Sybil Seely, Buster Keaton's partner in his early films.

The art historian Paul Ilegems wrote that I'm a pain in the neck. He put his finger on it.

« I'm not an idiot, I'm a customs officer. » (Fernand Raynaud)

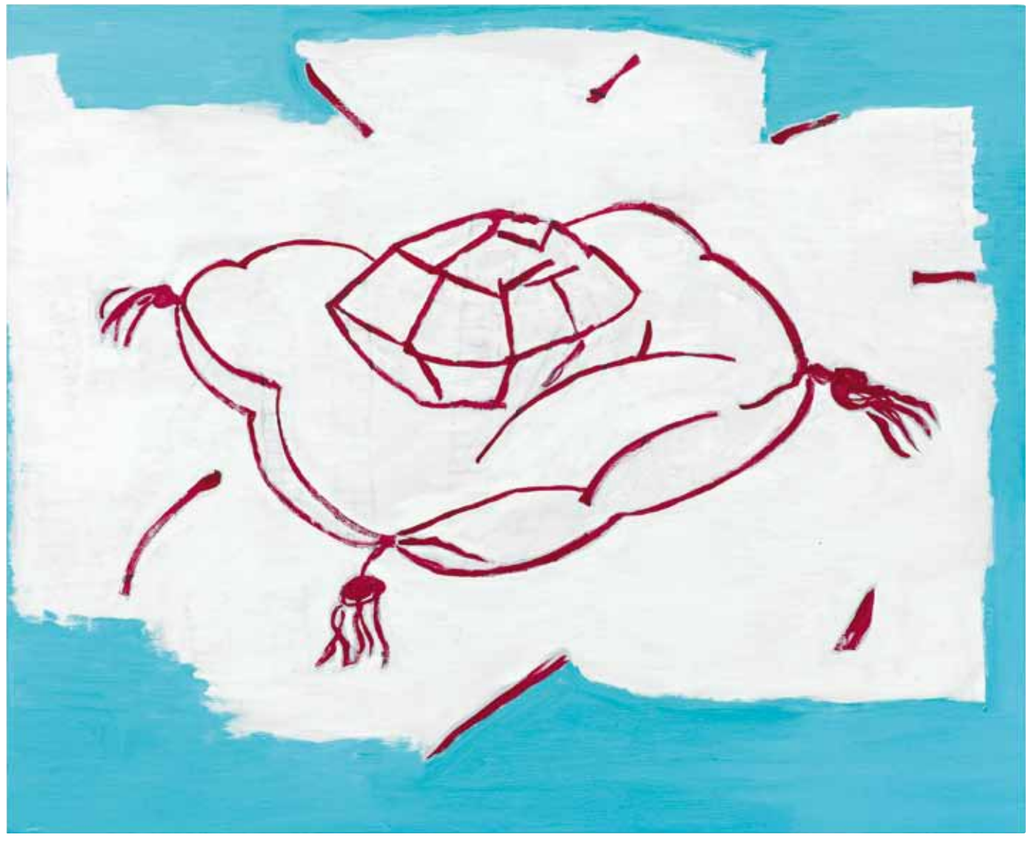
Montagne de Miel, 30 May 2016



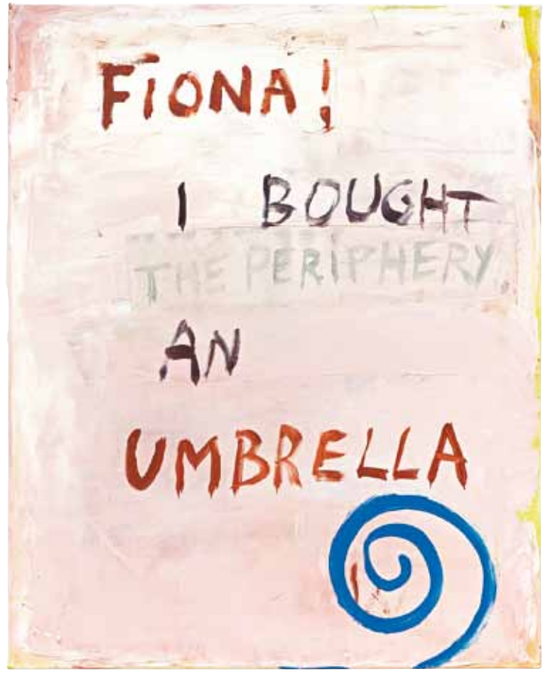
Paintings
2013–2016

A printed word is still a word,
but a printed painting is not a painting.

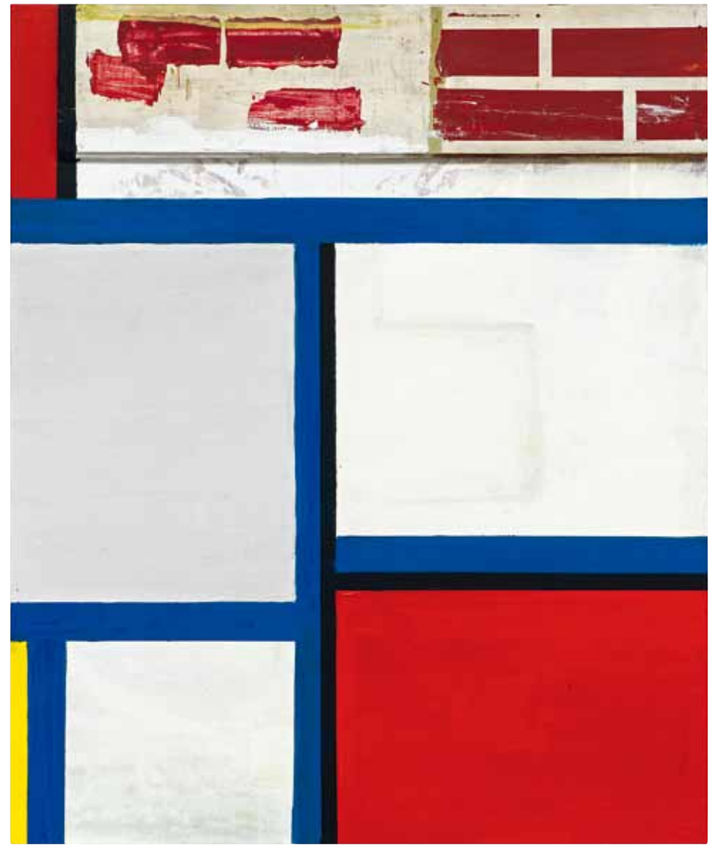
Étienne Gilson



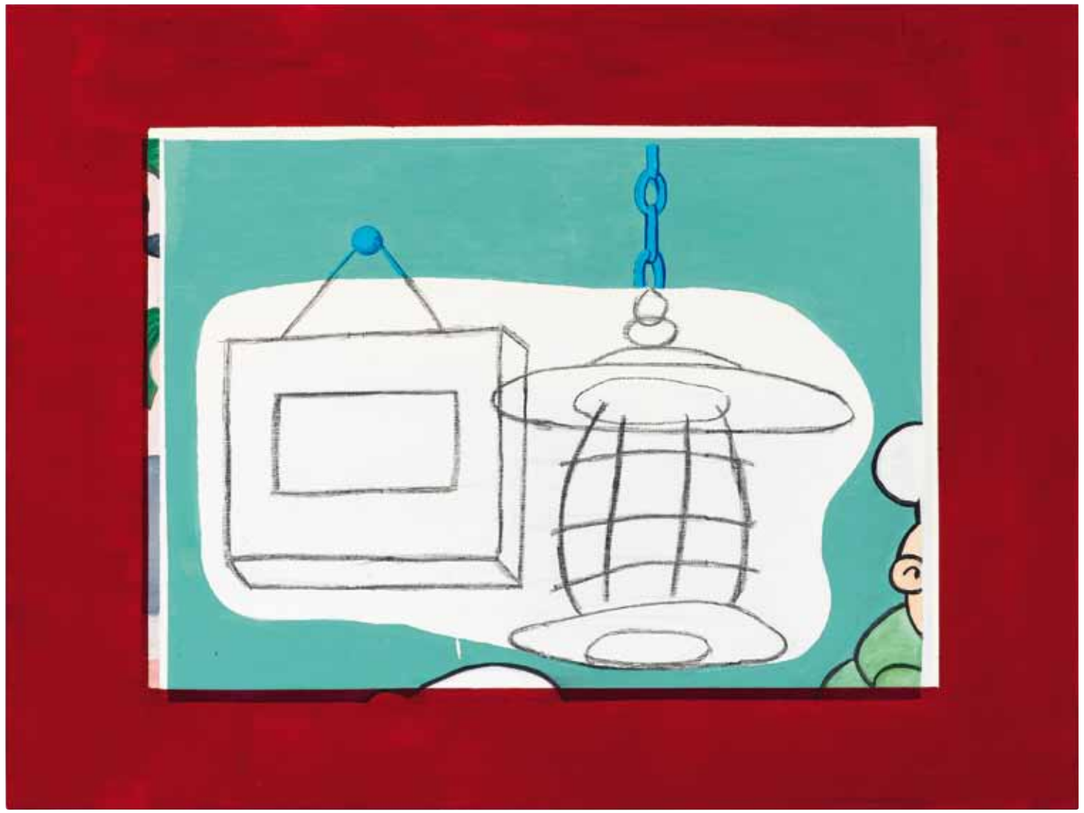
Le diamant de Juju, 2016, oil on canvas
130.5 × 160.5 × 3 cm, 51 3/8 × 63 1/8 × 1 1/8 in.



News, 2016, oil on canvas
50 × 40 × 1.5 cm, 19 5/8 × 15 5/8 × 1/2 in.

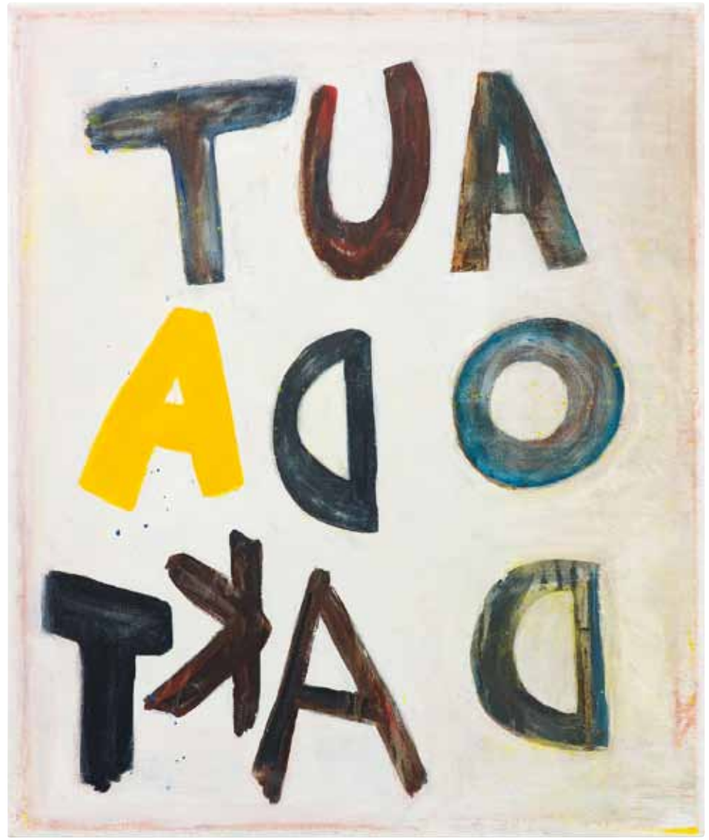


Piet, Georg & I, 2016, acrylic and oil on wood and canvas
120.5 × 100.5 × 3 cm, 47 3/8 × 39 1/2 × 1/8 in.



In the Kitchen, 2016, acrylic, oil and charcoal on canvas
135.5 × 180 × 3 cm, 53 1/4 × 70 3/4 × 1 1/8 in.

Les deux mégots, 2016, oil on canvas
50 × 60 × 2 cm, 19 5/8 × 23 1/2 × 3/8 in.



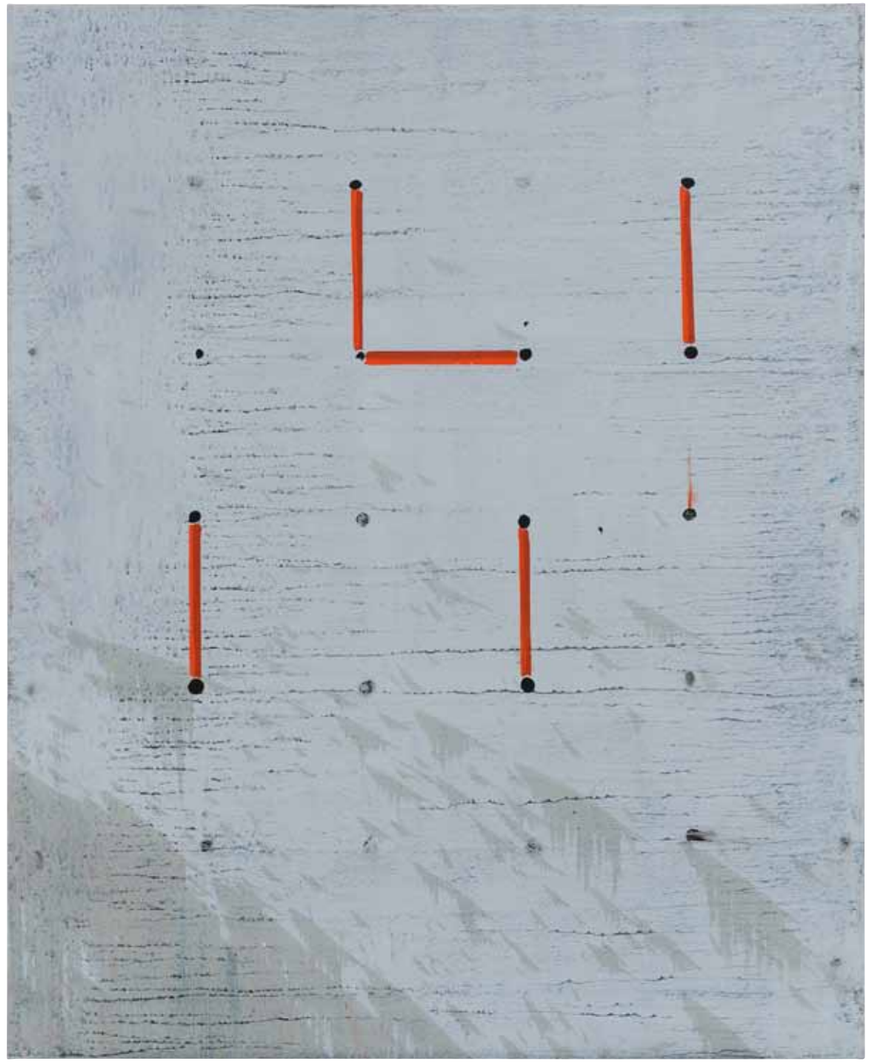
Guillaume Bijl's Wit, 2016, oil on canvas
121 × 100.7 × 3 cm, 47 5/8 × 39 5/8 × 1 1/8 in.

"A" Flag, 2016, oil on canvas
59.6 × 50 × 1.5 cm, 23 3/8 × 19 5/8 × 1/2 in.

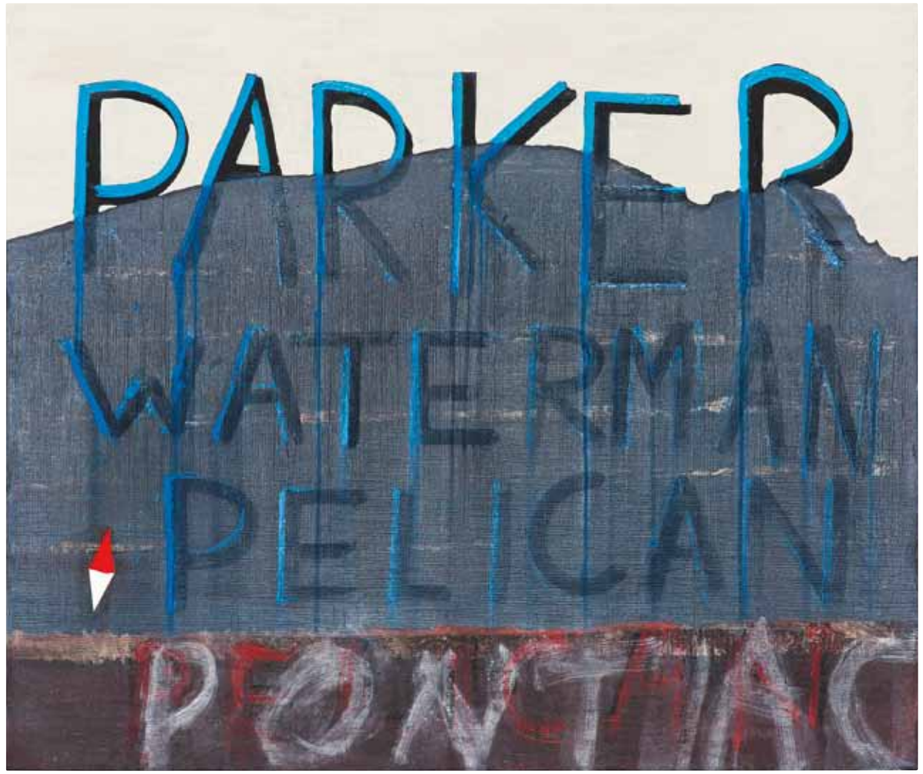
Mature, 2016, oil on canvas
50 × 59.6 × 1.5 cm, 19 5/8 × 23 3/8 × 1/2 in.

Ange Lili, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas
180 × 135.5 × 3 cm, 70 3/4 × 53 1/4 × 1 1/8 in.

Portrait of Pr. Dr. Kausa, 2016, oil on canvas
121 × 100.7 × 3.3 cm, 47 5/8 × 39 5/8 × 1 1/4 in.



L.i.i.i., 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas
160.2 × 130.3 × 3 cm, 63 × 51 1/4 × 1 1/8 in.



Stolen Name, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas
100.5 × 120.5 × 3 cm, 39 1/2 × 47 3/8 × 1 1/8 in.

Notice, 2016, oil on canvas
100.7 × 121 × 3 cm, 39 5/8 × 47 5/8 × 1 1/8 in.

The White Rider, 2016, oil on canvas
160.4 × 130.9 × 3 cm, 63 1/8 × 51 1/2 × 1 1/8 in.

Abstrakzyon 1, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas
100.5 × 120.5 × 3 cm, 39 1/2 × 47 3/8 × 1 1/8 in.

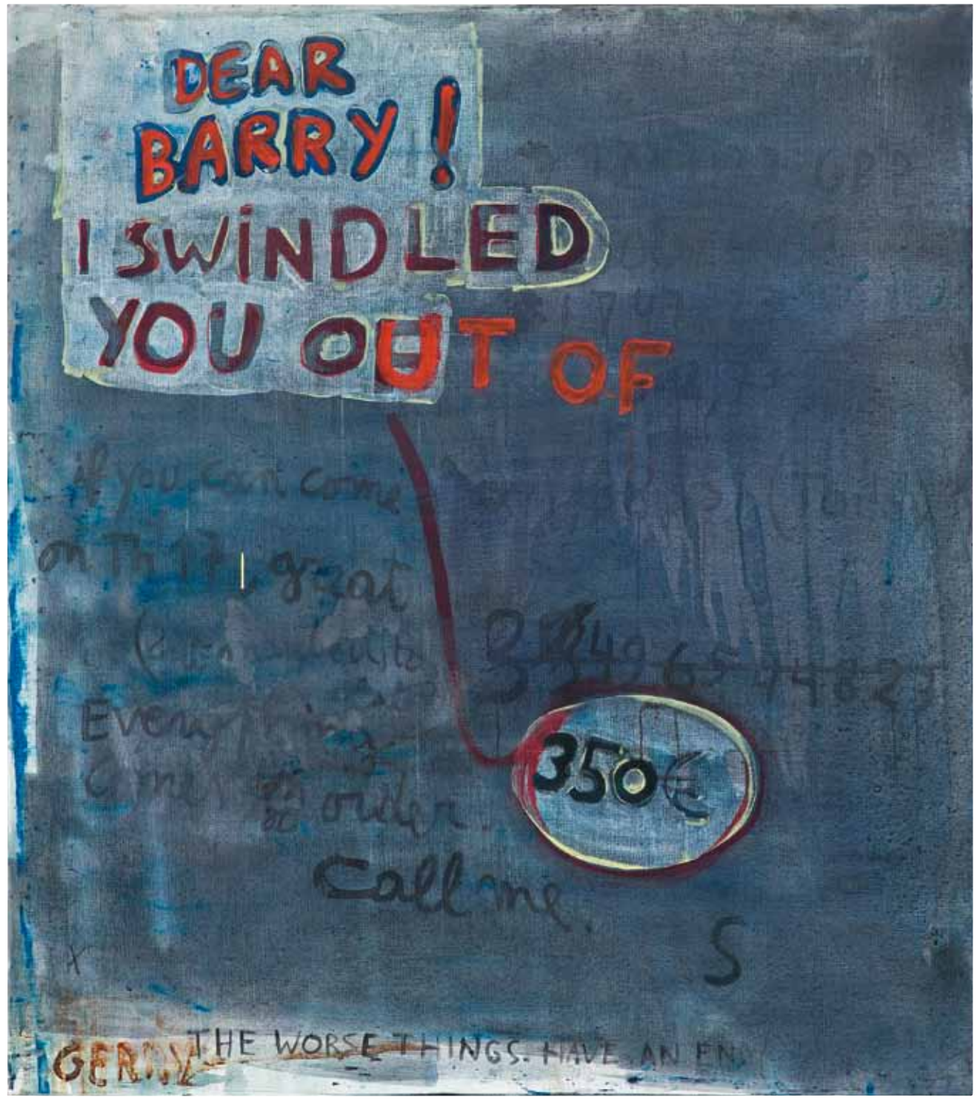
Abstrakzyon 2, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas
50 × 60 × 1.8 cm, 19 5/8 × 23 1/2 × 5/8 in.

School of Paris, 2016, oil on canvas
60 × 50.5 × 2 cm, 23 1/2 × 19 7/8 × 3/4 in.

Song for Suchan, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas
160 × 170 × 3 cm, 62 15/16 × 66 7/8 × 1 1/8 in.

EAST, 2016, acrylic, ink and oil on canvas
60 × 50 × 2 cm, 23 1/2 × 19 5/8 × 3/4 in.

