



# Walter Swennen

## Das Phantom der Malerei / The Phantom of Painting

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- Publication accompanying the great retrospective of the artist Walter Swennen
- This book offers a wonderful overview of the oeuvre of Walter Swenne, and the catalogue to an international solo exhibition which launches in Kunstmuseum Bonn (June-August 2021) before travelling to Kunstmuseum Den Haag (Autumn 2021) and Kunstmuseum Winterthur (Spring 2022)
- Text contributions written by Stephan Berg, Konrad Bitterli and Daniel Koep
- Text in English and German

Walter Swennen is a painter, born in Brussels in 1946. Like others of his generation, he approaches and explores the medium in new ways by applying principles from other disciplines. Swennen's work constantly challenges the viewer. His paintings demand slow and careful inspection. The layers of paint often hide a veritable battlefield of attempts, corrections, words and messages. His Dutch-speaking family suddenly began speaking French when he was five years old, and language games accordingly form an integral part of his art. A painting by Walter Swennen is not just a result, but also a process, which allows us to trace the path taken by the artist to achieve the ultimate 'visible' image. A key constant is the pleasure he derives from the battle with the paint. Non-conformist that he is, Swennen paints on anything: from canvas to wood to discarded camping tables, stoves and even washing machines.

Walter Swennen's long and varied career deserves to be recognised by a wide public for its radical nonconformism and the influence that the artist still exerts on young artists today. Swennen is represented by the Brussels Xavier Hufkens Gallery and the Gladstone Gallery in New York, and won the prestigious Ultima award for lifetime services to the visual arts in 2019. His work can be found in numerous museum and gallery collections.

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**Walter Swennen** is known for his radical, experiential and associative approach to painting, which is perhaps best summarised as a belief in the total autonomy of the artwork. For Swennen, a painting does not need to be 'emotive' or 'understood': the primary goal of painting is, quite simply, painting. Everything — form, colour, subject — comes from the outside. A poet before he became a painter, it is no coincidence that language plays a vital role in his practice. Although his oeuvre varies greatly in scale, style and materials, it can be construed as an on-going exploration into the nature and problems of painting (its potential and limitations), the fundamental question of what to paint (subject matter), and how (technique). The way that he handles motifs — he takes them as he finds them, high or low, and manipulates them at will — is akin to a kind of visual poetry that harks back to his early career as a writer. Freely associative, and above all humorous, Swennen's paintings explore the relationship between symbols, legibility, meaning and pictorial treatment. Walter Swennen (b. 1946, Brussels) lives and works in Brussels.