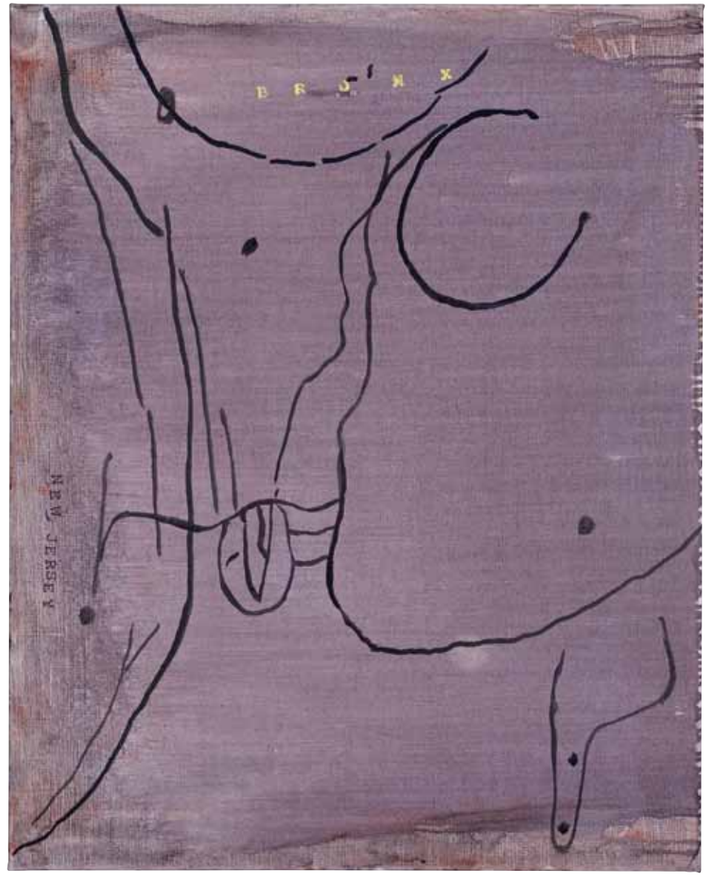
Transformations, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas
160 × 130 × 3 cm, 62 15/16 × 51 1/8 × 1 1/8 in.



Dear Barry, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
170.4 × 150 × 3 cm, 67 × 59 × 1 1/8 in.

Blue Fills Gap, 2015, acrylic, oil and ink on canvas
170.4 × 150 × 3 cm, 67 × 59 × 1 1/8 in.

Ipodpod, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
100 × 80 cm, 39 5/16 × 31 7/16 in.

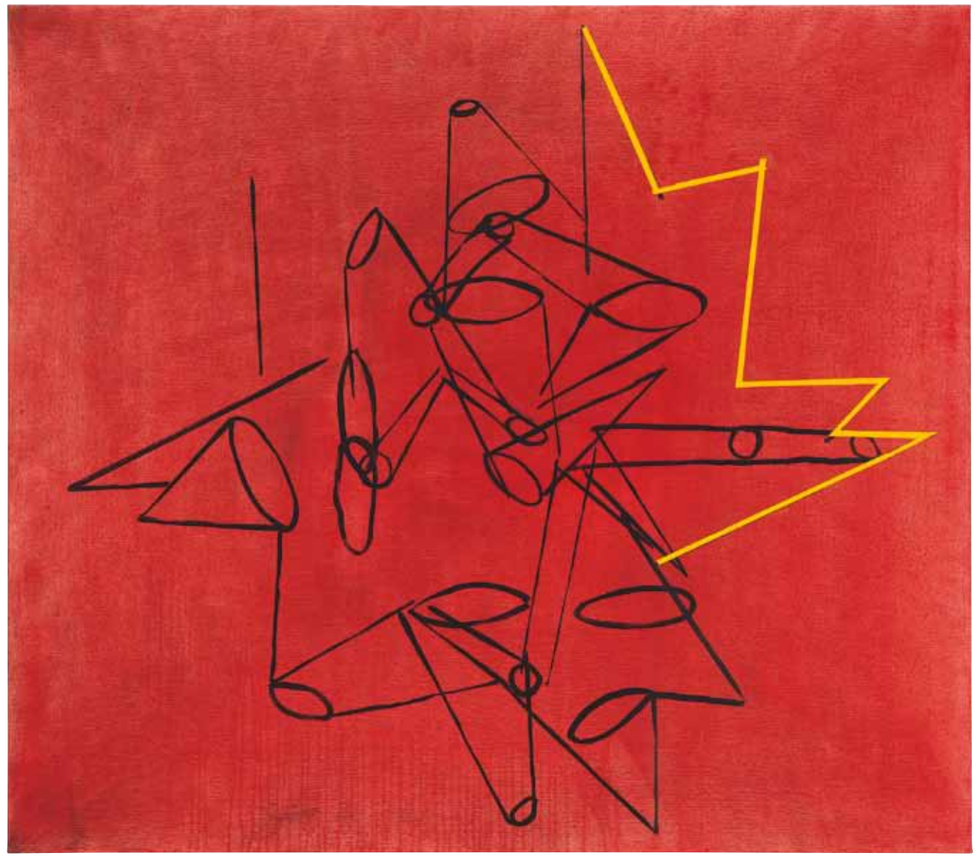


Manhattan, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
100 × 80 cm, 39 5/16 × 31 7/16 in.

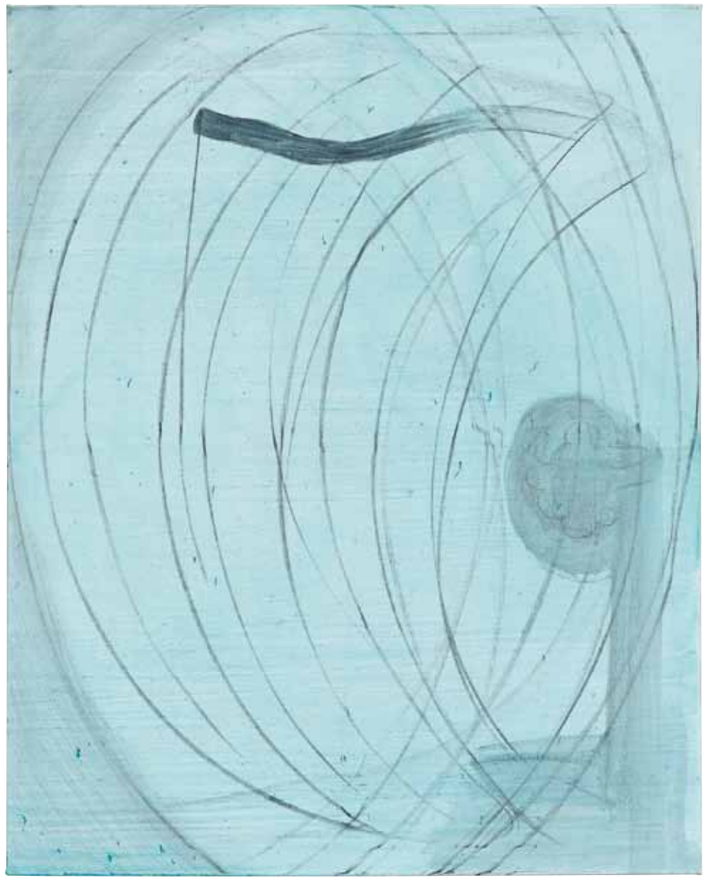
Labyrinthe, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
170 × 150 cm, 66 7/8 × 59 in.

Little Marianne's Dream, 2015, acrylic on canvas
50 × 40 × 3 cm, 19 5/8 × 15 11/16 × 1 1/8 in.

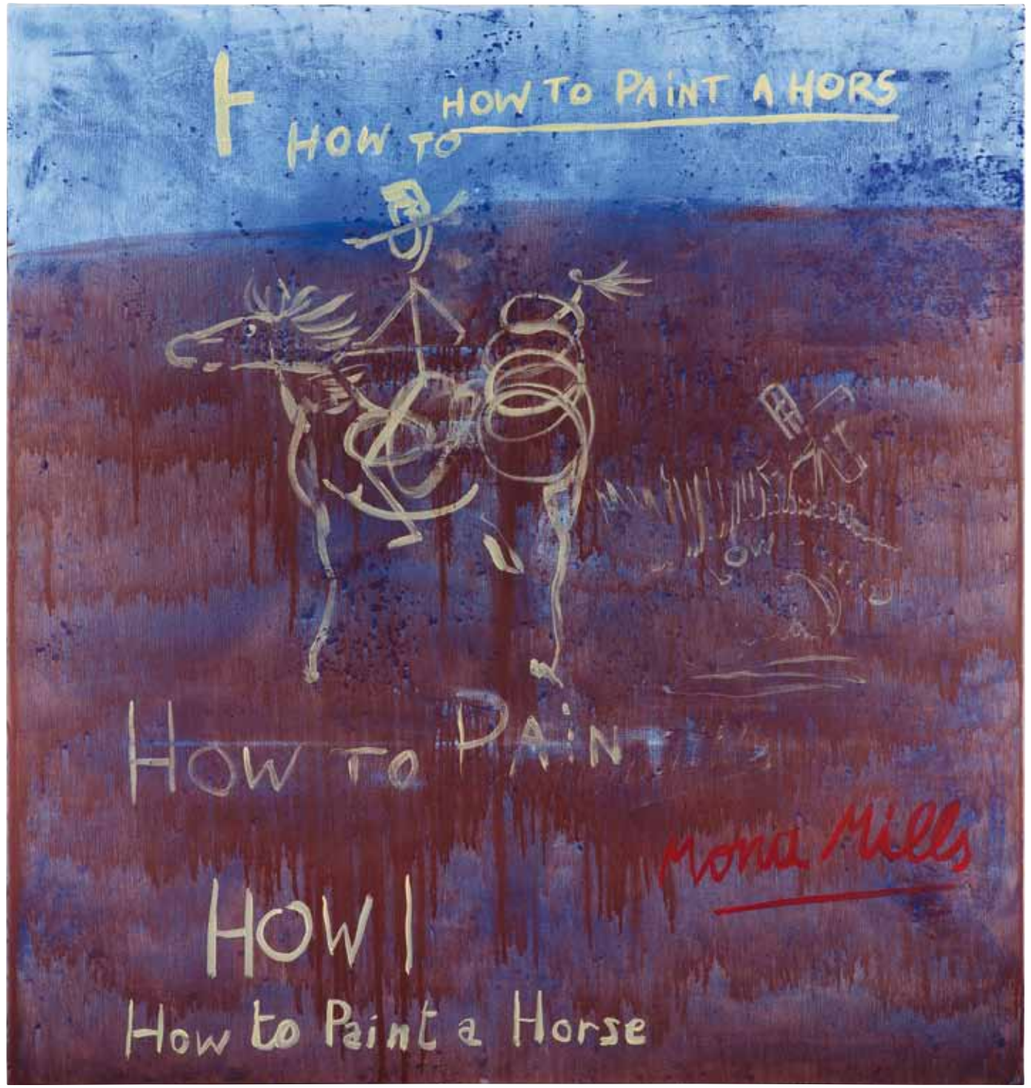
Untitled, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
50 × 60 × 2 cm, 19 5/8 × 23 9/16 × 3/4 in.



Blitz, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
150.2 × 170.4 × 3.2 cm, 59 1/8 × 67 1/16 × 1 1/4 in.



Wind Blue, 2015, charcoal and oil on canvas
99.8 × 79.8 × 1.8 cm, 39 1/4 × 31 3/8 × 11/16 in.



To Mona Mills, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
170 × 160 × 3.2 cm, 66 7/8 × 62 15/16 × 1 1/4 in.

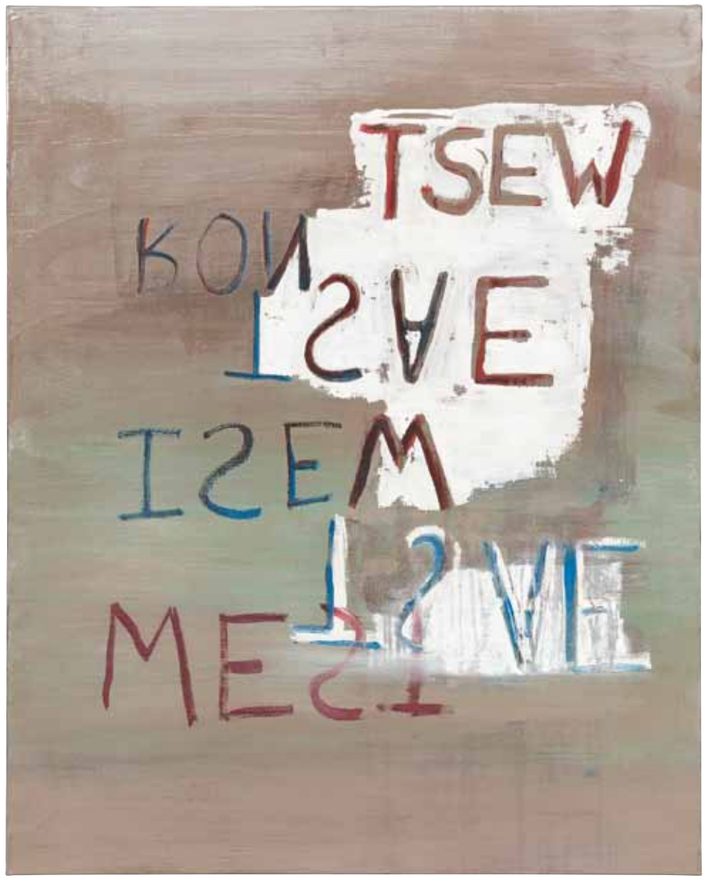
Max Sagt, 2015, acrylic on canvas
50 × 57.9 × 1.8 cm, 19 5/8 × 22 3/4 × 11/16 in.

To Exorcise the Black Dog, 2015, acrylic on canvas
50 × 40 × 2 cm, 19 5/8 × 15 11/16 × 3/4 in.

The House of Jan, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
100 × 120 × 3.2 cm, 39 5/16 × 47 3/16 × 1 1/4 in.

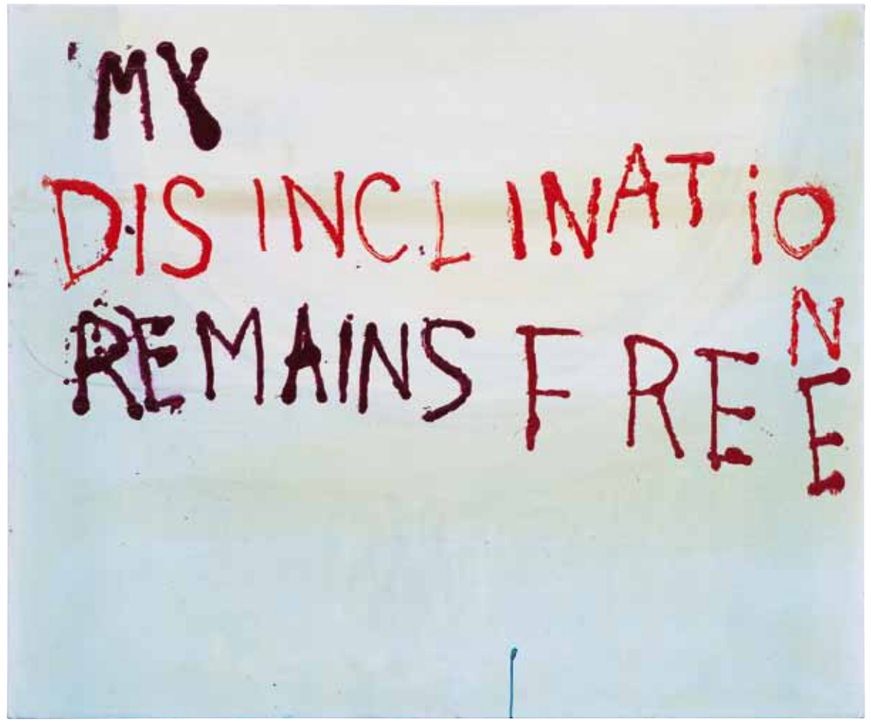
Nan's Still Life, 2015, oil on canvas
99.9 × 79.8 × 1.8 cm, 39 5/16 × 31 3/8 × 11/16 in.

The Red Scarf, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
160.3 × 170.3 × 3 cm, 63 1/16 × 67 × 1 1/8 in.

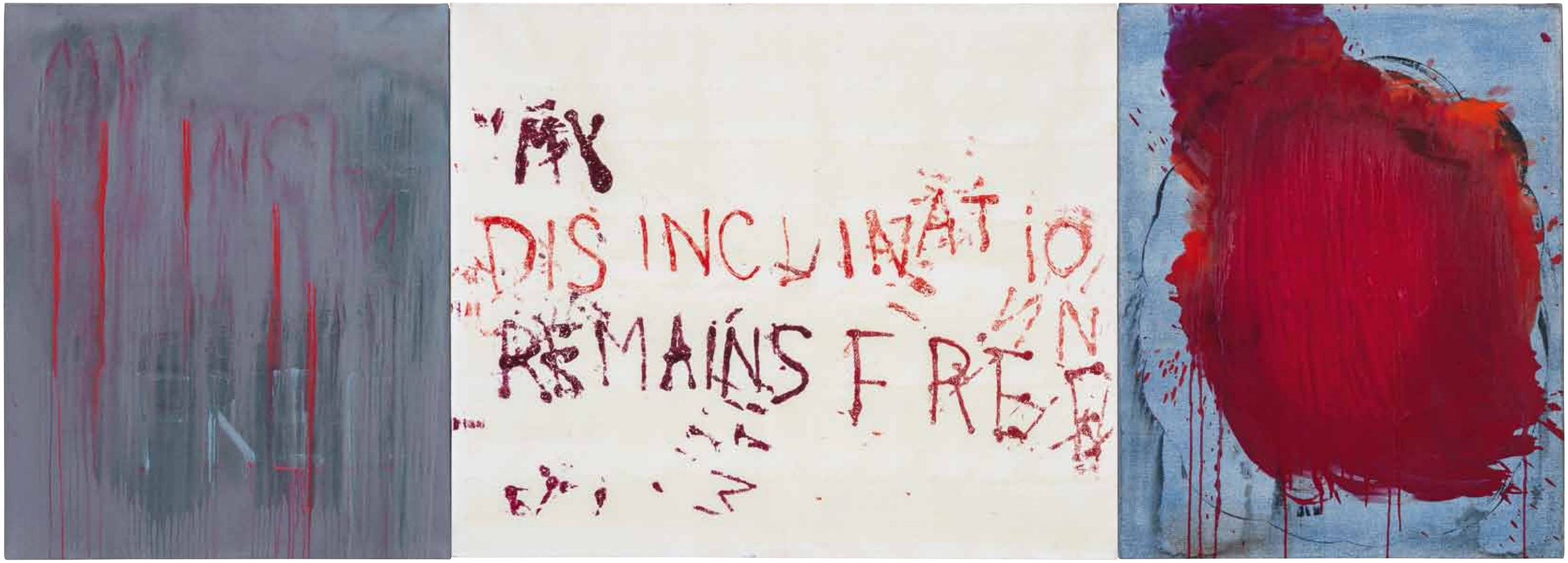


West-Mest, 2015, oil on canvas
99.8 × 80.2 × 2.1 cm, 39 1/4 × 31 9/16 × 13/16 in.

Blue Pig, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
50 × 57.9 × 1.8 cm, 19 5/8 × 22 3/4 × 11/16 in.



Max Says, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
100 × 120.2 × 3 cm, 39 5/16 × 47 5/16 × 1 1/8 in.



Zonder Titel, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas
100.4 × 280.9 × 3.1 cm, 39 1/2 × 110 9/16 × 1 3/16 in.

Mourning Star, 2015, oil on canvas
50 × 40 × 2.1 cm, 19 5/8 × 15 11/16 × 13/16 in.

Two Egyptians, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
160.4 × 130.2 × 3 cm, 63 1/8 × 51 1/4 × 1 1/8 in.

Ghost Dance, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
170.3 × 160.3 × 3 cm, 67 × 63 1/16 × 1 1/8 in.

Walt Slept Here, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
120 × 100 × 3.2 cm, 47 3/16 × 39 5/16 × 1 1/4 in.

Tire, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
50 × 40 × 2 cm, 19 5/8 × 15 11/16 × 3/4 in.

Big Sigaar, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
135.1 × 150.4 × 3 cm, 53 3/16 × 59 3/16 × 1 1/8 in.

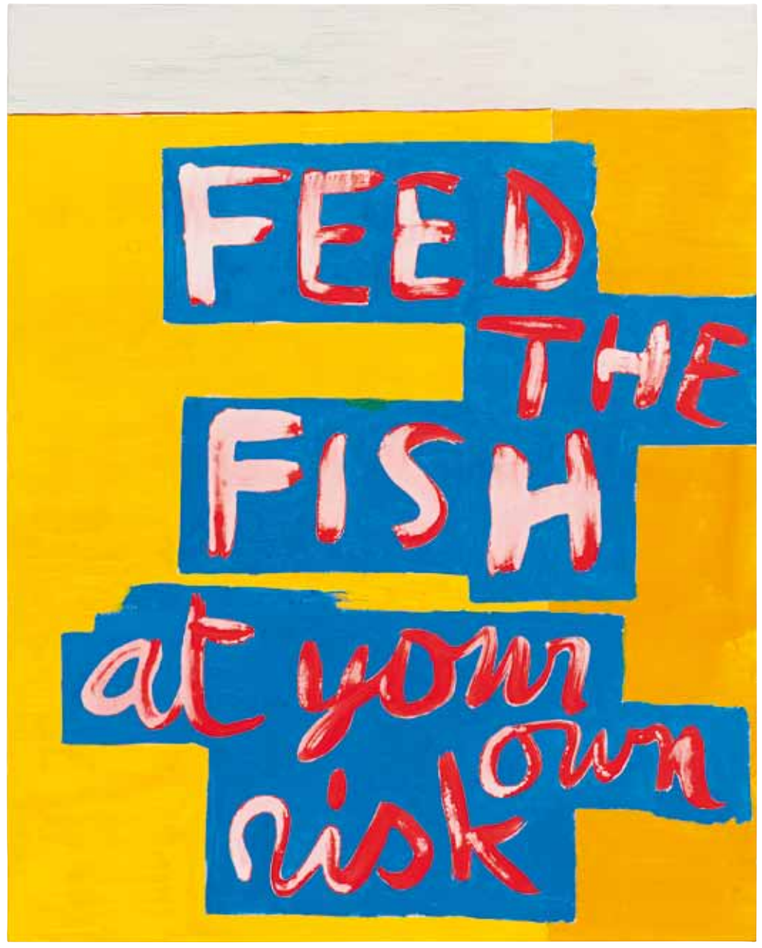
120

Red & Green, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
120.2 × 100.1 × 3 cm, 47 5/16 × 39 3/8 × 1 1/8 in.

121

h'm, 2015, oil on canvas
60 × 73 × 2 cm, 23 9/16 × 28 11/16 × 3/4 in.

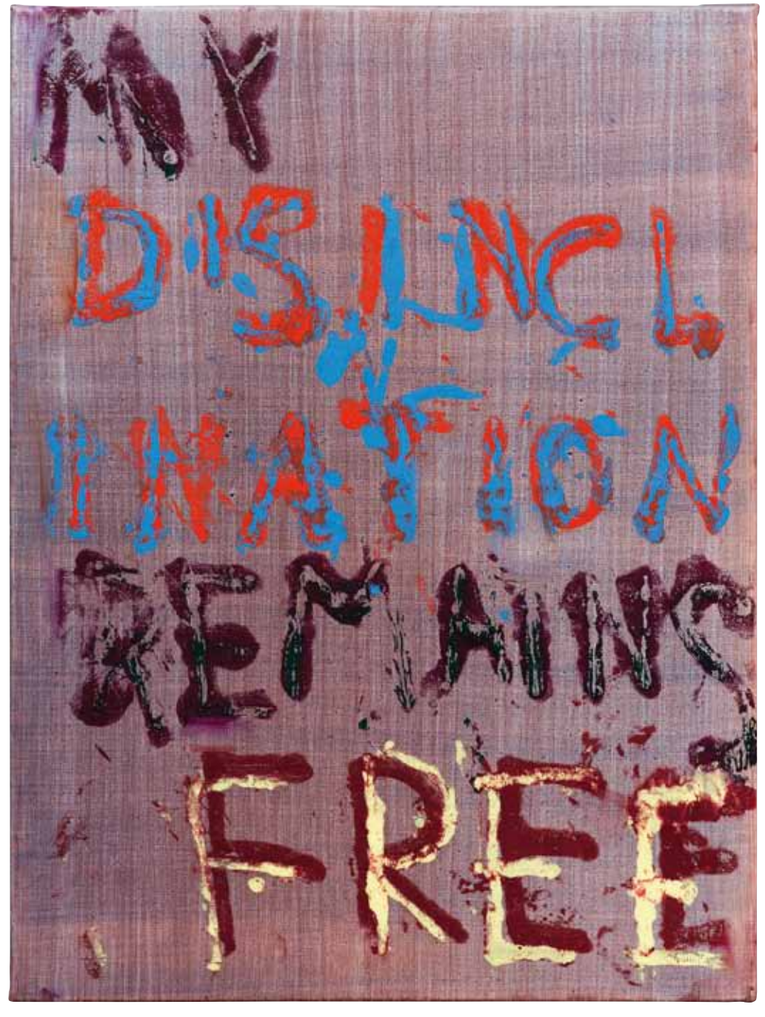
Ice Crown, 2015, acrylic on canvas
60 × 50 × 2 cm, 23 9/16 × 19 5/8 × 3/4 in.



Feed the Fish, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas
100.3 × 80.2 × 1.9 cm, 39 7/16 × 31 9/16 × 11/16 in.

Radio PRAHA, 2015, acrylic on canvas
100.4 × 120.3 × 3.1 cm, 39 1/2 × 47 5/16 × 1 3/16 in.

Voices, 2015, acrylic on canvas
100 × 360 × 3 cm, 39 5/16 × 141 11/16 × 1 1/8 in.

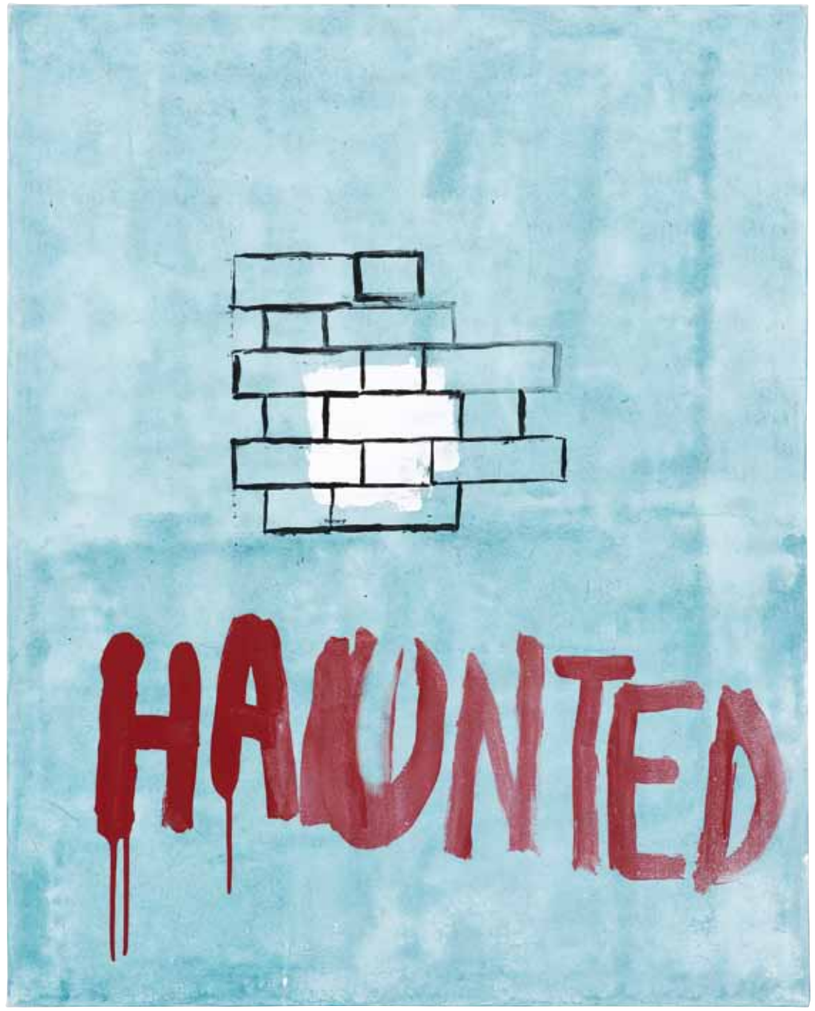


Untitled, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas
80 × 60 cm, 31 7/16 × 23 9/16 in.

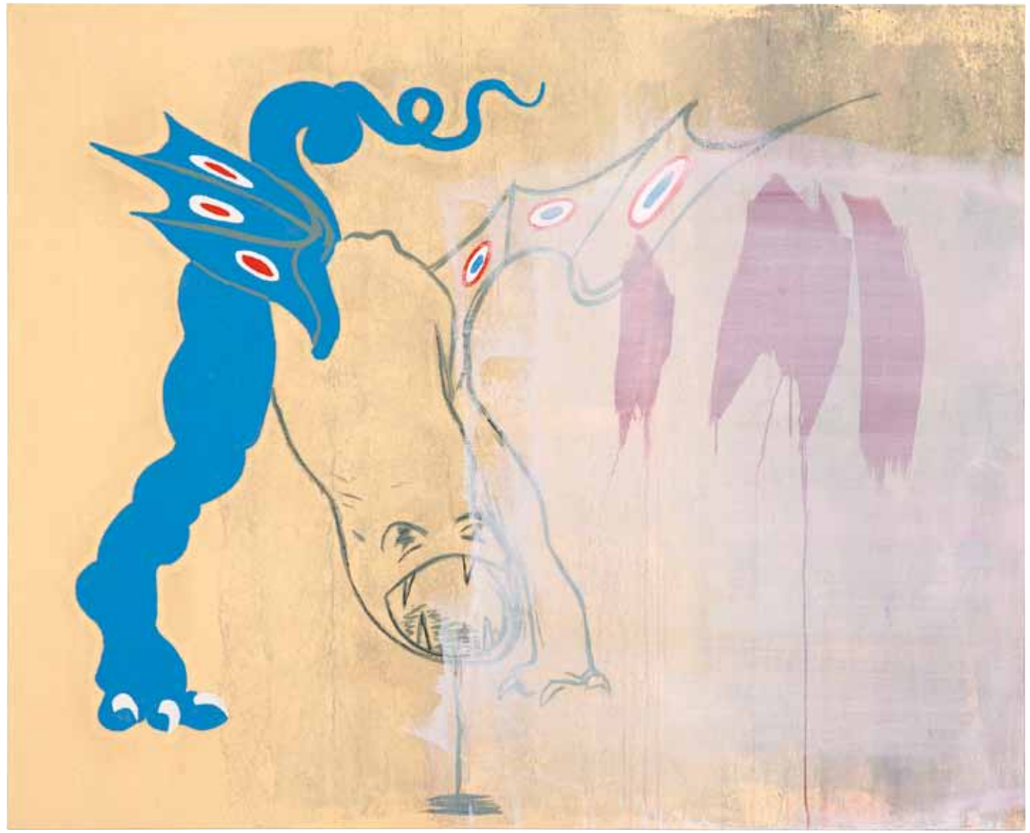
FREIE KOMMA, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas
40 × 50 cm, 15 11/16 × 19 5/8 in.

Defekt, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas
60 × 70 cm, 23 9/16 × 27 1/2 in.

Gamma black, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas
40 × 50 × 2 cm, 15 $^{11}/_{16}$ × 19 $^{5}/_{8}$ × $^{3}/_{4}$ in.

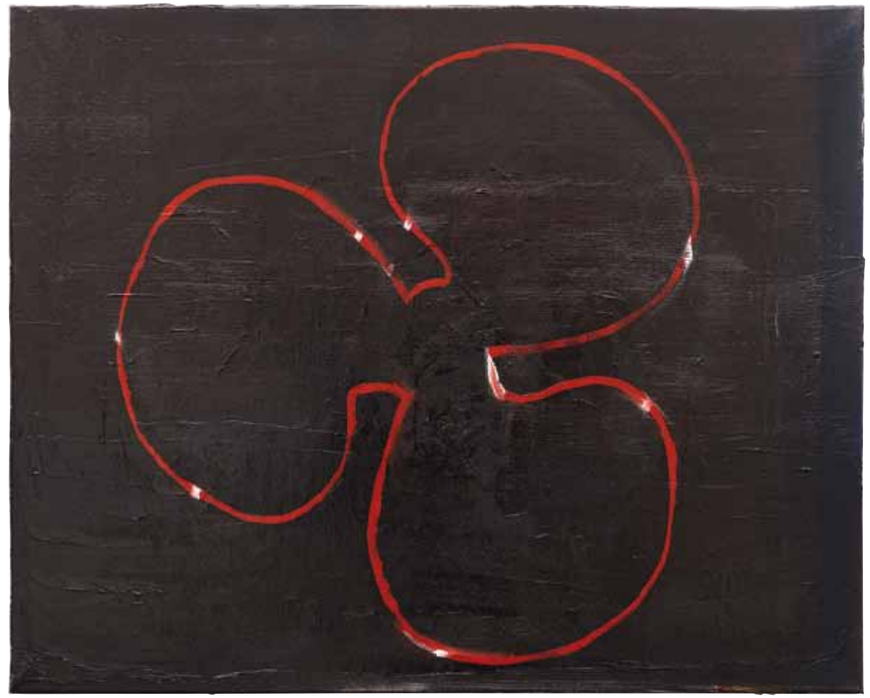


Haunted, 2014, acrylic on canvas
100 × 80 × 2 cm, 39 $^{5}/_{16}$ × 31 $^{7}/_{16}$ × $^{3}/_{4}$ in.

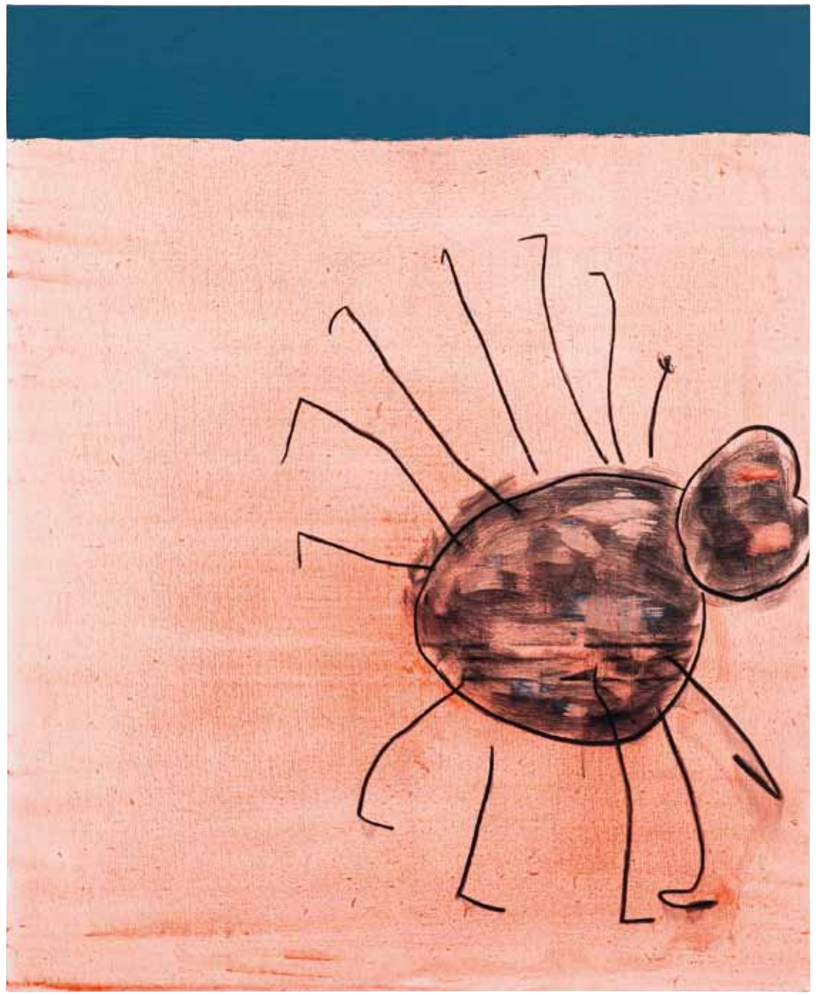


Paolo meets Malcolm, 2014, acrylic on canvas
130 × 160 × 2.5 cm, 51 1/8 × 62 15/16 × 15/16 in.

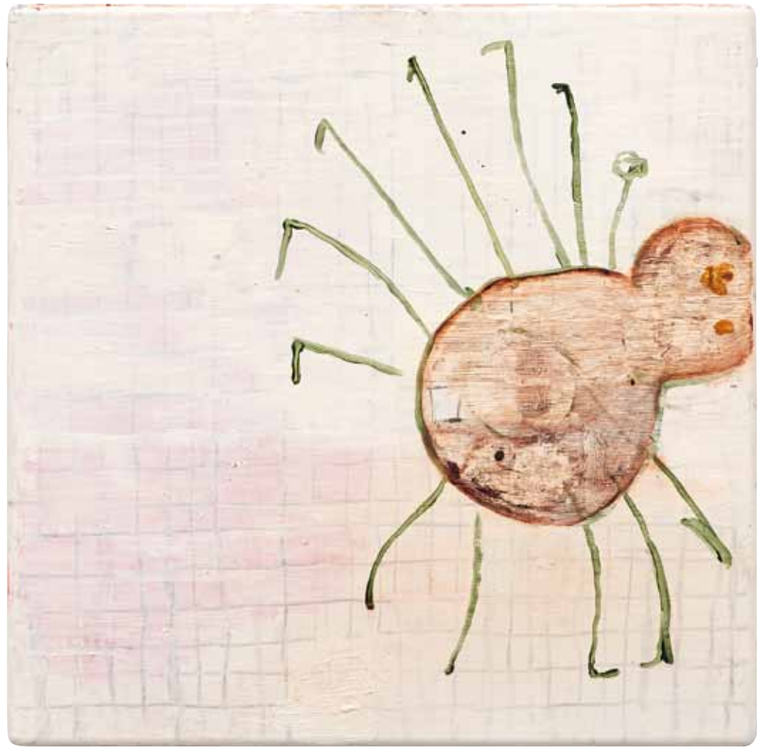
QED, 2014, acrylic on canvas
150 × 135 cm, 59 × 53 1/8 in.



Schroef, 2014, oil on canvas
65 × 81 × 1.7 cm, 25 9/16 × 31 7/8 × 5/8 in.

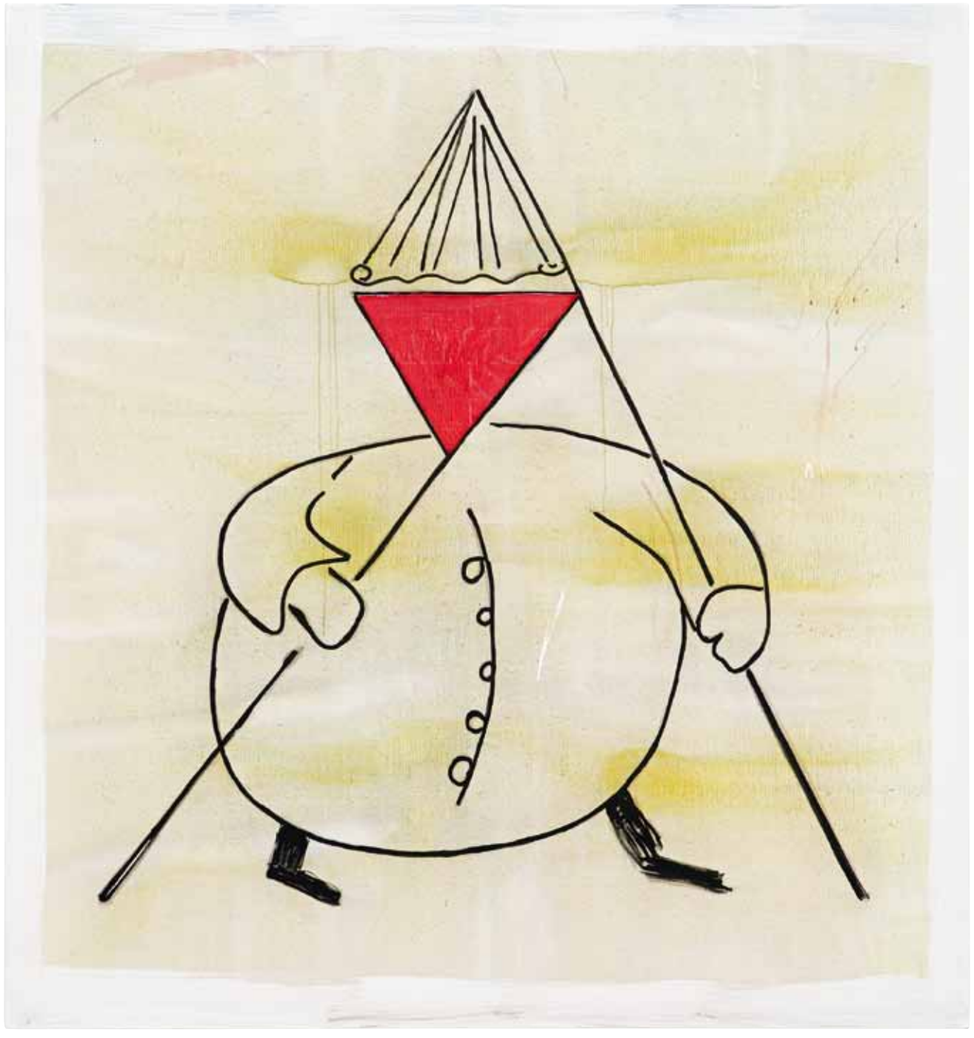


Spin van Marius, 2014, acrylic on canvas
160.4 × 130.4 × 2.8 cm, 63 1/8 × 51 5/16 × 1 1/16 in.



140

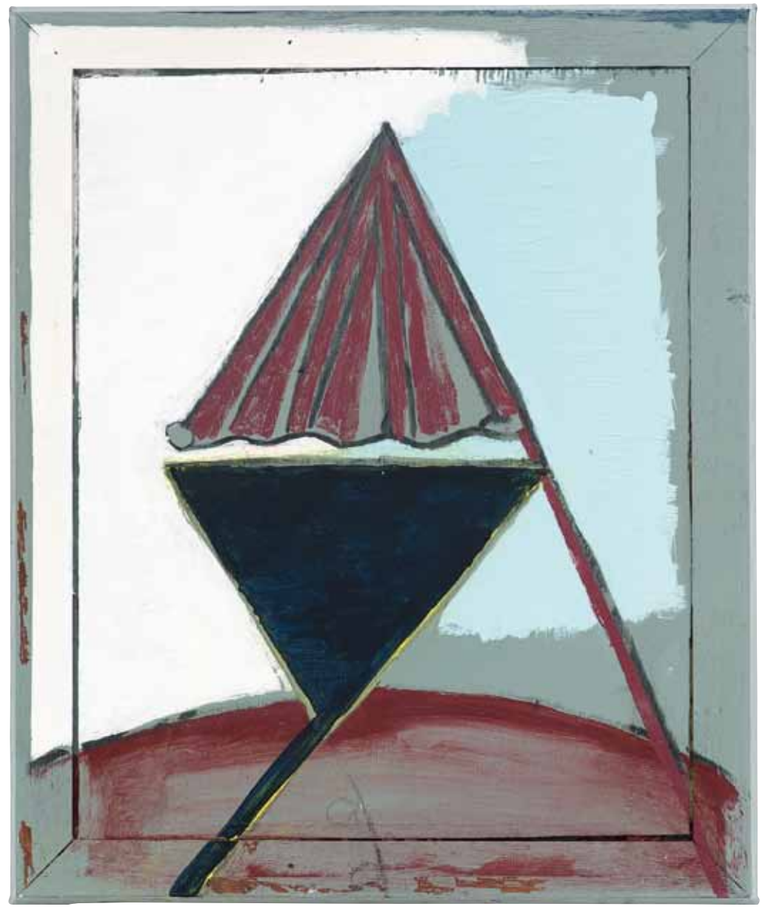
Spider (small), 2014, oil on metal
53 × 53.4 × 2.5 cm, 20 $^{13}/_{16}$ × 21 × $^{15}/_{16}$ in.



141

Le grand Mogol, 2014, acrylic on canvas
160.5 × 170.5 × 3 cm, 63 $^{3}/_{16}$ × 67 $^{1}/_{8}$ × 1 $^{1}/_{8}$ in.

Flor Fina, 2014, oil on canvas
60.2 × 70.4 × 2 cm, 23 $^{11}/_{16}$ × 27 $^{11}/_{16}$ × $^{3}/_{4}$ in.



Untitled (Portrait), 2014, acrylic on wood
61.5 × 50.3 × 3.9 cm, 24 $^{3}/_{16}$ × 19 $^{3}/_{4}$ × 1 $^{1}/_{2}$ in.

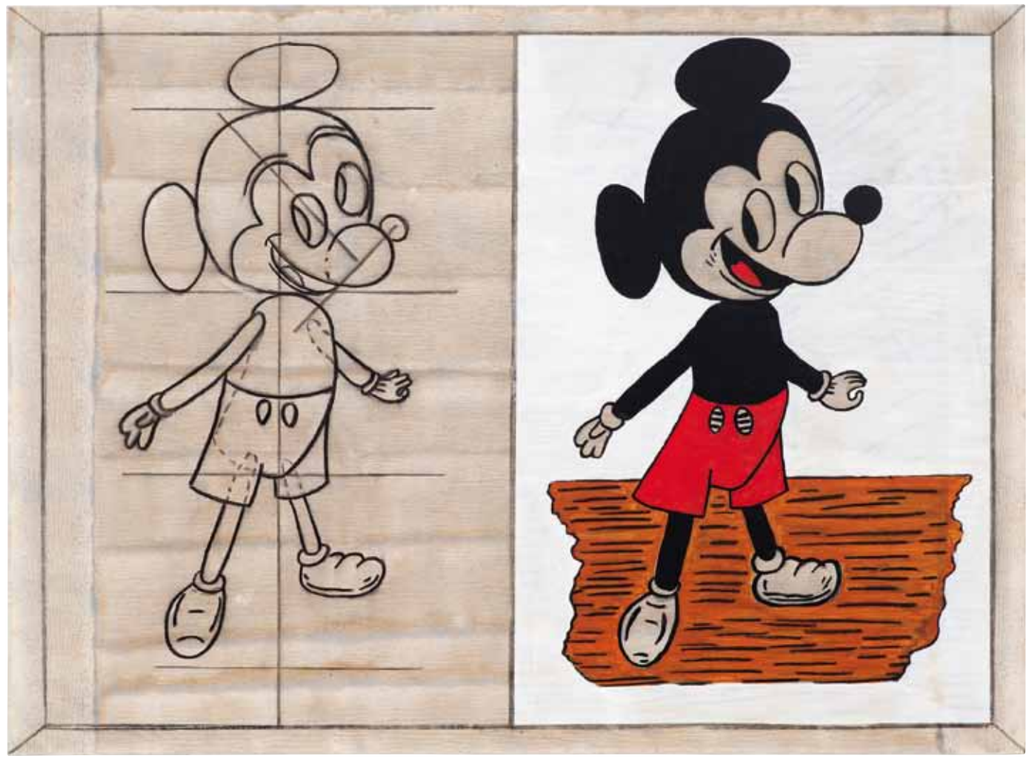
Tattoe, 2014, acrylic on canvas
119.8 × 100 × 2.7 cm, 47 1/8 × 39 5/16 × 1 1/16 in.

Chinese/Yellow, 2014, acrylic on canvas
40.3 × 49.8 × 1.6 cm, 15 13/16 × 19 9/16 × 5/8 in.

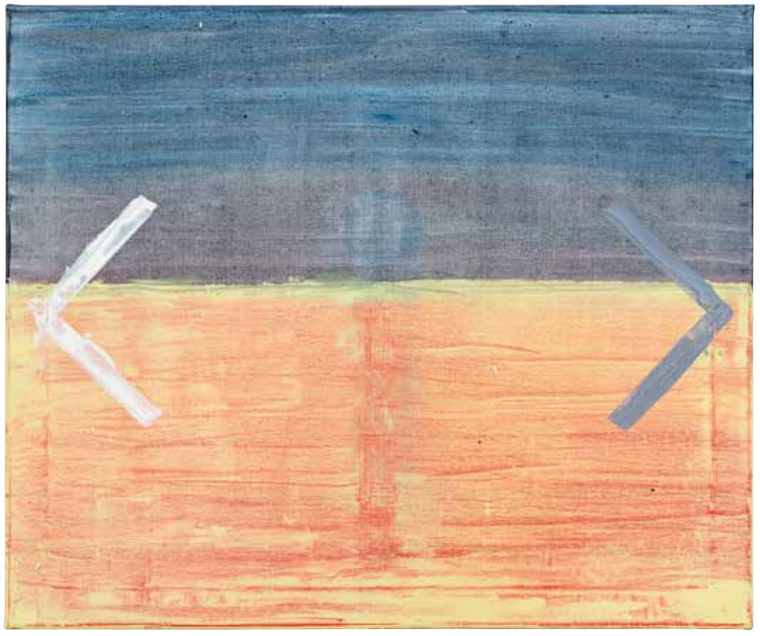
Ongereimt, 2014, oil on canvas
80.2 × 100.3 × 2.2 cm, 31 9/16 × 39 7/16 × 13/16 in.

U-boot, 2014, acrylic on paper, artist frame
30 × 40 cm, 11 3/4 × 15 11/16 in.

Connard, 2014, oil on canvas
60.5 × 70.3 × 2 cm, 23 13/16 × 27 5/8 × 3/4 in.



Mickey 1953, 2014, acrylic on canvas
132.3 × 180.4 × 2.8 cm, 52 1/16 × 71 × 1 1/16 in.



2 arrows, 2014, oil on canvas
50 × 60 × 1.6 cm, 19 5/8 × 23 9/16 × 5/8 in.

Gymnaste, 2014, oil on canvas
80 × 100 × 2.2 cm, 31 7/16 × 39 5/16 × 13/16 in.

Mustach, 2013, oil on canvas
60 × 50 × 2.2 cm, 23 $^{9}/_{16}$ × 19 $^{5}/_{8}$ × $^{13}/_{16}$ in.

Mabel, 2013, acrylic on canvas
60 × 80 × 1.7 cm, 23 9/16 × 31 7/16 × 5/8 in.

Jaune, 2013, acrylic on canvas
60 × 50 cm, 23 9/16 × 18 in.

Ceux qui sont ici, sont d' ici, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas
136 × 150 cm, 88 9/16 × 79 in.

FREE-WHEELING ON A HORSE

An overheard conversation between an elderly lady and a young, handsome man

Elderly lady: Mmm. I love it.

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: I heard Swennen's previous show was also magnificent.

Young man: (Picking his nose.) Mmm.

Elderly lady: I've always loved the paintings of Derk Thijs

Young man: Yeah.

Elderly lady: Yeah.

Young man: (With a finger on his chin.) And still…

Elderly lady: Yes…

Young Man: I read that Swennen tries to paint whatsoever.

Elderly lady: Does he?

Young man: Mmm…

Elderly lady: (Adjusting a lock of hair.) I wouldn't have thought so.

Young man: The end justifies the means.

Elderly lady: The end being a painting?

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: As opposed to an image?

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: I also heard that Thijs is trying to introduce little characters in his paintings.

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: Without becoming anecdotic, narrative or decorative.

Young man: I see.

Elderly lady: Mmm.

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: They say Swennen asked for the neons to be replaced by softer ones.

Young man: Did he?

Elderly lady: They say so.

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: …

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: This exhibition makes me think of Stephen Leacock's comparison between a horse and a bicycle.

Young man: I see…

Elderly lady: Leacock observes that the pedals of a horse don't allow for a comfortable circular pedalling movement.

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: He adds that free-wheeling on a horse is an extraordinary experience.

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: Yes.

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: Apparently this is what Swennen is looking for in his paintings…

Young man: I see.

Elderly lady: That's what I read.

Young man: Mmm.

Elderly lady: Free-wheeling on a horse…

Young man: Mmm.

Hans Theys, Montagne de Miel, February 2 2005

Ne Quid Nimis

A few words about Walter Swennen's work

The primacy of the text (Franz Kafka)

When I was studying Franz Kafka's novels and short stories in the mid-1980s, it struck me that all attempts to interpret his work seemed to overlook the fact that it can never be reduced to one meaning or conclusion and always seems to speak of an unknowable world and impenetrable texts. At the same time, the text's form imposes itself as necessary. In this sense, one can consider Kafka's work to be a continuation of the Talmud and the Midrash. In the never-ending, Jewish biblical exegesis, our interaction with an unknowable world and an intangible God is doubled by incoherent, contradictory, symbolic and unfathomable texts. The texts themselves, however, are not called into question, but cherished. The core of Jewish culture consists of an essentially endless series of interpretations or hypotheses that can be formulated, questioned and tested. 'When two or three Jews studied the Torah together, God was in their midst', summarised Karen Armstrong. Strangely enough, all of this can also be read in Kafka's texts: 'Don't misunderstand me', says the priest to Joseph K. in *The Castle*, 'I'm only telling you the different opinions there are about it. You mustn't pay too much attention to them. The scripture is unalterable and the opinions are often merely an expression of despair about this.'[1] In the novel *The Castle*, in which the suspected swindler K. pretends to be the new village surveyor, the only piece of evidence upon which he can depend is a letter from an unattainable official. The clearest pronouncement about this missive is made by Olga, the messenger's sister: 'Assessing the letters correctly is impossible because their value changes continuously, they give rise to endless contradictions, and only chance decides where we stop, that's to say, opinion is a matter of chance.'[2]

1 Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke. Der Prozeß*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1983, p. 185.

2 Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke. Das Schloß*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1983, p. 218.

Zonder titel (Pelure de banane), 1984, paint on canvas, 487 × 635 cm, 191 3/4 × 250 in.

My study of Kafka's writings left me with the impression that his oeuvre was not an attempt to express anything more than what was in the text, which was sufficient. Everything is there, in black and white.[3] There is no need for anyone else to offer an explanation or interpretation. When I first met Walter Swennen in October 1988, I understood that the same holds true for paintings. If they have something to 'say', then it is in a material sense, not in the form of a code that needs to be deciphered.[4] Swennen's paintings articulate their form. Their thinking takes place in the way they are constructed, even if they contain images or words.

The primacy of texture (Viktor Shklovski)

Swennen's views on the primacy of texture have evolved considerably since the late 1980s. Back then, he was interested in a collection of essays by Viktor Shklovski, which was published in French in 1973 under the title *La marche du cheval*.[5] For Shklovski, a work of art does not provide a translation of an artist's inner language into one that can be understood by the viewer. 'In art', he wrote, 'new forms appear to replace old forms that have lost their artistic value.'[6]
But what constitutes this artistic value? In order to explain this, he cites Broder Christiansen who noted in his book *The Philosophy of Art*: 'When we experience anything as a deviation from the usual, from the normal or from a certain guiding canon, we feel within us an emotion of a special nature (...) Why is the lyrical poetry of a foreign country never revealed to us in its fullness even though we have learned its language? We hear the play of its harmonics; we apprehend the succession of rhymes and feel the rhythm. We understand the meaning of the words and are in command of the imagery, the figures of speech and the content. We may have a grasp of all the sensuous forms, of all the objects. So what's missing? The answer is: differential perceptions. The slightest aberration from the norm in the choice of expressions, in the combination of words, in the

3 The only mystery surrounding Kafka's work is that his interpreters do not want or dare to see this. Compare with Mannoni, who wrote: 'Mallarmé is more intelligible than is claimed, it is sufficient to take him at his word...' O. Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène*, Éditions du Seuil, 1969, p. 253.

4 Paintings do not speak a 'language', because they do not contain elements that differentiate between meanings, such as phonemes. 'If painting is a language, one wonders what deaf people see in it.' (W.S.)

5 Victor Chklovski, *La marche du cheval*, Éditions Champ Libre, Paris, 1973. The contents of this book are completely different to the Dutch edition that was published by Karel van het Reve (with an introduction by the latter) under the title *De paardesprong*, De Haan, Haarlem, 1982.

6 Viktor Sjklovski, *De paardesprong*, De Haan, Haarlem, 1982, p. 89.

subtle shifts of syntax—all of this can only be mastered by someone who lives among the natural elements of his language, by someone who, thanks to his conscious awareness of the norm, is immediately struck, or rather, irritated by any deviation from it.'[7]

Furthermore: 'In order to transform an object into a fact of art, it is necessary first to withdraw it from the domain of life. We must extricate a thing from the cluster of associations in which it is bound. It is necessary to turn over the object as one would turn over a log in a fire.'[8]

From this it follows that you cannot make a work of art without shifting, repeating, multiplying or compressing things[9] in order to achieve artistry. Both the form and the 'content' of a work of art are the result of technical necessity and the potential of the material available.[10] Thus Shklovski contends that Dido did not conquer an island by cutting a cowhide into a circle, because this ruse belonged to the narrator's culture (as ethnologists and sociologists believe), but because this ruse is a 'priom': a device that facilitates the telling of a surprising story. (For how else could the narrator astonish his or her own people with this tale?) Likewise, it is nigh on impossible to write a story that does not involve love or murder. (This is an example I concocted myself.) But who do you love, or murder? Someone you know, like the postman[11], neighbours or family members, or a random passer-by? Because the latter is highly improbable, except in *The Phantom of Liberty* by Buñuel, protagonists will either kill their relatives or sleep with them. Proof of Sophocles' genius lies in the fact that Oedipus took the life of a stranger who later turned out to be his father, not in the Freudian interpretation of this priom.

If this reasoning were applied to a painting, then all so-called references to the external world (whether it be ideas or perceptible things) could be regarded as mere material which can be used to construct a painting. And this

7 Ibid: 47. Compare with Bergson's description of humour as an unexpected deviation from habitual or mechanical behaviour.

8 Ibid: 94.

9 The techniques employed by artists in the making of their work, as described by Shklovski, closely resemble those used in 'dream-work' and 'joke-work' as described by Freud. As an illustration, he cites the portmanteau 'beggar-millionaire' in a work by Tolstoy (ibid: 96), which immediately makes one think of Heine's play on words 'famillionaire', with which Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* begins.

10 A comparable idea is to be found in *The Art of the Novel* by Milan Kundera, in which the author develops the notion that the best novels are those that make use of possibilities that can only exist in novels. You can apply this criterion to the films *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* by David Lynch, and also to Swennen's paintings. In the case of the latter, he develops a concrete poetry that is crafted out of words and images, which are interwoven with materials: a poetry that can only exist within a painting.

11 *The Postman Always Rings Twice* by James M. Cain.

is precisely what Shklovski did. 'Paintings are not at all windows onto another world—they are things', he wrote, 'the artist clings to depiction, to the world, not in order to recreate the world, but rather to be able to use complex and rewarding material in his art.'[12] Cézanne echoed his words. His paintings were attempts to give form, through colour, to the spatial and optical effects of the perceived world (le 'motif'). For him, painting was not about the perceived object, nor about his own way of seeing (his specific '*optique*', which was certainly essential), but rather about the manner in which he transformed his experiences into colour, his own *way of doing things*, which he described as his temperament,[13] or his '*petite sensibilité*'.[14]

'A picture doesn't represent anything. It doesn't need to represent anything in the first place but the colours', said Cézanne to Gasquet.[15] Shklovski wrote that 'the outside world does not exist. Things replaced by words do not exist and are not perceived (...). The outside world is outside of art. It is perceived as a series of hints (...) devoid of material substance and texture.'[16] 'For a painter, colour is the only truth', asserted Cézanne.[17] And he added: 'I detest all these stories, this psychology, and all this intellectual humbug about them. For God's sake, it's all in the paintings, painters are no imbeciles. But you have to see it with your eyes—with your eyes—do you understand!'[18]

12 Viktor Sjklovski, *De paardesprong*, De Haan, Haarlem, 1982, p. 128.

13 'Let us strive to express ourselves according to our personal temperament.' Doran (Ed.), *Conversations avec Cézanne*, Macula, Paris, 1978, p. 136. Swennen does not like the term 'expression', but this is not relevant here, and will be addressed later in the text. This being said, it should be noted that the English word 'expressive', as used for example by Frank Auerbach (in the documentary made by his son), has less to do with the 'expression' of an inner life than with the physical impact of a painting.

14 Ibid: 180. When Cézanne complained to Maurice Denis that Gauguin had stolen his 'petite sensibilité', he obviously did not mean his manner of looking, but his way of working. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who believed that literature had nothing to do with ideas and everything with style, would later describe his own approach as 'la petite musique'. Cf. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Le style contre les idées*, Éditions Complexe, Brussels, 1987, pp. 90–91.

15 Doran (Ed.), *Conversations avec Cézanne*, Macula, Paris, 1978, p. 136. The editor, P.-M. Doran, doubted the credibility of this statement, not to mention the majority of Gasquet's reminiscences, on the grounds that they contain numerous statements, albeit in a slightly modified form, that can be found in other interviews. He does not seem to grasp that artists, like us, often repeat the same thoughts and words. I am inclined to trust Gasquet because the tone of the conversations rings true. According to Doran, however, they seem suspiciously similar to the style of Gasquet's other works. He does not realise that this resemblance might testify to Gasquet's sympathy for Cézanne or that his style grew out of his admiration for the artist. I was relieved to read that Gilles Deleuze concurs: 'The editor's reservations about the value of Gasquet's texts seem to be unfounded...' Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1981 (2002), p. 105.

16 Victor Chklovski, *La marche du cheval*, Éditions Champ Libre, Paris, 1973, p. 95.

17 Doran (Ed.), *Conversations avec Cézanne*, Macula, Paris, 1978, p. 142.

18 Ibid: 136.

Untitled, 1987, oil and lacquer on canvas, 89 × 91 cm, 35 × 35 3/4 in.

'The whole effort of a poet and a painter', says Shklovski 'is aimed first and foremost at creating a continuous and thoroughly palpable thing, an object with a texture (...) Good and bad in art is a question of texture. (...) Texture is the main distinguishing feature of that specific world of specially constructed objects, the totality of which we are used to calling art.'[19]

What does this mean? What is the significance of these words? Of what do they speak? Firstly, it concerns the idea that the value of a painting is not to be sought in what it represents, but in the manner in which it was created. In the case of Cézanne, it is about the way that he attempted, for example, to model by means of colour, while simultaneously trying to avoid his paintings disintegrating (become inharmonious or incoherent). In the case of Swennen, it involves the specific way in which he combines techniques, supports, materials, colours, inflated drawings, words and letters, and weaves them together in order to arrive at new objects or concrete thoughts.

The aesthetic and the artistic existence of the painting

In the mid-1990s, Swennen discovered a reference to Étienne Gilson's work *L'être et l'essence* in Deleuze's book on Spinoza. He also discovered Gilson's treatise *Painting and Reality*, which was based on a lecture series, and the related book that followed some years later, *Peinture et réalité*. In these works, Gilson distinguishes between three forms of existence of a work of art: the purely physical, the aesthetic and the artistic. As a physical object, a work of art is no different from any other object. As an aesthetic object, it is dependent upon the viewer's relationship with it. A gallery attendant, a transporter, an insurer, a painter or a philosopher will all have their own individual way of looking at a painting.[20] As an aesthetic object, the work of art presents itself to the viewer as a 'modus', as a representation, which everyone views differently. Because these representations are infinite, Gilson considers the aesthetic point of view to be a hopeless approach.[21] The aesthetic form of existence of the work of art is phenomenological in nature because it tells us nothing about the object itself, but only about how it appears to us (and how this appearance is determined by our abilities and expectations).

19 Victor Chklovski, *La marche du cheval*, Éditions Champ Libre, Paris, 1973, pp. 95–98.

20 As an example, he recounts an anecdote about Ingres, who was annoyed when a mover failed to express an opinion about a painting, and also refers to the way in which a painting by Tintoretto was used to screen off the clutter in the basement of a cathedral. Étienne Gilson, *Peinture et réalité*, Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, Paris, 1972 (1998), p. 22 and p. 25.

21 'That is the grandeur and the misery of phenomenology. It begins with a philosophy and ends in literature.' Ibid: 23.

Carol, 1989, oil and lacquer on wood, 122 × 110 × 5 cm, 48 × 43 5/16 × 2 in.

To define a work of art (as distinct from any other object) without using aesthetic criteria, Gilson described it as an object that is created by an artist in the context of his artistic activity. This artistic form of existence is therefore determined ontologically, from its cause. For Swennen, Gilson's distinction implies that the artistic value of a work of art does not depend upon the eye of the beholder. It affirms the autonomy of the artist and liberates the work of art from the expectation that it needs to express or mean something.

In addition, Gilson's distinction is obviously and inextricably linked with a profound focus on the material existence of a work of art. One of the consequences of taking an aesthetic approach towards a work of art is that people will inevitably equate reproductions or images with the authentic object, rendering the original imperceptible to the eye and diminishing the experience. Thus a leading art historian recently defined Swennen's paintings, in all innocence, as 'final images'. Not only are paintings often experienced as 'images', but there is also the supposition that the goal of a painter is to make images. Gilson warned of the dangers of reproduction as early as 1957. He drew attention to the folly of reducing paintings to images, and the tendency to absorb the world of art in books. He called this the 'dictatorship of literature'. 'A printed word is still a word', he wrote, 'but a printed painting is not a painting.'[22] Moreover: 'To be part of a book, a painting must rid itself of its materiality.'[23]

Reproductions have always existed. But those who once looked at an engraving of a work of art did not forget that it was an engraving. And the least that can be said about black-and-white reproductions is that they do not pretend to be true to the actual colours. 'The style of painting is inseparable from the technique', wrote Gilson, 'we know that it is inseparable from matter. Eliminating the material comes close to negating the work of art. Any study of styles based upon reproductions of visual works is based upon ghosts.'[24]

This gives rise to the misunderstanding that art historical learning and knowledge of art are one and the same thing. An understanding of art is acquired through practical effort. 'Is the knowledge of art history', said Gilson, 'in any sense of the term, a knowledge *of* art? It certainly is knowledge *about* art, but its object is not art, it only is its history. (...) To limit ourselves to painting, it is not rare to see parents of goodwill undertake the artistic education of their children

22 Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1957, p. 227.
23 Étienne Gilson, *Peinture et réalité*, Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, Paris, 1972 (1998), p. 94.
24 Ibid: 96. Swennen also uses the word 'ghosts' for the Platonic enlargement of the perceived image of a painting, which according to certain intellectuals is supposed to have preceded it.

Untitled (La dent), 1991, oil on wood, 125 × 122 cm, 49 3/16 × 48 in.

as early as possible, dragging them to art galleries… This is not the beginning of an artistic education; it is the beginning of a historical education.'[25]

Authors such as Giorgio Agamben and Boris Groys have spoken in recent publications about the possibility of devising an approach to art that starts from the makers and the making, although they themselves have not risen to the challenge. 'Perhaps nothing is more urgent', writes Agamben, 'than a *destruction* of aesthetics that would, by clearing away what is usually taken for granted, allow us to bring into question the very meaning of aesthetics as the science of the work of art. The question, however, is whether the time is ripe for such a destruction, or whether instead the consequence of such an act would not be the loss of any possible horizon for the understanding of the work of art and the creation of an abyss in front of it that could only be crossed by a giant leap.'[26] I admire Agamben's work, but the idea of annihilating the aesthetic approach seems somewhat childish. Let us acknowledge, instead, that it would be wise to remember that we are always viewers and that, as such, we should occasionally endeavour to look at a work of art from the perspectives of the maker, the techniques and the materials used.

Painting whatever

On his fortieth birthday, Swennen decided to stop thinking of himself as a poet, and to consider himself a painter. The difference being, he told Bart De Baere, that poetry is fundamentally concerned with nostalgia, and thus with the past and transience. Painting, he continued, is about the future. I believe that we should take this statement literally, in the sense that, for Swennen, a painting is an object that needs to be lured into existence through actions. It does not *pre-exist*.[27]

For Philip Larkin, '… to write a poem is to construct a verbal device that would preserve an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever reads the poem.'[28] This was not the case for Mallarmé. His poems were trying to conjure new events. But what next? How much further can you go? Paul Celan, whose

25 Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1957, p. 90.

26 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999, p. 6.

27 One could, of course, say the same about a poem, and it goes without saying that this statement does not apply to every painting. But we understand, nevertheless, what is meant: Swennen endeavours to create new paintings without giving form, in a direct way, to prior experiences or thoughts.

28 Philip Larkin, *Required Writing. Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982*, Faber and Faber, London/Boston, 1983, p. 83.

thinking evolved from Mallarmé's, attempted to articulate atrocities via such hermetically sealed texts that it was impossible to imagine when reading them, or afterwards, that one had actually 'seen' these things. But then? Broodthaers made poems with objects.[29] And Swennen starts to write and draw upon canvas. He begins to create paintings. And he discovers and formulates a way of painting that is not focused on the past, but takes place in the present: 'Done with nostalgia, nostalgia is good for the young. (...) Painting interests me, because it has nothing to do with the past. It is more epic than lyrical. Each painting is a story that unfolds in the present.'[30] Only now. Just for today.

Later that same year, in October 1986, Swennen wrote a letter in which we read, '... succeed in painting whatever; that is the ideal. Whoever lacks experience in saying whatever, can interpret this statement as a witticism. Yet it is my ideal, the most difficult thing imaginable. (...) The key: premeditation is *always* an aggravating circumstance.'[31]

The idea to try to paint whatever reminds me of Nietzsche's 'discovery' of the eternal return. It is an absurd image, but it works. If you imagine that all of your actions will be repeated infinitely, they acquire an unexpected gravitas, perhaps even meaning. Some ideas seem to strengthen our grip on reality. Of course, you cannot create *ex nihilo*, but if you can find a way to enable objects to 'think' in your place, then you do not have to perpetually steer them...

The idea of painting whatever comes from the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who replaced Freud's 'ground-rule', whereby patients were requested to share with their analyst 'whatever they thought of', with an invitation 'to say anything, without fear of stupidity'. It was an exhortation based on the rationale that the source of a patient's discomfort is unknowable and unimaginable. We comprehend that this discomfort is intimately bound up with language, because we are speaking beings, but this is precisely the reason why language lets us down as a conscious and focused research tool. The analyst and the patient set sail on a sea of directionless, interwoven stories, shifting and inverting words, until something *happens*. Because the patient's conscious use of the language is insufficient, words are considered to be sounds that can have alternative meanings. They become hollow shells, which might lead to new experiences or insights through fresh associations and connections.

29 He began to do this in 1964, when he was forty years old.

30 Bart De Baere, *Walter Swennen. N'importe quoi*, in: Artisti (della Fiandra)/Artists (from Flanders), 1990, p. 89–92.

31 See facsimile on p. 47.

Swennen tries to make paintings that remain 'unimaginable' until they actually exist. He employs materials, tools, techniques, colours, shapes, inflated drawings, words and letters, and he strives, as far as practicable, to keep them separate from a 'meaning', thus deploying them as hollow forms or signifiers. For example, letters have beautiful shapes that are quite independent of the sound they represent, or the meaning that is associated with the sound. A triangle can be read as a flag, as a roof or a hat. A top hat can be read as an inverted 'T'.

p. 146
p. 224

'Mallarmé', explained Mannoni in *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène* (1969), 'was undoubtedly a poet, even though he had nothing to say; consequently, the poetry was to be found elsewhere, rather than in what was said. From the very outset, it was an experiment about language, not an existential one.' 'What makes literary criticism so awkward in the case of Mallarmé', he continued, 'is that the treasure is concealed behind the meaning (as he himself has literally said) while an "ingrained habit to want to understand" compels us to search for meaning behind the words. The treasure is the richness, the jewels and the pearls of language effects in all their unembellished glory—puns, assonance, ambiguity, metaphors, metonyms and so forth.'[32] And if there is still a clear meaning to be found within the poem, says Mannoni, then that is only in order to render it tolerable as a play with words. Thanks to this recognisable element, the poet and the reader can bid a satisfied farewell to one another, because they are both free to do as they please (create something or discover a meaning).[33]

In his essay *Poésie et pensée abstraite*, Valéry recounts an anecdote that Edgar Degas has conveyed about Mallarmé. One day, in a conversation with the poet, Degas had emphasised his admiration for Mallarmé's mastery by mentioning that he himself had a great many ideas for poems, but was unable to develop them. 'You do not make poems with ideas, my dear Degas', Mallarmé had replied, 'but with *words*'. Two pages later, Valéry describes how a phrase, which has cropped up in ordinary conversation, has acquired a life of its own in his head. 'It has obtained a value', he says, 'a value *at the expense of its limited meaning*'.[34]

According to Mannoni, one should not search for specific meanings in Mallarmé, which would be hidden behind the abstract and evocative use of language, but for the effects created by the word play, syntax, spelling and typography. Whoever clings to meaning will fail to find the treasure. This not only applies to Lacanian analysis, but also to art historians, and especially to the makers of paintings and poems.

32 O. Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1969, pp. 258–259.

33 Swennen thinks that, for the same reason, he adds drawings to his paintings, although he is not entirely sure.

Untitled (Denneboom P), 1993, oil on wood, 84 × 58 cm, 33 $^{1}/_{16}$ × 22 $^{13}/_{16}$ in.

Having been in analysis, Swennen immediately realised that his new 'method' (to try to paint whatever) was little more than a crutch, because it is very difficult to say or do whatever. Of crucial importance is that this idea provided him with a way of creating work that was wholly conceived from the point of view of the maker (as opposed to that of the spectator), freed from the so-called necessity to express, share or demonstrate something.

At the same time, we know that everything we do is inevitably coloured by the traces of our past, our education and our upbringing, the things we have seen, those we have rationalised or repressed, and the seemingly ordinary things that we might have forgotten.[35] All of our words, creations, actions, and even our inactions, speak of something, whether we like it or not. But this is hardly a problem, so long as we do not confuse their story with a so-called meaning or, worse, with an intention or an idea that might have been at their origin.

Provoked accidents

'For the artist', wrote Shklovski, 'the external world is not the content of a picture, but material for a picture. The famous Renaissance artist Giotto says: "A picture is—primarily—a conjunction of coloured planes." (...) The realistic painter Surikov used to say that the "idea" of his famous picture *The Boyar's Wife, Morozova* occurred to him when he saw a black bird on the snow. For him this picture was primarily "black on white."'[36] 'One of the pictures I did in 1946', Francis Bacon tells David Sylvester, 'the one like a butcher's shop picture, came to me as an accident. I was attempting to make a bird alighting on a field. And it may have been bound up in some way with the three forms that had gone before, but suddenly the lines that I'd drawn suggested something totally different, and out of this suggestion arose this picture. I had no intention to do this picture; I never thought of it in that way. It was like one continuous accident mounting on top of another.'[37] Time and time again, Bacon does his best to impress upon Sylvester that he is striving to paint likenesses, but without

34 Paul Valéry, *Variété V*, Gallimard, Paris, 1945, p. 141 and p. 143 (Valéry's italics).

35 The idea that artefacts bear unintentional traces of their creators, or the cultures from which they emerged, is probably derived from Nietzsche and Marx. Derrida elaborated this beautifully, and enjoyed unravelling stories in order to see what would ultimately remain. But it was also expanded upon by Freud and Lacan, who regarded our dreams, mistakes, jokes and even our linguistic products as providing secret access to repressed sexual drives and infantile images; forces that would govern our lives without us being aware of this.

36 Viktor Sjklovski, *De paardesprong*, De Haan, Haarlem, 1982, p. 127.

37 David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1975 (2009), p. 11.

using anatomically correct or mimetic elements. It is difficult, he explains, because you do not know what the searched for elements should actually look like.[38] Sylvester's resistance to this idea is strange, but we need not attach much importance to his attitude here. The bottom line is that a beautiful book exists, one in which a practitioner attempts to explain that it is the act of painting itself that leads to unpredictable results.

'Things always happen differently to what you expected.'[39] This statement, quoted occasionally by Swennen, is taken from a book by the German physician Viktor von Weizsäcker, who sought to develop a dynamic theory of medicine and to prove that a great many insoluble medical problems are linked to inadequate questioning which, in turn, leads to obsolete, paradoxical conclusions. A dynamic theory, he seems to say, would take account of the fact that physiological symptoms are dynamic themselves, because they respond (via the brain) to a world that is in constant movement and, in turn, is influenced by the physiological reactions in question. A scientist needs to think like a chess player, he states, a person who, even if he knows the rules, can never predict what will happen, and whose every move has an impact upon his opponent's possibilities.[40] Chess is perhaps an unduly static example and, furthermore, one that immediately conjures up negative connotations in an artistic context. Nevertheless, it encapsulates the idea of ever-changing unpredictability. A better illustration, and one which Swennen has quoted in a different context, is of someone who crosses the street and, in order to avoid an oncoming car, either slows or quickens his pace.[41] Unfortunately, both of these examples also describe conscious processes, while Von Weizsäcker, instead, is concerned with the countless invisible, impalpable and unconscious agents of perception that might influence physiological processes. Moreover, he is concerned about the way in which scientists unconsciously distort the subject of their research through the processes by which it is viewed and formulated. Scientists ought to be aware of the fact that they create reality through the way they measure it or think about it.[42]

38 Cf. ibid: 105.

39 Viktor von Weizsäcker, *Le cycle de la structure (Der Gestaltkreis)*. Translated from the German by Michel Foucault and Daniel Rocher, Desclée de Brouwer, Brussels, 1958, p. 124. Von Weizsäcker also cites this sentence. Considering various hypotheses with regard to certain forms of agnosia, he claims that reality, which is always more complex than can be predicted, demands greater scientific openness and an awareness of how a hypothesis can 'create' the observed reality.

40 'Organic movement is deliberate, which means that only the act determines the end result.' Ibid: 188.

41 'If I cross the street while a car is approaching, I don't gauge the speed of my passage according to a palpable sensory stimulus that affects my perception—it's not, therefore, a reflex—but in response to the prediction of what the car will do (...) The "stimulus" that holds me back from maintaining a certain speed is the foreseen collision, which never takes place.' Ibid: 172.

Both of these levels can naturally be found in painting. In the first place, at the moment when a painting is created from a series of mutually influencing observations, actions and events (for example, the way in which the paint behaves: flows, covers or dries), and subsequently when an outsider thinks about the said painting and, by reducing it to a simple relationship between cause and effect (original idea and result), for example, misapprehends the work.

'... Many things are only seen by humans after a learning process, and what we do not learn to see is indeed not seen', writes Von Weizsäcker. 'Painters and sculptors know more about this apprenticeship than physiologists.' At the same time, Weizsäcker continues, painters are unable to depict an epileptic seizure or a person who is suffering, because they do not know how a man moves in an objective sense (in physical or pathological terms). 'When simply looked at, the body and movement are revealed differently to the artist, the tailor, the gymnast and the physician.'[43] In these sentences we recognise Gilson's ideas about the phenomenological or aesthetic approach to art, and the difficulty of seeing things from the perspective of their objective 'cause'. Painters, gallery attendants, removal men, insurance clerks and art historians will all see a painting differently.

If you have not learned to look at a painting as a painter, then you cannot see it as a painter. The artistic manifestation remains invisible. This is what Von Weizsäcker teaches us. But, of course, this is no bad thing. You can also look at a painting as a bookworm who has never made anything with his hands. But you would need to remember that a large part of it falls outside your field of vision.

Whoever wishes to learn to see paintings from the standpoint of their makers, will encounter an obstacle, which we will now consider from the perspective of Von Weizsäcker's ideas about the perception of a world in motion by a moving observer. 'Many scholarly books have been written about poetry', said Czesław Miłosz, 'and those books find, at least in the West, more readers than the poems themselves. (...) A poet who wishes to compete with these mountains of erudition should pretend to have more self-knowledge than is allowed for poets. (...) Honestly, I have spent my whole life in thrall to a daemon, and how the poems he dictated came about, I have no idea.'[44]

42 'It is not the task of science to explain phenomena, but to produce reality.' Ibid: 187.

43 Ibid: 108–109.

44 Cited in Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1986, p. 3.

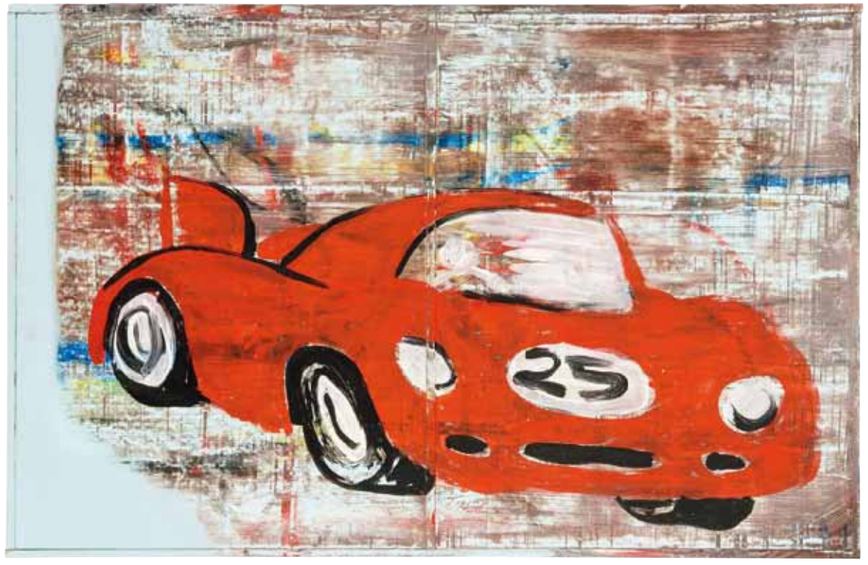
Cowboy magenta, 1997, oil on wood, 63 × 59 cm, 24 13/16 × 23 1/4 in.

Whenever we wish to consider the artistic existence of a work of art (the work considered from the standpoint of the maker and the making), we are hindered by the fact that an artist rarely *knows* exactly what happened during the creative process.[45] He or she, in some cases, might remember something. But independent of the question as to whether or not an experience is mutilated by the memory through the process of classyfying and 'saving' it, there is always the problem that—because it involves a multidimensional occurrence, both in psychological and physical terms (during which the material and the maker are equally active)—the creative moment can never be articulated without conferring a one-dimensional, linear and seemingly teleological character to it. One immediately discerns that ideas, intentions, decisions and criteria seem to have been involved, which might indeed all be present, even if only out of habit, but these play less of a guiding role than you might imagine, especially when, as an outsider, you think about it *afterwards*.

The painter does not know why he or she makes certain decisions. To make something happen? Or to avoid it? The man who slows or quickens his pace to avoid a car when crossing the street does so because of a collision that has only existed in his head. According to Swennen, Deleuze was interested in the fact that Cézanne noted that a painter's work mostly took place before putting a brush to the canvas, namely in determining what *will not* be painted. It goes without saying that a painter who wishes to make innovative work must constantly shy away from things (pictures, compositions, textures, connotations) that will suggest or impose a solution. You do not know what has to happen, but you know what you *don't* want to happen. 'A painting', says Swennen, 'changes in relation to a state that has already been reached, not to a state you want it to have in the future.' You react to what is already there, and hope to elicit an event that will carry you further along.[46]

45 '... paint is so malleable that you never do really know', Bacon tells Sylvester. 'It's such an extraordinary medium that you never do quite know what paint will do. I mean, you even don't know that when you put it on wilfully, as it were, with a brush—you never quite know how it will go on. (...) I don't really know how these particular forms come about. (...) I look at them probably from an aesthetic point of view. I know what I want to do, but I don't know how to do it. And I look at them almost like a stranger, not knowing how these things have come about and why have these marks that have happened on the canvas evolved into these particular forms.' David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1975 (2009), p. 93 and p. 100. Every artist is, of course, different. Swennen is not an admirer of Bacon. Nor does he want to know, beforehand, what he will do. Bacon's statement suggests that painting is partially about expansive, uncontrolled gestures, which tends to obscure the actual, sought after unpredictability. Despite this, Bacon's words are important.

46 An example of how one painting (see p. 146) might have come about: Swennen covers a predominantly dark red ground with a layer of yellow. Then he uses a brush with an onion-shaped tip to draw a vertical line in the wet paint. In the beginning, he uses a light touch; as he progresses, he applies a little more pressure and the line becomes broader.



Voiture rouge, 1998, oil on wood, 44 × 68 cm, 17 5/16 × 26 3/4 in.

Acting tactically (System D)

Herbie Hancock tells us how, during a tight concert in Stuttgart, he played a wrong chord in the middle of a solo by Miles Davis. Terrified, he covered his face with his hands. In that split second, he heard Davis hesitate for one second, and then start to play a series of notes that turned his 'wrong' chord into a right one.[47]

The idea of a multi-dimensional space in which the artist simultaneously moves, thinks and acts brings to mind the challenges faced by dancers, actors, musicians and singers during public performances. For they too are dealing with ever-changing, never entirely predictable factors: the character and potential of their instrument; the interpretation of the score or the text; the renditions by the other players, the architecture of the theatre, the reactions of the public and so forth. The pleasure in being part of a mobile space, which is affected by your own movements, decisions and actions, undoubtedly adds to the lure of any musical, dance or theatre performance, or sport, and perhaps also painting. Not in a 'gestural' way, which is what Sylvester seems to do when he compares Bacon's actions with the speed of a tennis player's arm (already moving before a decision has been made).[48] The resemblance between these several fields is not a matter of speed (or expression), but of a particular way of spatial thinking, which can also be a very slow process, as is usually the case with Swennen.

A painting by Swennen occurs as the result of a limited range of interventions, usually staggered over time, and in which each new action is a response to the results of the preceding actions and events. Born from a strategic desire to

Noticing this, he decides to let the line taper off towards the end. It is an elegant mark. There is a pleasing ridge along the left- and right-hand side. He has pushed aside the paint, in actual fact, so that the under-layer is partially revealed. To the right or left of the first line he paints a second, which begins slightly lower down. He decides to make it a little shorter. He repeats this action several times… Looking at the result, he thinks, 'well I never! An exotic fruit, but I don't know what it's called. It's a Chinese fruit.' And he adds a triangle to it, an appendage that makes it look like a head with a conical-shaped Asian hat. Finally, he paints the Chinese pictographs for the term 'Untitled' ('because he doesn't know the name of the strange fruit'). About the 'taking away' of paint: in *Abstrakzyon 1* (see p. 79), the contours of a 'little dog' are formed by large dots, which were created by using a houshold atomiser to blow away the uppermost layer of paint while still wet.

47 Swennen adores jazz. The correlation between this musical genre and his paintings is primarily based on the following three points: a contrapuntal or counter-rhythmic approach (e.g. Thelonious Monk), an expressionless, non-lyrical, almost neutral sound (e.g. Lennie Tristano) and improvisation around standards or popular tunes, in which the theme occasionally returns, rather like a recognisable image in a poem by Mallarmé, or a drawing (or a colour or a recognizable texture) in a painting by Swennen (e.g. Albert Ayler and Sonny Rollins).

48 '… you didn't play the shot, but the shot played you.' David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1975 (2009), p. 96.

Toroni monte en ballon, 2004, oil on canvas, 50.6 × 60.5 cm, 19 15/16 × 23 3/16 in.

provoke unimaginable and unpredictable accidents as part of a multidimensional interaction with the materials of matter and thought, this way of proceeding can only be tactical. The painter has initiated a practice that allows for accidents and manifests itself in a form of vigilance, one that ensures that the opportunities that present themselves are correctly appreciated. Swennen's paintings are built up slowly, and involve long periods of apparent inactivity, during which time he primarily reviews what has emerged. This slowness is not in contradiction with a tactical approach beyond preconceived ideas or intentions.

A pertinent example of this type of tactical thinking is *bricolage*[49], as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss: the accumulation of a wealth of objects, which are hoarded without any knowledge of what they might be needed for. Even though the use to which the stored object is ultimately put might be determined by an earlier function or a number of associated attributes, it is nevertheless deployed in a new and surprising manner. This entire process, in terms of both the collection and the use of objects, is tactical. Levi-Strauss employed this concept to explain the way in which myths were probably composed out of fragments of other, older cultures, where 'something that used to be a goal now assumes the role of means: the "signified" becomes the "signifier" and vice versa.'[50] Radical, tactical action sets no store by traditions, functions and meanings. It reacts. It puts things straight. It seeks solutions for self-inflicted problems. 'My paintings', said Swennen during a lecture in April 2016, 'evolve from repair to repair, from patch to patch'. 'When you paint', he told Bart De Baere in 1990, 'you should always respond to the things that penetrate from outside, something that you yourself established but a moment before. You respond to what is already there. You have brought it forth yourself, but it is there, and all you can do is enter into a dialogue with it. So it constantly changes.'[51]

Thinking back to Von Weizsäcker's image of a perception that influences and even shapes the observed reality (whether it concerns a pedestrian crossing the road, an observing physician, a painter at work or an art historian who scrutinises), it becomes clear that the arts have perhaps always developed in a

49 I do not agree with the assertion that *bricolage* is typical of Belgian art. Not only because it is regressive to characterise artists according to national traits, but also because of the derogatory connotations associated with the word *bricolage*. Looking through the eyes of Levi-Strauss, it would seem as though any artist, if he or she fails to depart from ideas or intentions, is inevitably making *bricolage*.

50 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Plon, Paris, 1962, pp. 28–29.

51 Bart De Baere, *Walter Swennen. N'importe quoi*, in: Artisti (della Fiandra) / Artists (from Flanders), 1990, pp. 89–92. At that time, Swennen was speaking about a mental image that preceded the painting, although he compared it, basing himself upon a remark by Sartre, to a dream image of the Parthenon, in which you cannot count the number of columns. 'But if you paint, you have to count the columns.'

tactical way. There are several good examples of this to be found in the book *How Music Works* by the musician David Byrne. He points out that certain people claim that African drums owe their unique shape to the availability of materials, which are inevitably poor, and the limited technical resources. Byrne, on the other hand, believes that the instruments are meticulously developed, constructed, handled and played in response to the physical, social and, in particular, acoustic environment. The percussion music that ensues is unsuitable for our stone churches with their echoes. In these places, however, we have developed a modal music that relies upon long, sustained notes. In a comparable way, Mozart's chamber music needed to compete with the noise generated by a crowd in a confined space. The only way of amplifying the sound, at the time, was to expand the size of the orchestra, which is exactly what happened. The ever-increasing scale of the concert halls that were built during the nineteenth century led to greater contrasts and the use of timpani in musical compositions (in order to reach listeners at the back of the auditorium). Around 1900, it became illegal to eat, drink or make noise during a classical concert. As a result, musicians could compose much softer passages. In all probability, the solos and improvisations associated with jazz music arose from the limited musical material available and the need to keep people dancing for a whole night. Also in jazz, the banjo and the trumpet started to play a greater role because they were louder. (Throughout this development, it is also evident that musical evolutions may also have triggered spatial modifications.) Great technological advances have been made in recording techniques since the late nineteenth century and these, in turn, have influenced the way that music sounds. Byrne, for example, notes that the MIDI technique was more suited to the digitisation of piano and percussion, than for guitar, brass and string instruments. As a result, composers began to create more melodies and harmonies using piano chords. Another key influence is related to the emergence of insulated sound studios and the habit of recording the musicians separately, and so on.[52]

52 Cf. David Byrne, *How Music Works*, Canongate, Edinburgh/London, 2013, pp. 15–27, 136, 148–154. Byrne also describes how he and Brian Eno made music on the basis of found spoken language that was subsequently added to music: 'Relying exclusively on found vocals also solved a content problem: the lyrics would clearly not be derived from autobiographical or confessional material. Often, what the vocalists were actually saying didn't matter to us at all. It was the sound of their vocals—the passion, rhythm, and phrasing—that conveyed the emotional content. (…) It doesn't matter whether or not something actually happened to the writer—or the person interpreting the song. On the contrary, it is the music and the lyrics that trigger the emotions within us, rather than the other way around. We don't make music—it makes *us*. Which is maybe the point of this whole book.' (p. 158 and p. 162). Byrne also pointed out that the texture (the sound, the arrangement or the groove) of music is always neglected, for example in relation to copyright, because it cannot be documented in any form of transcription (cf. p. 166).

In a comparable way, developments in the art of painting were influenced through the invention of portable, enlarged miniatures, the building of museums, art education, the art trade, photography, reproduction techniques and the invention of new materials. Thus, the creation of art books featuring coloured reproductions and, later, the creation of catalogues undoubtedly influenced the development of modern and contemporary art.[53] Watching films and looking at works of art on laptops and smartphones has led to new paintings. With regard to Swennen, we might also suggest the comic book as an influence, but more on this later. The painter stands, therefore, in the midst of a world in movement, a milieu that is affected by his or her own actions and those of everyone else. Yet the reaction to this world does not simply occur within a psychological, actual (as in the exhibition space) or virtual space (of books, television or the Internet). It also occurs, most specifically of all, in the physical space of the painting. It is there that the totality of a world in movement is reprised in a tangible shift, a tangible condensation, a tangible confluence, a tangible obfuscation or revelation, a tangible displacement of the physical, and thus mental, boundaries. Without the development and distribution of comic books, Swennen would not have been able to learn to draw by copying the characters contained within. And if he had not learned to draw by copying comic books, perhaps he never would have developed the habit of drawing with a clear line, or later gone in search for specific techniques through which to transform inflated drawings into paintings in a 'non-drawn' way.

The texture itself

If Mallarmé's poems are not composed of ideas, but words, then Swennen's paintings are made, in the first place, out of layers of paint that are applied to a support, most usually paper, wood, canvas or metal. It is impossible to compile an exhaustive list of supports, because Swennen, unlike some artists, does not limit himself to certain practices. The first work of art that he exhibited was a beer crate filled with painted bottles. In April 2016, he created a flag by painting upon a piece of rose-coloured fabric; a week later he painted a representation of a brick wall upon a section of a door. Recently, he was given a metal stove cover

53 See for example: 'That our vision of art has been transformed by photography is obvious. (…) But, and this is a greater influence, we can see the growth of a pictorial and sculptural imagination which is positively attuned to photographic transposition. (…) One often wonders whether the ultimate hope of a painter or sculptor today, apart from having his works accessible in a museum, would not be to see them diffused in photographs and comprehensive picture books. (…) The catalogue has become an aesthetic force.' Edgar Wind, *Art et Anarchie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1985, pp. 102–105 and p. 186.

Apple & Pear, 2005, oil on wood, 60.5 × 93 cm, 23 13/16 × 36 5/8 in.

as a gift because he is fond of painting on them; others have given him failed paintings and wine crates. Ten years ago, he told me that he first used to rub metal stove lids with garlic because he had heard from a restorer that this would facilitate the adhesion of the oil paint. One of Swennen's stovetop paintings comprises a drawing that was made with an electric, metal brush. And so on...

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In recent years, Swennen has also taken to painting with acrylic paint, a medium that rivals oils in terms of the range of fascinating effects that can be achieved. The greatest advantage of acrylic is that it dries quickly. As a consequence, there are things that can be done in this medium that cannot be achieved in oil paint. Thus Swennen has made, in recent years, several paintings that feature a type of stain with sharp edges; a shape that is created by removing a puddle of paint that has started to dry. Because the edges dry first, a sort of contour emerges that can be viewed as an abstract form, or a 'window' within the painting. This technique makes it also possible to give letters a differently coloured edge, one that cannot be obtained in any other way: you paint over them using acrylic paint, allow this to dry for a few minutes, and then remove it again. The shorter drying time also makes it possible to take risks that, in the past, were less obvious. Swennen recently obtained a beautiful sky-blue surface by first coating a canvas with Payne's grey and then painting over it with zinc white mixed with a touch of titanium white. In order to obtain a gradated effect in the original, dark grey surface, he tilted the painting four times: the paint flowed slowly towards the centre, becoming thinner and more transparent at the edges. Swennen likes to let the paint stream slowly over the surfaces of his works because it triggers effects that cannot be foreseen (although he tries to avoid drips, which have an expressive connotation). He told me how pleased he was with the background of the painting *To Mona Mills* (2015), because he had managed to paint a kind of chaos, which is impossible. He had created it by placing the canvas on the ground and applying paint and water, which he subsequently attempted to mix using a squeegee, all the while taking great care to minimise the amount of water and paint that trickled over the edge of the canvas.

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A technique that Swennen has developed for the transfer of drawings or letters onto a painting is to first apply the paint with the brush, or directly from the tube, onto a plastic sheet. Using this sheet, the image is then printed onto the painting. The first painting in which this technique was used contained a crude representation of a spruce-fir that had been applied with a painter's knife. Because he wished to add a letter to the uneven surface, which would be nigh on impossible using a brush, he first painted the letter onto a sheet of very thin, flexible plastic film. Using a wad of fabric, he was able to press this film into the chinks of the underlying paint. Not only are the effects of this printing technique always different, they are also inexplicable if you don't know how they were made.

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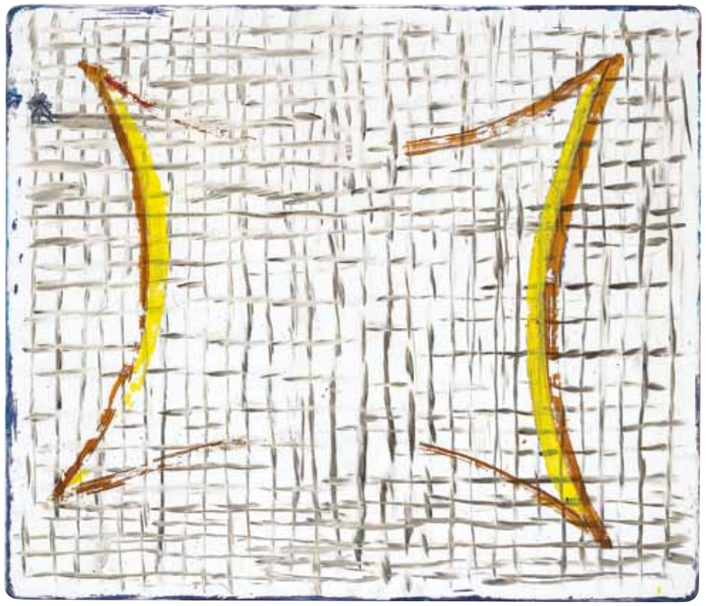

Losange, 2006, oil on metal, 41 × 48 cm, 16 1/8 × 18 7/8 in.

Another specific texture in Swennen's oeuvre stems from his fondness for painting with a painter's knife, a technique that he borrowed from Claire Fontaine, with whom he took painting lessons for three years, beginning in 1962. Fontaine painted schematised landscapes in the style of Nicolas de Staël in which a tree, for example, is depicted by a rectangular green surface that has been smeared onto the canvas with a knife. From her, Swennen learned that paint can be applied with the knife and then subsequently worked with a paintbrush.[54] In Swennen's paintings, the painter's knife is often used to create a layer which clearly distinguishes itself from the other layers and, via its deviating texture, demonstrates the collage-like, interwoven structure of the painting. In addition, this thicker layer, no matter how it is applied (whether it is dabbed, patch by patch, or smeared in a sweeping gesture), can also provide a diverting optical effect. In *Blitz* (2015), a broken yellow stripe, reminding some of lightening, visually comes to the fore. Because this stripe was applied with a trowel between two parallel strips of tape, it bears a close resemblance to the actual tape, which gives rise to an attractive sculptural reversal that is as deceptive as it is funny. For another recent painting an effect was created by repeatedly cleaning the painter's knife against the canvas using broad, sweeping gestures. Executed in different types of red, the result was immediately reminiscent of Diana's red tunic in *The Death of Actaeon* by Titian (National Gallery, London). Later, as is Swennen's wont, he tempered this stunning effect by applying a layer of white.[55] The work was called *Transformations* (2016), referring to the habit to whiten shop windows during a renovation.

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To date, Swennen has only used the painter's knife to apply oil paint, principally because he has not yet found a satisfying technique to thicken acrylic paint. This brings us to another textural difference in his paintings, which has nothing to do with the manner in which the paint is applied, but with the employed paint itself. In addition to the difference between oil and acrylic paint, we must also take account of the numerous additives that can lend the paint a glossier, duller, coarser, smoother, more fluid or viscous texture. The addition of oil

54 Rembrandt used a painter's knife to evoke, for example, the texture of textile. Looking at the dress in *The Jewish Bride* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), I noticed that he had also used a painter's knife or palette knife to scrape away paint. Titian also painted with a painter's knife. Regarding the latter, I have also read that one of the reasons why *The Death of Actaeon* (National Gallery, London) is considered unfinished is because of the absence of 'scumbles': small, dry dabs of paint that the artist applied to the surface of the painting with his fingers (as a finishing touch). Cf. Nicholas Penny, *The Sixteenth Century Italian Paintings. Volume II. Venice 1540-1600*, National Gallery Company, London. Distributed by Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 248–252.

55 The same thing happened to the previously very attractive painting *Red & Green* (see p. 120). I have known Swennen to destroy wonderful paintings on several occasions, simply because he considered them to be too exquisite, as though their beauty might prevent us from seeing them.

Smoking, 2006, oil on canvas, 120 × 100 cm, 47 1/4 × 39 3/8 in.

makes the paint shinier, whereas white spirit deadens its sheen. One of the new qualities of acrylic is that you can dilute it with water and use it to make transparent layers (glazes), which enable the artist to gradually build up his paintings in a quest for the perfect value of a tone. In some of Swennen's works, coffee was added to the white background in order to render it more mottled. Sometimes, he has added ink, gouache, cigarette ash or dust from the vacuum cleaner to the paint. (I quote from memory, this is by no means an exhaustive list.) When, in 2006, he started to paint on top of another artist's abandoned paintings (paper collages on canvas), he attacked them with a broom. As a result, small scraps of paper ended up being mixed into the semi-abraded paint.

As a final example of the textural differences that Swennen makes use of in his paintings, I would like to discuss the work entitled *Pirate* (2007), which is based upon a gouache that he painted when he was ten years old. The work consists of three individual panels. The two panels on the left-hand side are made up of two different 'backgrounds' that were waiting in the studio. There are always 'backgrounds' ('des fonds') in abeyance. Often, they are so beautiful that you hope the artist will leave them untouched. In this particular case, he felt so inclined, and came up with the perfect solution upon noticing that, when placed together, the two works were the same length as the right-hand panel (a piece of board with unusual proportions for a painting). When we take a closer look at the latter, we notice that certain sections of the 'drawing', such as the lines that suggest the lapels of the jacket, are not painted, but created by leaving them unpainted. This does not hold true for the pirate's shirt collar, however, which is a touching invention of the young boy. The contours of the top of the boots, on the other hand, are indeed 'drawn', while their surface is spared: another pleasing reversal, which reminds us of the fact that Swennen studied etching at the academy. The drawing contains a somewhat awkward but poignant spatial suggestion, which is enhanced by the splayed legs, the semi-obscured right arm, and the sabre that runs behind the legs. We also discern three solid surfaces, which together provide an additional, haptic or pictorial space: the yellow hilt, the white area of the face and the pale blue 'background', the latter of which was painted around the figure afterwards. Finally, there are the small black discs that float before the pirate, and which were applied to the places where the board, in the area occupied by the figure, contained knots; yet another example of haptic, pictorial depth. Swennen told me that these black spots reminded him of bullet holes, which also allows us to perceive the figure as a paper human target on a shooting range.[56] Thanks to the material reason for the placement of the black disks, however, we understand that this final 'image content' is not what lies at the basis of the painting's construction. It is the result of a series

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56 Ibid: 49.

of successive decisions that are linked to the creation of a beautiful *matière*, the transformation of an existing drawing that possessed certain physical (and emotional) qualities, the application of graphic reversal techniques in terms of transferring the drawing, the creation of a haptic effect through the addition of areas in white, yellow, light blue and black, and the completion of the painting by uniting three different panels.

Figuration and abstraction

In 1990, Swennen explained to Bart De Baere that he had struggled for some time with the concepts of figuration and abstraction, but had reached the conclusion that it was a false problem 'because a painting is always an image of a painting. No matter what it depicts, it is always about a painting.'[57] Nowadays, I struggle to understand what he might have meant by that first sentence. I think we can say that things were still confused. In a text from 1994,[58] written after several conversations with the artist, I argued that Swennen created paintings in which figuration and abstraction could meet, and which abolished the so-called differences between the two approaches. In 2007, I refined this further by suggesting that this encounter was made possible through the un-modelled, perspective-less space that is specific to Swennen's paintings.[59] I still believe this to be true, even today, although I would no longer express it in such a way; simply because the terms are too restrictive to help us think about painting. They prevent us from seeing, in the first place, that Swennen weaves textures, and that it is the materials he uses, be they rectangles, drawings or letters, which primarily determine where to apply paint. That these drawings and letters might also mean something, and can evoke images, narratives, thoughts and feelings within the viewers (and Swennen), and at the same time form part of the painting's genesis, is equally important. But the terminological distinction between figuration and abstraction causes us to forget that it *always* boils down to material additions. All that the distinction between figuration and abstraction means, ultimately, is that one thing is recognisable and 'says' something while the other does not. But colours, shapes and textures can also say something; they just seem to speak less loudly.

57 'Un tableau est toujours une image d'un tableau. Quoi qu'il y ait dessus, c'est un tableau.' Bart De Baere, *Walter Swennen. N'importe quoi*, in: Artisti (della Fiandra)/Artists (from Flanders), 1990, p. 89–92.

58 *En avant la musique!* In: Hans Theys, *Walter Swennen*, MUHKA, Antwerp, 1994.

59 Cf. Hans Theys, *Congé annuel*, L'usine à stars, Liège, 2007, p. 52.

Composition

Some painters try to obtain balanced compositions, while other painters try to counter any balanced composition that comes too easily. Swennen endeavours to lure into existence compositions he could not possibly have conceived in advance, by applying both intrinsic and external parameters. If we look at *Spider (small)* (2014) and *Spin van Marius* (Marius' Spider, 2014), two paintings based on a square drawing by Swennen's grandson Marius, we see that the first time he transferred the drawing to the square cover of a cooker. The second time the part of the canvas that falls outside the square surface was painted blue. How unexpected to find this surface at the top of the painting! In *Stolen Name* (2016) the vertical lines and then the west-sloping lines of letters were overpainted. (Hence the image of the compass needle.) In *Le diamant de Juju* (2016) a drawing is festooned with those short lines used to add force to an extraordinary apparition in a comic strip. Some of these little lines are used as borders of the last layer of paint. In the painting *In the Kitchen* (2016) the proportions of the canvas don't correspond to the proportions of the imitated drawing (a found object). Consequently, the reproduced drawing overlaps with the painted, red border, which follows the proportions of the canvas. The resulting effect reminds us of careless printing. Thus, many compositions comply with laws or agreements which fall outside the field of aesthetics. But not all of them. In *Mature* (2016) a certain yellow colour appears three times: once as the imitation highlight of an abstract, oval form, once as an oval form and once as a strip of colour. When I point to the amusing highlight and the equally amusing recurrence of the colour in the strip of colour, the painter tells me that Claire Fontaine believed every colour used should reappear somewhere else in the same painting. The oval, he added, was the simplest, non-angular form he could make if he wanted to obtain a nicely edged area with a painter's knife.

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In *Scrumble 2* (2006), the painter's knife was used to hide the bad parts of a painting (a dirty criss-cross of different coloured lines).[60] The resulting composition is reminiscent of the way in which gallery walls are repaired after an exhibition: all of the holes are filled and hidden under a smooth, rectangular plane. Because this 'composition' is controlled by an unpremeditated, but ultimately inevitable structure, Swennen calls this an 'autogenetic' composition.[61]

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60 Another painting from 2006, *Red Cloud* (see p. 198), comprises a pink surface composed of intersecting painted stripes. The contours of this surface were formed by using white to paint over all of the individual lines that detached themselves from the background. In *Scrumble 2* the reverse happened, in the sense that the dirty intersections were covered and the separate lines were saved.

61 Cf. Hans Theys, *Congé annuel*, L'usine à stars, Liège, 2007, p. 48.

Scrumble 2, 2006, oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm, 39 3/8 × 31 1/2 in.

Thus we see how the particular state of a painting (coloured criss-crossing lines that form dirty junctions), combined with a certain technique (the application of paint with a painter's knife), can result in a non-random, new composition.

Drawings

Many of Swennen's paintings consist of enlarged reconstructions of found or self-made drawings, of which the figurative elements are usually described, even by the artist himself, as 'images'. I suspect he does this because, of course, they are not drawings: they are not drawn, but reproduced with paint. Some authors think that the drawings are derived from comic books, but this is rarely the case. Nor can you say that they resemble 'comic-book drawings' because, after all, not every comic book is drawn using clear lines. The drawings used by Swennen nearly always possess great linear clarity (without shading or shadows), and often feature solid silhouettes. One of the overriding characteristics is their lack of perspective or modelling, so that they seem to exist within a flat space. If the drawings depart from this formula, then it is because the very first paintings are an exception to this 'rule' (see for instance the reproduction on p. 164) or because the used drawing was found and contains a particular flaw. For example *Nan's Still Life* (2015), which is based on a drawing by Swennen's wife, in which the splitting of the word 'français' into syllables indicates that the draughtsman was thinking instead of looking. (As a comment, Swennen added a blunt shadow.) Some drawings come from book covers, game boxes, stickers, packaging and so on. Others are derived from doodles or related, small-scale works on paper.

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Certain writers enumerate and organise these drawings by theme, in much the same way that others add up the number of metaphors in the work of Mallarmé. Of this, Mannoni writes: 'The mistake of thematic analysis lies in (...) the fact that images are approached in the first place, as a signified, and only afterwards as a signifier, when it's too late.' And a few pages later he adds: 'We cannot imagine how thematic analysis (...) can give an account of irony.'[62] Some exegetes see, for example, an image of a king holding a lit cigarette in the vicinity of his genitals. Others see a flat drawing based on a playing card that has been embellished with the depiction of two moving objects: a burning, glowing cigarette and a plume of smoke. Some people see, for example, a ghost. Others see a figure whose non-painted eyes offer a glimpse of the

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62 O. Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1969, p. 261.

Red Cloud, 2006, oil on canvas, 120 × 100.5 cm, 47 1/4 × 39 9/16 in.

painting's background. As I mentioned above, in a note, Swennen says today that he might add 'images' to his paintings to satisfy the viewer, so that he can go on painting (just like Mallarmé who, according to Mannoni, introduced recognisable images into his work just to be able to play with words). This remark, however, ignores the role played by the drawings and letters in the creation of the painting, as coincidental but essential indicators of where to apply the paint. In this sense, it concerns very literal 'signifiers': empty shapes that can be filled with colours and textures.

Of course, none of this means that the drawings cannot, or may not, mean anything to the artist and viewer. It is precisely this unusual convergence of forms, textures and meanings that lends Swennen's paintings their richness. What it amounts to, however, is the complex interweaving of all these layers, and the continuous attempts to do this in a new way for each painting. Each painting is trying to be different; each painting strives to disclose, once more, how it is made; each painting endeavours, at the same time, to remain beyond our reach.

Colour

Swennen mainly uses black, white, grey, yellow, light blue, red and variations of red, such as orange, English red and brown. Very often he mixes these colours with small amounts of other colours to make them slightly impure. 'There are no primary colours', he once told me. In practice, this means that if a type of paint contains a shade that is reminiscent of the primary colours, it will suffice. In retrospect, you could say that Swennen mostly paints with the colours of Mondrian, although he has replaced dark blue with light blue. I write 'in retrospect' because this was probably not the intention, and perhaps more the result of a desire to use mainly the primary colours (or shades that resemble them). Sometimes, when finishing a painting, he spoils the applied colours. *Two Egyptians* (2015) was finished by adding colours directly from the tube, mixing them with water and afterwards cleaning the canvas, scrubbing more around the figures. The red spot resembling a love bite was an unforeseen result of this action. A few years ago, Swennen set himself other boundaries by defining a colour spectrum, the shades of which he would always use in the same order. This spectrum was hung on the studio wall in the form of a strip, to remember the order. It is typical of how he works: he defines rules, endeavours to apply them and then cheats. The use of a limited number of colours lends great consistency to his oeuvre, which makes a vivid and uncluttered impression. It is precisely these limitations that facilitate an impressive, but readable diversity.

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Pirate, 2007, oil on canvas and wood (3 parts), 200 × 170 cm, 78 3/4 × 66 15/16 in.

Words and letters

In earlier texts, I pointed out that when Swennen was five, his parents decided to speak another language and send him, accordingly, to a different school. This meant that, from one day to the next, his world became incomprehensible. In all probability, the spoken language must have made an absurd and hostile impression upon him. And at school, the written language probably seemed very strange, or at least at first, when he was unable to link the written characters with a familiar sound or meaning. These circumstances have had an undeniable impact upon his relationship with language, but I do not think they provide a sufficient explanation for his virtuosity.[63]

'The Belgian is afraid of conceitedness', Simon Leys writes in an essay on the 'belgitude' of Henri Michaux, 'especially the conceitedness of spoken or written words. Hence his accent, and the famous way of speaking French. The secret is this: Belgians think that words are conceited.'[64] While Leys has a point, he is also mistaken. What seems to characterise the Belgians (and not only French-speakers, but also the Flemish with their supposedly droll kind of Dutch) is probably common to all people who speak or write a language which, in a different geographical location, is linked to a dominant culture (with its specific social, economic and political influence). This place need not be nearby, like France and the Netherlands in the case of the Belgians. I suspect that some English-speaking inhabitants of North America, in centuries past, deliberately rejected the standard linguistic norms in their use of the language, just as today, Canadians, Australians, and English-speaking South Africans and Indians will resist the influence of American English. Wherever an element of language is associated with social, economic, political or cultural dominance, a deviant version will emerge. This is certainly true in the ghettos of the United States, also

63 We can speculate endlessly about this, but will never pinpoint the truth. Everyone has a tainted, splintered, disturbed and collage-like self-awareness, but not everybody is an artist. A fractured personality is not a sufficient condition to be an artist.

64 Simon Leys, *Le studio de l'inutilité*, Flammarion, 2012, p. 18. Leys' dislike of pompous wording seems to permeate his entire thinking. In another place, where he explains his pseudonym is borrowed from a fictional character created by Victor Segalen, he immediately adds that if he had known that Segalen's novel would be rediscovered, he would have opted for a 'banal Flemish patronymic', such as Beulemans or Coppenolle. At the end of an essay on Lu Xiaobo and the interdependence of the Chinese party and the mafia, Leys wonders why Belgian diplomats only dared to apologise unofficially for the diplomatic abuses that were meted out to his sons. He should have been less sophisticated and humble, I think, and have opted for a more pompous pseudonym. Finally, since we are talking about him, I would also like to point out that Leys, like Hannah Arendt, believed that Nabokov's best work is his book on Gogol. I wholeheartedly endorse this view for there is no better writing on the primacy of form in literature. Ibid: 120 and 156.

in Brittany, Alsace, Provence, the French Basque Country and French-speaking Canada. A deviating use of language expresses a different set of values.

When Swennen speaks, you sometimes hear that his Belgian accent becomes more pronounced. In sociolinguistics, the act of switching to a language variant that deviates more from the norm is described as downward divergence. It is used, for instance, to emphasise the pedantry of your interlocutor. Swennen, who is fascinated by argot (as in French translations of American crime novels, for example), is annoyed by the fact that his French-speaking acquaintances listen to French radio stations. Deviating language is not irrational, it just gives shape to a different set of values. What Leys noted is a phenomenon that undoubtedly exists in China as well, but which we cannot hear. You can probably only hear it in your own language, just as you can only truly grasp literary works that are written in your mother tongue. And herein lies the truth of Leys' remark, for a poetic language can only be appreciated as a deviation from a standard language. Every literary language is perverse, capricious or, at the very least, unusual.

What Swennen does with words is wonderful. He allows them to collide and merge, he isolates or suppresses them, turns them upside down or mirrors them (or mirrors only the letters, which remain in the usual order). He deploys all of the techniques described by Freud and Shklovski: shifting, inversion, duplication, repetition and condensation.[65] He uses words for their sound and for their shape, and he uses them because of their meaning. He lets them turn and tilt, he uses and abuses them, he tells lies and he says what he thinks. Language has become form: a collection of unreliable sounds that can always mean something else, as in our dreams, but also an almost endless collection of typographies and characters (Roman, Cyrillic, Chinese…). We see the words, and we read them. We think we see words, but in fact we see coloured surfaces that no 'abstract' painter could ever imagine or justify. *Connard* (2014) contains three invectives, in which some of the letters are upside down or mirrored. 'I thought that if I made the words a little less legible', Swennen told me, 'I could buy the painting

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65 In the 1970s, Swennen made a photographic novel about a lady with a typewriter, which only contained one sentence: 'Je m'en vais' ('I'm leaving'). A recurring figure in his writings was Latham Scholes (1819–1890), the inventor of the first practical typewriter and the QWERTY keyboard. When I asked Swennen, some years ago, if he liked the work of Serge Gainsbourg, he replied that he could muster some appreciation for the song *Laetitia*, which opens with the following lines: 'On my portable Remington/I wrote your name Laetitia/Elaeudanla Téïtéïa'. A typewriter is ultimately a very suitable instrument by which to create concrete poetry, because mistakes come easily. 'I also like typewriters because they allow the positioning of a character a little bit too far to the left or the right' Swennen told me, 'as if it were an attack by Thelonious Monk'.

a few seconds of extra time during which it could prove itself. Because when people recognise an image in a painting, or read a word, they walk straight on past. Now, the husband will pause for a few seconds to decipher the words, so his wife will have just enough time to poke him in the ribs with her elbow and whisper: "Look at the beautiful colours!"'

Whoever looks at these fragmented remains of our languages might consider them to be a form of resistance to rationality and related, life-threatening moral forces. This would reflect the views of Freud, who believed that fulfilling sexual experiences were incompatible with the conditions of civilisation, making it mandatory for our unconscious urges to resort to secrecy (for instance, by hiding the truth in illogical jokes). If we look at portmanteaus such as 'famillionaire' (Heine quoted by Freud) or 'beggar-millionaire' (Shklovski) they might indeed seem illogical but, in my view, they are constructed according to laws which are also used by 'rational thought', or any other form of productive thinking. They are the result of the same 'condensation' that leads Francis Bacon to tell Sylvester that Michelangelo and Muybridge have become one and the same artist in his mind. Ultimately, even the laws of nature, which are amongst the highest fruits of rational thought, are forms of condensation, because they bring together at least two different physical units in the form of an equation. It does not matter how you arrive at an idea or a formulation, so long as the thought or formulation bears fruit.

If we do not consider these language games to be an irrational opposition to reason and morality, but as an unreliable, stubborn, irritable, stained, tainted, messy, quirky, idiosyncratic and independent way of thinking that, above all, is inextricably linked to the material concepts of the painting, then we see a connection with the philosophy of Max Stirner, from whom Swennen recently gained a new motto: '*Mein Widerwille bleibt frei*' or 'My disinclination remains free.'[66] In contrast to general reasoning, Stirner defended the right to a personal 'unreason' which was real to him, because he himself felt real. Heralding Gombrowicz's plea for immaturity and opposition to Form, he wrote: 'The thought of right is originally my thought; or, it has its origin in me. But when it has sprung from me, when the "Word" is out, then it has "become flesh", it is a fixed idea. Now I no longer get rid of the thought; however I turn, it stands before me. Thus men have not become masters again of the thought "right", which they themselves created; their creature is running away with them.'[67]

66 Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, Verso, Londen, New York, 2014, p. 182.

67 Cf. Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1971, p. 137.

Leeuw, 2007, oil on canvas, 169.8 × 149.8 cm, 66 13/16 × 58 15/16 in.

Swennen's recalcitrant language can also be set against the background of Lacan's belief that we are made of language, and that language has alienated us from both our bodies and the world. Man would be a 'language-being' ('*parlêtre*') with a hopeless, irreparably distorted sexuality, exiled in a world of unreliable, manipulative words, which cannot touch the core of reality, *le réel*. Reading Lacan is a wonderful, amusing adventure, and it is not without significance that Swennen has been influenced by him, but I prefer not to delve into this here.

About flat paintings and pictorial space

The lack of modelling and (correctly applied) perspective in the drawings used by Swennen would seem to suggest that he wishes to create flat paintings. Strictly speaking, this is not the case. His paintings are not all-over or polyfocal. Nor do they evoke a flat image that seems to hover in front of the canvas, as wished for by Greenberg. So what does, in fact, happen? The drawings themselves are flat, constituting one of the planes that are combined into a painting. Sometimes these planes seem to situate themselves at different distances from the viewer, thus creating a pictorial space, but at other times not.

In his book on Bacon, Deleuze distinguishes between the optical and haptic use of colour. Optical use of colour segues from light to dark, includes shades (values) of the same tone, and is used in what Greenberg called 'sculptural' painting (which reached its apogee in the seventeenth century). Haptic use of colour does not involve shades of the same tone, but juxtaposes different colours in the knowledge that their 'cold' or 'warm' character will create an impression of lightness or darkness, and closeness or distance.[68]

Because Swennen's paintings lack perspectival elements and do not rely upon the optical use of colour (values of the same tone, shadows), unless as a joke (for example, the shadow of a letter, or the shadows in found drawings which are usually selected because they contain a flaw), one might say that his work is an innovative variation on the artistic traditions that consciously renounced 'modelling' (by way of lighting effects) as an approach to reality, and that 'went on reducing the fictive depth of painting'.[69] Greenberg noted that such a deliberate negation of the 'realistic' approach had only occurred twice: first in Byzantine

68 You can also model with this technique, as Cézanne has demonstrated, but that is not at issue here. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1981 (2002), p. 131.

69 Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, Thames and Hudson, Londen, 1973, p. 155.

Le congé annuel de H.T., 2007, oil on canvas, 100 × 120 cm, 39 3/8 × 47 1/4 in.

art and, secondly, as a result of the radical, late-Impressionist paintings (including those by Monet) that can be considered as the first 'all-over' paintings. According to Greenberg, painters such as Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Klee were the first to adopt this approach, with Mondrian following later. But since it aimed 'to reaffirm the flatness of pictorial space'[70], the approach was only fully realised, in his view, in the work of the painters that he personally championed such as Pollock, Rothko, Newman and Still.

Some people claim that Mondrian strove to make 'flat' paintings: works in which, to the eyes of the viewer, the blue and red surfaces do not appear to recede or advance but, thanks to the addition of a black or grey grid, all of the coloured fields appear to situate themselves at the same pictorial depth. I do not know if this was actually Mondrian's intention because I have not read his writings, but it is undeniably true that the red and blue do indeed seem to be at the same depth in some paintings. For Greenberg, however, Mondrian was but a precursor, whose work but signalled all-over painting: 'Dominating and counter-posed shapes, as provided by intersecting straight lines and blocks of color, are still insisted upon, and the surface still presents itself as a theater or scene of forms rather than as a single, indivisible piece of texture.'[71]

Greenberg did not appreciate paintings in which certain areas stood out and thereby resembled a 'figure', or those in which patches of colour were strewn around in a contrapuntal way. Nor did he like paintings that seemed to retreat into the wall, like a window. He preferred paintings in which the 'pictorial effect' was uniformly dispersed and appeared to hover in front of the canvas.

If we use Greenberg's criteria as a way of better understanding Swennen's paintings, we find that the artist does, in fact, play with all of these elements. The absence of modelling and (correctly applied) perspective might create the impression that Swennen wants to make flat paintings, but they often contain prominent elements that seem to leap to the fore. He does not use modelling or perspectival depth, but evokes pictorial depth through the haptic use of colours (tonal contrasts). In a conversation that was published in 2007, he says: 'I have always found the condemnation of illusion and depth to be deplorable. Even a blank canvas has depth. The good thing about painting is that you can decide whether or not you want to utilise that depth.'[72] In April 2016, when Swennen and I looked at an unfinished painting that contained four different shades of white, it seemed obvious that one of these, an ivory-toned hue, came more to the fore than the others. I asked Swennen if this was intentional, and whether

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70 Ibid: 168.
71 Ibid: 155.
72 Hans Theys, *Congé annuel*, L'usine à stars, Liège, 2007, p. 52.

Stark wie ein Stier, 2008, oil on canvas, 150.4 × 135.5 cm, 59 3/16 × 53 3/8 in.

he had observed the effect. Twice he answered negatively. If anything, he was annoyed by the question. Didn't I know that paintings are flat? And that they have a texture like puff pastry?

The point is that Swennen will always oppose the habit of confusing the result of a practice with a so-called intention. It is not because a finished painting contains a certain image that this image found itself at the origin of the painting. The same applies to texture and pictorial space. It is certainly enlightening to see Swennen's paintings from the stance of Greenberg, but at the same time we must realise that what we see has never been pursued by the painter as part of a programme. He has always tried to paint whatever. Rejecting any kind of programme in terms of content or personal expression,[73] Swennen has devised a free way of working in order to come up with unprecedented paintings. Even if we have the impression that he is 'playing', this is not the result of an intention. His paintings are not anti-perspectival or anti-modelling in a programmatic way, but they are, in a very concrete sense, pro-painting. They are not the result of intentions, but the results of a number of parameters that he uses to construct his painting-objects.

What are these parameters? Actually, it mainly comes down to habits. In 1990, he told Bart De Baere that his drawings remind us of comic books because he learned to draw by copying them. For the specific 'space' of his paintings, it seems essential that Swennen uses a clear line and makes line drawings that do not suggest volume (the opposite of Chinese painting). But he himself will never call it a clear line. He will never formulate it as an objective. It is simply a habit that can be put to good use.

To me, Swennen's paintings reflect[74] upon the possibilities of flat paintings and pictorial space. This thinking is free. It is not bound to intentions, stylistic principles, or a programme. It stems from the radical principle of painting whatever, from a number of habits and from a tactical approach that allows for provoked accidents.

73 'Le réel', or that which cannot be represented, thus takes the form of both Swennen's 'personality' and the paintings themselves, which remain beyond our reach. The paintings double the unknowability of the world. They try to escape any meaning.

74 'And that is what bothers me about painting: through its materials, its forms, something is thinking and I have only words to talk about it.' Daniel Arasse, *Histoires de peintures*, Gallimard, 2004, p. 26

Still Life

In Swennen's work we find moving cars, smouldering cigarettes, falling men and sprinting athletes. I always see these figures as funny allusions to the impossibility of representing movement in a painting.

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Malcolm Morley—a painter whom Swennen admires (for instance because of the white borders, which indicate that he does not depict three-dimensional space in his work, but two-dimensional images)[75]—describes his paintings, which are based on models, postcards and other pictures, as still lifes.[76] Gilson considers the still life to be a genre 'in which painting reveals its very essence and reaches one of its points of perfection.'[77] He describes *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* by David as an unsatisfactory attempt to suggest movement. But probably, he continues, this was never the artist's intention. Accepting the immobility of paintings, he probably sought to evoke an illusion of movement through a play with lines: not the depicted people move, but the composition. This effect is even more pronounced, says Gilson, when we compare David's painting with Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda*. 'In this masterpiece', he writes, 'there is hardly a trace of motion left. Time seems to have come to a standstill. Human beings themselves, however well painted they may be, are only second in importance to the patterns of the lines and to the balance of the masses.'[78]

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When I recently asked Swennen to elucidate two paintings that contain the image of a propeller, he said that they were still lifes, because they were based on an existing fan. In *Schroef* (2014), we discern a number of white spots along the edge of the blades. Why are they there? Ruminating upon the existence of left- and right-handed propellers, Swennen had the idea of covering the image of a propeller (an outline drawing) with a white drawing of the same object, but mirrored. Not happy with the result, he erased the second outline. At the points where it intersected with the first outline, which was still wet, the paint could not be erased, so the white spots remained. Why a propeller? Probably because the object that ended up in Swennen's studio has a pleasing shape. Perhaps because it reminded him of his father, who was an engineer and worked in the docks for a long time. Perhaps because the propeller is an invitation to engage in *bricolage*. Finally, because a propeller is essentially a moving object and paintings

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75 'I have no interest in subject matter as such, or satire or social comment or anything else lumped with subject matter. (...) I accept the subject matter as a by-product of surface', Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *Malcolm Morley, Itineraries*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001, p. 51.

76 'Since his Super-Realist years, when he gave up painting an ocean liner from life and replaced it with postcards, Morley has essentially been a painter of still lifes...' Ibid: 182.

77 Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1957, p. 26.

78 Ibid: 23.

cannot depict motion. The movement is not depicted, but it is contained within the painting, which bears traces of an obliterated gesture.

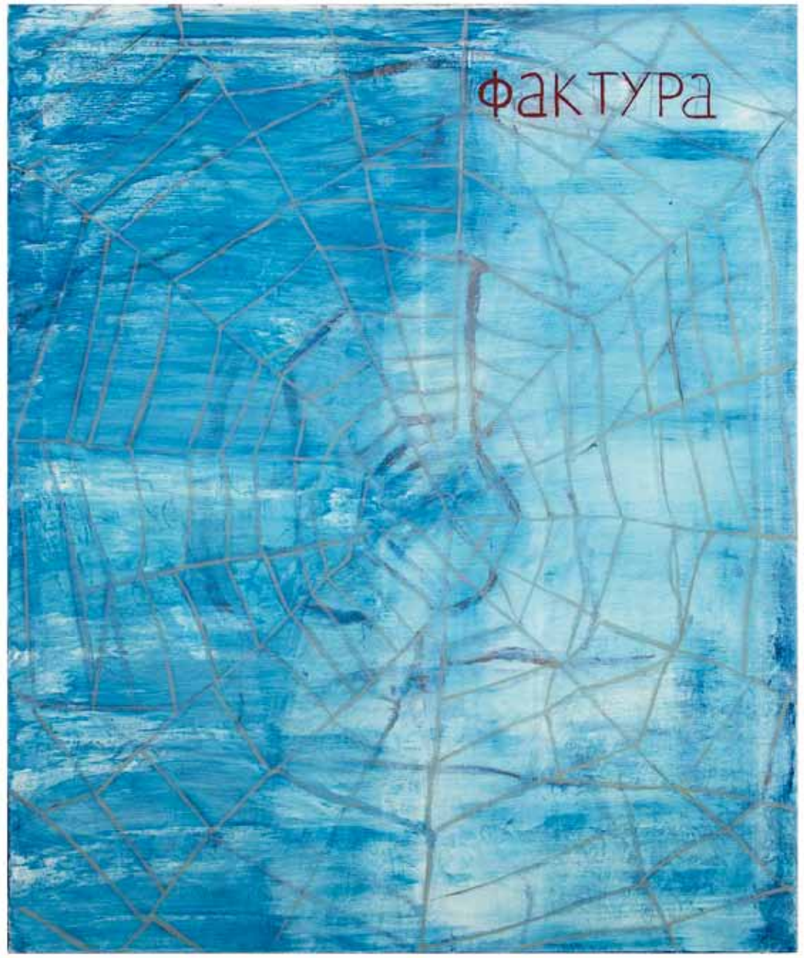
The imperfect perspective

The irreverent way in which Swennen deals with perspective is reminiscent of the tricks that Rogier van der Weyden employed in *The Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* and *The Descent from the Cross*. In the first painting, the central figures are much larger than the others. If we compare the size of Christ with the architecture, he would, in actuality, be five metres tall. The result of van der Weyden's trickery is an impression of great proximity that, in an incomprehensible way, seems quite obvious.[79] In the *Descent*, the entire narrative takes place within an altarpiece cabinet that is approximately a shoulder-width deep. Yet this scene plays itself out in five successive layers: closest to the viewer is the apostle John, who supports Mary. Behind Mary, already a little deeper within the scene, we see the body of Christ, which has been passed to Joseph of Arimathea and is already being carried away by Nicodemus. Behind these men stands the cross and, deeper still, the servant who, on top of a ladder, has freed Christ and lowered him. While this servant should, by rights, be situated two metres further behind, the nail that he holds in his right hand advances out of the altarpiece cabinet.[80] This use of perspective to create a phantasmagorical space probably had a symbolic function related to a specific world view.

According to the art historian Dirk De Vos, there was no clarity of meaning to the symbolism of the Middle Ages. 'Everything could be used or interpreted in multiple directions. Indeed, the multifaceted world was God's Being in multiple disguises. If we read the philosophical, theological or moralistic tracts, or the mystical writings, then we are faced with a profusion of images and symbolism, as the only means by which to communicate the unspeakable. (...) As the mastery of this technique advanced, insight into the world became increasingly

79 It was Griet Steyaert, art historian and restorer of the painting, who pointed this out to me. Compare with the following remark by the art historian Dirk De Vos on *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan Van Eyck: 'The view of the chamber corresponds to the impression that one might have of it when standing in the doorway, like the two figures in blue and red. Yet that is impossible. The perspective is linear, the figures appear to touch the ceiling, and the chandelier hangs too low, although the mirror seems to reflect everything in the correct proportions. *The painterly artifice creates an incredible suggestion of proximity and spatial compactness*, something that is only achieved in photography, mutatis mutandis, with a telephoto lens at best.' Dirk De Vos, *De Vlaamse Primitieven. De meesterwerken*, Mercator, Antwerp, 2002, p. 59 (my italics).

80 Dirk De Vos, to whom I am indebted for this knowledge, explains that the painting also depicts a sequence of events. Cf. Dirk De Vos, *De Vlaamse Primitieven. De meesterwerken*, Mercator, Antwerp, 2002, p. 77.



Faktura, 2009, oil on canvas, 120.6 × 100.5 × 2 cm, 47 $^{1}/_{2}$ × 39 $^{9}/_{16}$ × $^{3}/_{4}$ in.

complex and ambiguous, which would ultimately lead to divine revelation.'[81] 'Erwin Panofsky', writes De Vos, 'has called this "disguised symbolism" because of the underlying events that the depiction does not immediately divulge. Through too literal detective work into these symbols, however, this term often leads to a system of iconographic statements that actually negate the spirit of the visual revelation.'[82]

No one knows the technical and stylistic origins of the oil painting techniques used by the Flemish Primitives. Sometimes it seems as though these painters were possessed of a sudden urge to depict polychrome sculptures in a flat manner, at other times it would seem that the similarities between these two art forms is more related to the desired ambiguity of the paintings. According to De Vos, the paintings probably originated out of the flourishing studios of the Flemish-French miniature painters, whose 'nature and perfection can explain for (the beginnings of) panel painting.'[83] He points to formal factors such as the 'illusionistic, anti-decorative and anti-hieratic evolution of the miniature: the small size, for example, that implies a clarity that intensifies the possibilities of imagery; the fact that a miniature always resembles a "window" as a result of the prominent frame, which serves to highlight the illusory nature of the image.' Anyway, whatever its origin, 'the independence of the painted image has finally manifested itself in material form. A portable "wall unit" was created, especially designed to house a painted representation. It is a form common to fifteenth-century painting: a filled and mounted panel, as smooth and flat as a mirror, set like a piece of glass in a window frame, a kind of flat viewing box that allowed the visual enchantment to be carried from room to room.'[84] In other words, these paintings were not born of a desire to detach frescoes from their architectural supports, or as a way of creating flat reproductions of polychrome sculptural groups, but as ingenious illustrations from books turned into monumental paintings. Could it be a coincidence that something similar happened with Walter Swennen? Perhaps the specific, flat space of his paintings, in which coloured surfaces meet words and drawings with clear lines, spring from

81 Ibid: 10. Huizinga says the same thing about medieval colour symbolism in *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919).

82 Ibid: 11. In an essay on Michel François, I linked this idea with Freud. Last year, I learnt that Daniel Arasse had done the same: 'I was surprised to read in an iconographic handbook by Vincenzo Cartari, published in Venice in 1556 and entitled *Images of the Gods of the Ancients*: "It should not surprise us that the gods of the ancients are intertwined, that the same god sometimes shows different aspects, and that different names sometimes denote the same thing", which immediately made me think of a text by Freud…' Daniel Arasse, *Histoires de peintures*, 2004, p. 309. Cf. Hans Theys, *Michel François. Carnet d'expositions 1997-2002*, Ursula Blickle Stiftung, Kraichtal, 2002, p. 14.

83 Dirk De Vos, *De Vlaamse Primitieven. De meesterwerken*, Mercator, Antwerp, 2002, p. 14.

84 Ibid: 12–13.

Untitled (Annonce), 2010, oil on canvas, 100.4 × 80.3 cm, 39 1/2 × 31 5/8 in.

the doodles of a distracted reader? This is probably too strong. Yet there must be a grain of truth in it. The amazing freedom of his works, on a material, compositional and 'non-programmatic' level, can, in part, best be explained from the perspective of the freedom within certain comic books, the doodles in the margins of ponderous writings and the scattered words and phrases that are left over from the reading of an inspiring book.

Finally, I would like to share some nonsense about the perspective-less, pictorial space of Swennen's paintings, starting with some reflections by Daniel Arasse on the invention of perspective in the fifteenth century. According to Arasse, perspective cannot simply be considered as a symbol for a world without God, as Panofsky has proposed, nor merely as a prerequisite for a place that facilitates action (as Pierre Francastel posited). In Arasse's opinion, perspective, which was originally called '*commensuratio*', was used to shape the world to the scale of the human figure, a world that was measurable. For that reason, perspective was often used to give form to the mystery of the Incarnation: the infinite God becoming measurable and tangible. He points, for example, to a pillar in an Annunciation by Ambrogio Lorenzetti that is dated to 1344. This pillar, a common symbol of Christ, is rendered with perspective at the base, but while it ascends, it gradually merges into the Divine gold leaf of the background.[85] In the perspective-less space of Swennen, it seems, no Incarnation is possible. Fortunately, Lacan would sigh, since the Incarnation is the source of all misery.[86] And we remember that Freud, according to Lacan, was drawn to the God of the Old Testament because He stood for the Word and an invisible, masculine Law, in contrast with the feminine Reality, which is round and made of flesh. In Swennen's work seems to be no place for the feminine reality: everything seems to be spectral and thin, like a pneumatic, spiritual adventure (*cosa mentale*). Everything? No, in this ghostly world, there is something that offers resistance, like a gallstone. And that something is the painting.

85 Cf. Daniel Arasse, *Histoires de peintures*, 2004, p. 76.

86 'It's when the Word becomes flesh that things start to go really badly.' Jacques Lacan, *Le triomphe de la religion*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, p. 90

Turning the nonsensical into an enigma

In the collected wordings *Híc Haec Hoc*, Swennen describes making paintings as transforming the nonsensical into an enigma.[87] Before we take a closer look at this statement, we would do well to recall what Mannoni wrote about Baudelaire: that it was his destiny to 'incessantly touch upon obscure questions, without promising explanation.'[88] This is reminiscent of Swennen's remark that the art historian Paul Ilegems was correct to describe him as 'a pain in the neck'. Just as the enigma is a challenge thrown to the people by a god,[89] so Swennen presents us with paintings as aporias, works that compel us to accept a kind of 'deferred meaning', of the type that Mannoni found in Mallarmé's poetry. 'From the first reading,' Mannoni writes, 'there is a promise of meaning, there is the mystery of the twenty-four letters: as long as the sentence is incomplete, we supposedly still have multiple meanings... this state, in which we are more undecided than lost, continuously coalesces and disintegrates as we proceed. This is called the reading. Only Mallarmé makes this a state without end...'[90]

What does an experience of the nonsensical actually entail? Swennen's first exposure to meaninglessness probably occurred when his parents decided, from one day to the next, to speak a different language as a way of breaking with the wartime past. Many a child has been forced to learn a new language. But how many people, during their childhood, suddenly found that they could no longer understand their parents? The experience must have been abysmal.[91] Yet it seems that Swennen survived this situation by not taking it seriously, by giving it a twist. Disconnected letters, sounds, words and meanings may have engendered

87 See p. 46 of this book.

88 O. Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1969, p. 264.

89 Giorgio Colli, *Naissance de la philosophie*, Editions de l'Aire, 1981, p. 84.

90 O. Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1969, p. 255.

91 Besides this experience, there were additional circumstances that must have lent Swennen's world a meaningless or nonsensical aspect: the death of a sister just before he was born, and the imprisonment of his maternal grandparents. As I wrote elsewhere, the deceased sister may have been more real to Swennen's mother than her son, who was born just after her loss. Later, Swennen made every effort to make himself visible to his mother. Realising that she was particularly fond of an uncle who was a painter, he started fantasising about becoming a painter as well. What he doesn't seem to have realised, however, is that his mother's affinity with the uncle had probably less to do with the idea that he was an artist and more with the fact that he had also suffered the loss of a young child. Nevertheless, Swennen eventually found his own approach towards painting by applying the technical-tactical approach of his father, who was an engineer, to create new forms. 'And did his father appreciate this?' one might wonder. Hell no! For when his wife died, he blamed her premature death on his son's bohemian lifestyle. Apparently he thought his son's life needed some more nocturnal spicing.

an ever-shifting inner world, a realm that few discover.[92] This is what I suspect, for the very reason that it lays the foundations for a second crucial experience of 'meaninglessness', namely his discovery that the 'non-representative' elements of a painting ('between the terra cotta saucer and the signature') do not 'mean' anything anymore; it is only a 'painting'. A pleasurable, endless activity suddenly opened up to him, one that extended beyond language and meaning.[93] [94]

Objects have something to say, not because they speak to us, but because we start talking to ourselves when we see them. We consequently experience them as meaningful. Works of art can also have meaning; only the significance does not have to result from an intention of the artist. The meaning does not derive from the things, but from a human need. Meaning watches over us in the depths of the night.

Mannoni noted that the point of a joke makes the wordplay (out of which the witticism is born) bearable.[95] We seem to find it intolerable when words are confused. The disorder makes us feel uneasy. Jumbled words lose their meaning. A world that is named with meaningless words seems just that, meaningless. But if we weren't able to tinker with words, we would become trapped in them. The psychoanalyst tinkers, the poet tinkers, the painter tinkers. But they rarely admit this. And quite often, they do not know it themselves.

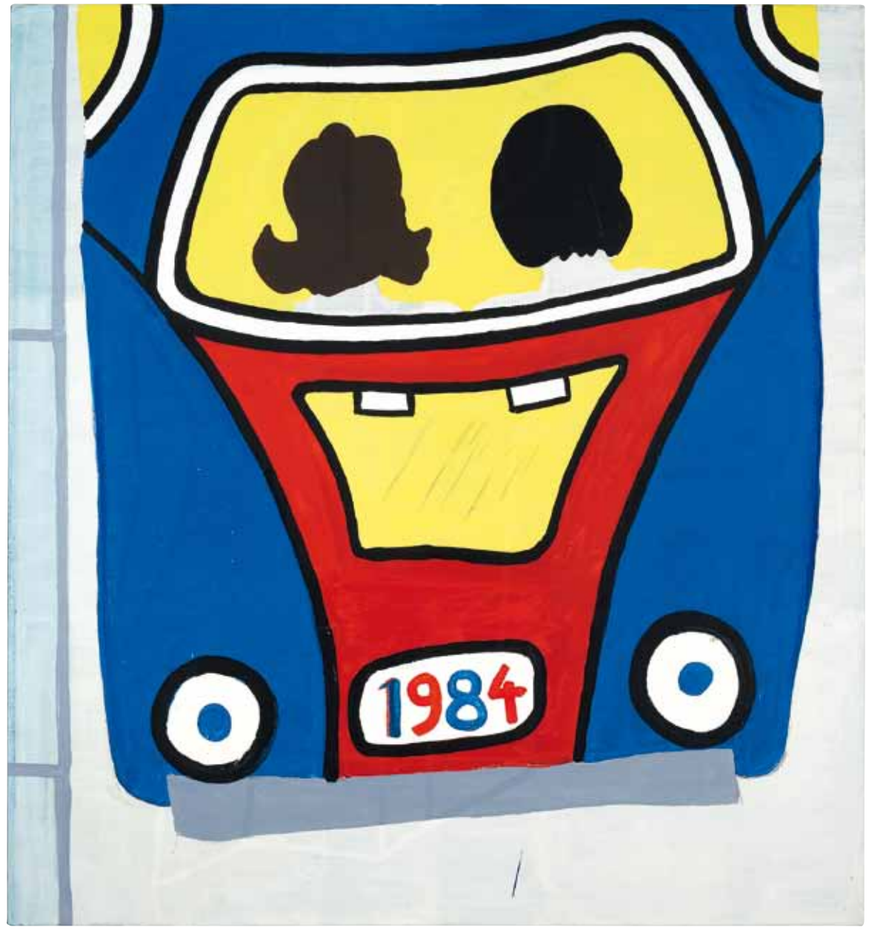
In his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud endeavours to show, in elaborate detail, that jokes are established in the same way as dreams, driven by the unconscious. Via a subtle detour he tries to lead us towards new evidence for the existence of the unconscious, which is something that he regards as a

92 Swennen does not like the suggestion that an 'inner world' exists, especially if it must be 'expressed'. He also dislikes the concept of 'identity', in a way that is reminiscent of Nietzsche.

93 The language had not only lost its absolute, obvious and dependably useful character, but was also linked with a shameful past which, paradoxically, was based on the rejection of the language that was ultimately spoken. And when this language is finally spoken, it is defective. For it is not real French. When Swennen's father hears a recording of his own voice, he is shocked by his accent, which he had believed to be impeccable until that moment.

94 Perhaps Swennen had not yet discovered the freedom of playing with words, which may also have been a result of his discovery of 'meaningless' painting.

95 Cf. O. Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1969, p. 253. Freud subscribes to the accepted belief that the comic effect of a joke arises from an initial impression of orthodoxy, which is immediately replaced by an impression of absurdity: 'What at one moment has seemed to us to have meaning,' he writes, quoting Kraepelin, 'we now see is completely meaningless.' (Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 42.) Freud calls this the *sense in nonsense*. He returns to this later, arguing that the joke protects the pleasure of wordplay against the criticism of reason by providing the play with an apparent meaning. (Cf. ibid: 180.)



Car (Back), 2010, oil on canvas, 135 × 125 cm, 53 1/8 × 49 3/16 in.

given, as he admits at the end of the volume. If we set Freud's topological meanderings aside (the question where the drives are actually located, how they are repressed, which site is 'occupied' by the psychic energy and through which gaps this energy escapes in order to satiate a still forbidden lust), then we understand that he views the joke as a statement that initially seems to make sense, then turns out to be senseless, but ultimately possesses a deeper hidden meaning. This meaning, which differentiates the joke from the games of children and the noncommittal jest, would reside in the fact that it disarms rational criticism and allows for the utterance of obscene, aggressive, cynical and sceptical thoughts because of a witty formulation (that briefly makes sense and subsequently turns out to be nonsense).

According to Freud the joke always targets the prevailing morality, the principles of which prevent us from giving free reign to pleasure because all forms of society call for the delayed gratification of our personal desires. The beauty of Freud, in my view, is that he doesn't merely stop there and seems to want to upend the entire world. 'What these jokes whisper,' he writes, 'may be said aloud: that the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless moral values. And in our days it has been said in forceful and stirring sentences that this morality is only a selfish regulation laid down by the few who are rich and powerful and who can satisfy their wishes at any time without any postponement…'[96] To introduce his chapter on the hidden purposes of the joke, he reminds the reader of Heinrich Heine's witticism, in which the latter compares Catholic priests and Protestant clerics, respectively, to supermarket employees and independent shopkeepers. Freud writes that he had hesitated about including this joke in his book because he realised 'that among my readers there would probably be a few who felt respect not only for religion, but also for its CEOs and management personnel.'[97]

According to Freud the joke is directed against authority figures, sexual rivals and institutions such as marriage, of which he wrote: 'One does not venture to say aloud and openly that marriage is not an arrangement calculated to satisfy a man's sexuality…'[98] The reader is left with the impression that it always must have been Freud's motivation to defend the right to be different: the right to be a poet, a painter, a homosexual or a Jew. Freud is a blessed crook. The whole of Freud's psychoanalysis is a sort of joke, aimed at the formulation of social criticism but which, at the same time, bypasses any authoritarian or moral resistance. Still in the chapter on the underlying purposes of jokes, Freud analyses a

96 Ibid: 155
97 Ibid: 132
98 Ibid: 156

The Black Dog, 2010, oil on canvas, 85 × 65 cm, 33 7/16 × 25 9/16 in.

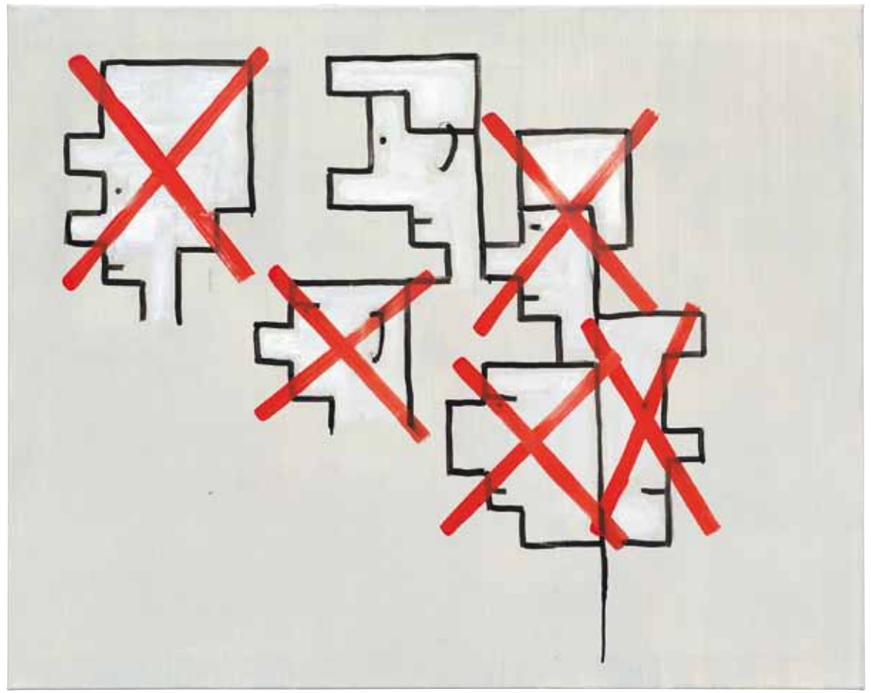
joke about a deaf Jew who is told by his doctor that his lack of hearing is due to an excessive consumption of alcohol. The Jew decides to stop drinking. When it transpires that he has fallen off the wagon, he admits that his hearing had improved when sober, but he decided that he was better off drinking because he heard such terrible things. And Freud concludes: 'In the background lies the sad question whether the man may not have been right in his choice. It is on account of the allusion made by these pessimistic stories to the manifold and hopeless miseries of the Jews that I must class them with tendentious jokes.'[99]

Although the joke has a higher purpose, according to Freud, the remarkable thing is that its origins lie in a childlike desire for gratification, which takes the form of a lust for words and a hankering for nonsense (the condensation of words or the exploitation of similarities, for example, would save psychic energy in a way that is tantamount to experiencing lust). 'But the characteristic tendency of boys to do absurd or silly things', Freud writes (he is silent about girls), 'seems to me to be directly derived from the pleasure in nonsense.'[100] Children (just like adults 'in a toxically altered state of mind'[101]) would love to play with thoughts, words and sentences. Later, a price is paid in the name of reason, and 'only significant combinations of words remain permitted.'[102] Thus the desire would stay buried and seek gratification through joke-telling, thus facilitating the expression of criticism.

This does not sound convincing. Rather it seems that jokes are made possible, and have been drawn into our existence, through our disproportionate need for meaning. When our meaning-seeking brain falsely detects a sexual or other interest in a combination of sounds or shapes, we find this combination funny. Ultimately, we laugh at this rummaging brain and, by extension, at all of the institutions that have emerged from our dangerous need for precisely-defined, specific meanings: rules of games, sports clubs, social rituals, fashions, schools, churches, political parties and so on.

Through its disturbing character, the joke is related to the Greek oracle, as described by Giorgio Colli in *Naissance de la Philosophie*: ambiguous, elusive pronouncements by an apparently malicious and cruel God. Oracles are passed on to us by seers. Often they take the form of riddles. Only the wise can solve or interpret these conundrums. 'For the Greeks', Colli writes, 'the wording of an enigma carries in itself tremendous hostility.'[103] The gods reveal their wisdom

99 Ibid: 160
100 Ibid: 175
101 Ibid: 174
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid: 52



Zes min vijf, 2010, oil on canvas, 100.5 × 120.6 × 2 cm, 39 $^{9}/_{16}$ × 47 $^{1}/_{2}$ × $^{3}/_{4}$ in.

through words, he writes, 'hence the external nature of the oracle: ambiguity, obscurity, allusiveness, uncertainty'.[104] For Colli, the divine origin of the oracle is a sufficient explanation for its obscurity. But why must God's word be obscure (ambiguous, uncertain and allusive)? Does God have a speech impediment? Or is it simply that the words, being fundamentally skewed and of human origin, are unfit for divine thoughts? We know the true words of the Christian God; that is a fact. But why is the word of our almighty and infallible God so ambiguous, contradictory and confused? There are several answers to this question. Firstly, the holy books would never have survived, nor have inspired so many people, if they were unambiguous. The inconsistency and muddle-headedness of spiritual texts is a prerequisite for their viability and efficacy. Secondly, the word of God is contradictory and confused because it was aimed at preventing us from believing that we know God. Gods are useful as an instrument of power when their words can only be understood and translated by a select few. Also, spiritually minded people see gods as images representing the unknowable nature of the world and the inadequacy of knowledge. A knowable God cannot be a God.[105] Only as an unknowable construction God can guide us towards humility and a constant awareness of our imperfect knowledge. Societies were made possible through the invention of unknowable gods. Man does not stop being an animal when he learns to speak, but when he keeps remembering that his perceptions are relative, that his words are inadequate and that his thoughts can never claim to be based on a universal truth. Thirdly, therefore, the words of gods are nebulous in order to remind us that our own observations, words and thoughts are muddled and relative.

Gradually, however, the enigma was uncoupled from the divine oracle and came to assume the form of a person-to-person intellectual challenge. And later still, says Colli, it gave rise to dialectics. A dialectical conversation in ancient Greece always departed from two contradictory statements (The Being is and the Being is not). The opponent was invited to side with one of these propositions and it was subsequently demonstrated that his position (no matter which side he took) was untenable. The challenger, who formulated the contradiction, always won. For Colli, the dialectic culture of the ancient Greeks was destructive because it undermined all forms of certainty or conviction. Yet it seems to me that in order

104 Ibid: 15

105 'The concept of divinity according to Heraclitus is as follows: "The One, the unique wisdom, refuses and agrees to be called by the name of Zeus." The name of Zeus is acceptable as a symbol, as human designation of the supreme God, but an inadequate designation, precisely because the supreme god is something hidden, inaccessible.' Giorgio Colli, *Naissance de la philosophie*, Editions de l'Aire, 1981, p. 73. Colli, however, does not enquire as to why God should remain unknowable.

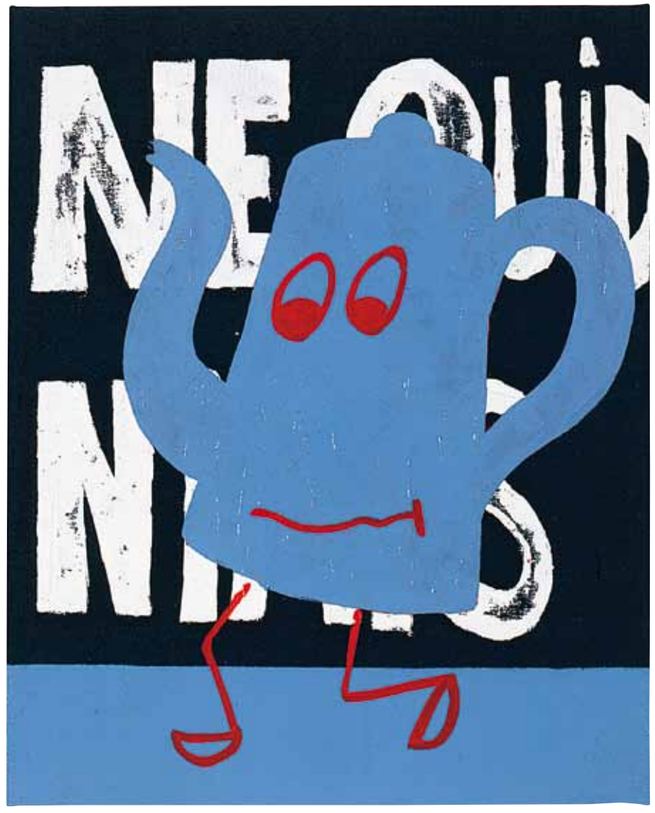
T, 2011, oil on canvas, 60 × 50 cm, 23 5/8 × 19 11/16 in.

to overcome prejudice, stupidity, demagogy, dictatorships, absolute monarchies and religious mania, this destruction is indispensable. The predetermined 'victory' of the challenger in the dialectical conflict depended not upon his arguments, but upon the fact that it sprang from a contradiction. No single reality can be approached only from two perspectives. In almost all sciences, progress is the result of a cross-fertilisation between approaches that previously pretended to be exclusive. Does this prevent us from adopting positions? Certainly not, but is it so hard to remember that each position is fundamentally relative? 'Heraclitus had no criticism of the senses', wrote Colli[106] 'on the contrary, he praised sight and hearing, but he condemned the tendency to transform our perceptions into something stable that would exist outside of us.'

'The essence of the enigma', said Aristotle, 'lies in putting together apparently inconsistent and impossible things.'[107] As Shklovski demonstrated, the same can be said of a narrative that is crafted through the use of prioms: the devices that permit unexpected twists. It is also true for the dream-work and joke-work, which seem to speak about a hidden knowledge that guides our behaviour. And Lacan's '*le réel*' also speaks in riddles.[108] Attempting to guess the nature of Schopenhauer's Will or Freud's Unconscious is ridiculous if one believes that these Things actually exist. But the puzzling itself, the playing with words and images, the rearranging of sentences and the weaving of alternative narratives can turn an unmanageable life into a manageable one. Not because the neurotic has been tamed by his psychiatrist, as the Lacanians believe, and not because the true nature of his or her desires has been revealed, but because a fruitful interaction with a shifting (internal or external) reality requires a constantly self-renewing language game.

Swennen, who undoubtedly discovered a 'right to nonsense' in the writings of Lacan, does not believe in the existence of the unconscious. 'All we can say is that *there's thinking*', he says.[109] In Swennen's paintings, there is thinking. *Ça pense*. Colours, shapes, textures, letters, words and figures are woven together to form a new, concrete thought. Not in order to report on a reality that is located beyond the painting, but in order 'to be': to be visible, to have been made, to

106 Ibid: 71
107 Ibid: 61
108 Compare with Colli's observation (ibid: 42) that the Greek words for 'bow' and 'life' consist of the same phonemes (only the emphasis is different). As a result, the God with the bow (Apollo) becomes the god of life and death. In fragment 51 Heraclitus speaks of 'an attunement of opposite tension, like that of the bow and the lyre.' The lyre, which was also made from the horns of a goat, was the second attribute of Apollo. We see why: because the identically sounding words (bow and life) and the formal similarity between a bow and a lyre, could not but give rise to a usable, ambiguous image.
109 See p. 39 of this book



Untitled (Ne quid nimis), 1990, oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm, 39 3/8 × 31 1/2 in.

have been thought through action, and thus, as an enigma, to indirectly give an account of the miracles of thinking (through action).

'Basic research is what I am doing when I don't know what I am doing', wrote Wernher von Braun in *The New York Times*.[110] 'There is no idea, however ancient and absurd, that is not capable of improving our knowledge', wrote Feyerabend.[111] Some tribes or nations in the Brazilian rainforest did not need western science to achieve peace, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has demonstrated, but a collection of concepts, images and associated rituals that, in their own way, led to harmony.

Swennen gives form to concrete thoughts that reveal the prioms and the collage-like structure of all thinking. The young Swennen wanted to become a philosopher. He eventually became a painter to be able to think in a free way. Or so I see it. Everybody is free to think differently.

Montagne de Miel, 30 June 2016

110 On 16 December 1957. Quoted by Hannah Arendt in *Vita activa*, Boom, Amsterdam, 1994, p. 229.

111 Paul Feyerabend, *Tegen de methode*, Lemniscaat, Rotterdam, 2008, pp. 206–207.

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- *Ein perfektes Alibi*, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany
- *At My Own Risk. Couldn't Be Better*, Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY, USA

2014
- *Works on Paper*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium

2013
- Nicolas Krupp Contemporary Art, Basel, Switzerland
- *Continuer*, Culturgest, Lisbon, Portugal
- *So Far So Good*, WIELS, Brussels, Belgium
- *Why Painting Now?*, Galerie nächst St. Stephan-Rosemarie Schwarzwälder, Vienna, Austria

2012
- Aliceday, Brussels, Belgium
- Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège, Belgium

2011
- *Garibaldi Slept Here*, Kunstverein Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany
- *Peintures et dessins*, Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire, Paris, France

2010
- Domo Baal, London, UK
- Arentshuis, Bruges, Belgium

2009
- Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège, Belgium
- Nicolas Krupp Contemporary Art, Basel, Switzerland

2008
- *New Paintings*, Aliceday, Brussels, Belgium
- *How To Paint A Horse*, CC Strombeek, Grimbergen, Belgium, travelled to De Garage, Mechelen, Belgium
- *Curating the Campus*, de Singel, Antwerp, Belgium

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- Galerie Greta Meert, Brussels, Belgium

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1980
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– Hans Theys, *Walter Swennen. Ne Quid Nimis*, Zonder titel, Brussels
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2013
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2011
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2008
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1991
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1988
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Colophon

This catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition
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