

READING THE EVENT: NOTES ON THE WORK OF TONY SWAIN

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A thundercloud passes over; a patch of woodland goes dark – or was it dark already? Who knows? And then, to make it worse, you suddenly come across a block of writing set bang in the middle of the clearing ... I can't paint words!' Carlisle's voice raises half an octave.

'Painting's painting, writing writing. Never the twain. It's all wrong, aesthetically speaking: all the depth and the texture of a summer countryside steamrollered into a flat page.'

*'That's what I like about it', Serge says.
C: a novel, Tom McCarthy¹*

Tony Swain's paintings primarily 'take place', so to speak, on newspaper. Using this material support as a site in which to reconfigure and overpaint the original content, the artist replaces or blends printed images with painted ones.² His paint stitches together fantastical spaces that neither entirely obliterate its original content (the newspaper's familiar registration marks, colour bars and the printed text from the verso of the page are often left partially visible, while the newspaper's photographs become key points for embellishment and painted motifs), nor seek to document a Euclidean reality. Rather, there is a synthesis of document and imagination, external fact and internal thought. Using the paintings of Tony Swain as its touchstone

and inspiration, the following text is a collection of simultaneously recorded observations, short and long, that emerge from reflecting upon the relationship between painting and printing. These two processes, often distinguished by their differences to one other, are instead discussed in terms of how they might abrade together in a productive friction, and how their juxtaposition might generate multiple and perhaps unlikely points of connection. From examining what is at stake both conceptually and practically when paint is applied to a sheet of newsprint, to the linking of artistic practices that illuminate each other by their common interests, these notes are *dérives* that occur in parallel and alongside Swain's work.

The painted page

Key to understanding Tony Swain's work is that it is not painting on canvas, but painting on a page. Unlike the definitive singularity of a canvas, a page is part of a narrative sequence, a member of a quire. Newspaper is a material that asks us not just to look at the image but to read it. Implied, in turn, is the notion that if it can be read then perhaps the image has indeed been written.

Swain's overpaintings begin from an initial detail found within the original newspaper, rather than by a preconceived composition imposed upon the page which is arbitrary to its original printed content.

In this sequential structure, images follow images. The unfolding scene, ribbon-like and serpentine in its process of becoming, is constructed akin to Gertrude Stein's notion of language, where 'one word and another word next to the other word [is] always being chosen'.³

That the image might be treated as a text (and, by extension, that painting not always be considered in alterity with printing) should not be surprising. Indeed, the two elements collide throughout the period of Modernism with frequency, from the cubism of Pablo Picasso and George Braque, to the collages of Max Ernst, where such techniques were further constellated and embellished by the coming of Pop Art and the pluralism of postmodernism. And while one can also move in a backward direction and find rich points of image/text interconnection in the role of ornamented text in illuminated manuscripts, let us nonetheless be particular about the material support upon which Tony Swain's images are constructed: newspaper.

Newspaper is the printed page at its most functional: thin enough to hold ink, light enough to carry, cheap enough to mass-produce, broad enough to read. But there is something 'off' about seeing paint on the printed page. The manual application of paint overlaying mechanical patterns admits the jarring relationship between human touch and machine.

As if to acknowledge the oddness of its ornamentation, Swain's paint refuses entirely to cohere to the low-grade paper: it puckers and wrinkles; it summons up a strangeness in the image. That the translucency of the paper reveals not only the lightness of the artist's gestural strokes but also the verso of the page is testament to the presence of the 'printedness' of the page – a printedness that, when painted, appears veiled rather than completely concealed from view.

Painted, the page still hangs on to the residues of longing to be read, a habit seemingly hardwired into the materiality of the printed page. But this new reading must take place in a visual vocabulary. In its creative misuse, Swain's painted image wilfully inhabits a form that antagonises its material support, making that antagonism part of its subject matter, its exhibition.

A consideration of rhythm in text and image

By the sixteenth century, the need for mnemonic devices to faithfully preserve elements of collective memory had diminished due to the rise in printing and literacy. Use of cadence, rhythm, repetition and other forms of memory devices were replaced by comprehensive illustration both descriptive and diagrammatic.⁴ The printed image began to overtake the oral word. Mnemonic devices slowly lost their use and coherency; they were transformed into dead metaphors, nonsense rhymes and incantatory rituals where function metamorphosed into mythic gesture, artefact. Like abandoned titles, they lacked a context, a clue of their formation. As they became symbol, the uses of rhyme and cadence were transmuted into the medium of imagery, the newly literate visuality.

Ébauche and étude

Traditionally, the process of image-making and the precursor to much painting is the form of the rough outline, the sketch. And within this classic context, the sketch comprised two forms: the *étude*, a study of the subject that acted as an observational record; and the *ébauche*, an initial compositional draft that served to translate the artist's initial idea for a composition into a more elaborated version.

Put simply, where the *étude* serves as a mere document of reality, moving outwards from the artist, the *ébauche* is a record of the imagination that synthesises what one has received within the mind.⁵

Responding to Paul Nash's painting *Event on the Downs* (1934), art critic E.H. Ramsden noted, 'It is not the painting of a landscape that concerns the artist, but the transcription of a mood'.⁶ Here, Ramsden's emphasis is less on Nash's attempt to create a painted copy of the physical landscape, and more on the way in which he appears to translate the idea of what takes place within that site into image as one might try to record a dream. This is the imaginative transcription of an event unfolding, it is the painting of an image reflected in the mind's eye.

While Nash's *Event on the Downs* prioritises the formalisation of the *ébauche* as a finished artwork, the paintings of Tony Swain describe a fluid movement between the two types of sketch. Swain's work takes the material subject as the primary apparatus through which to present the field of painting (where both the newspaper's materiality and its printed content are prerequisite triggers for the development of a painted image in the abstract). His paintings seek to draw the real and surreal into dialogue with one another; both states are made present, contingent on each other for meaning.

The consequence of such a dialogue is that the generated images are a lyrical reimagining of the printed page as a subject in possession of an unconscious desire, a page that dreams of itself beyond the confines of its literal definition. An imaginary document, the artwork is revealed to be in possession of an auratic potential, an abstraction that is an exhibition of desire.

Swain collapses the ephemeral, fleeting newspaper image with the flash of the internal mind. The process of painting extends the duration of that flash. Taking the initial printed detail as a starting point for the development of a painting, the artist's images find the breaches, the jumping-off points from the reality of the printed page. His images tug and unpick the

newspaper's imagery, expanding its hallucinatory qualities as it dreams of itself as image.

Three other artists

The accidental printer: Despite his frequent use of newspaper print in his work of the 1930s and 1940s, Willem de Kooning claimed he cared little for it on a conceptual level. As if to deny the qualities of the material, the artist described his painting on newsprint as accidental, the product of a merely functional endeavour. He would often use paper to mop up excess paint and hasten the drying of the canvas. When removed, the newspaper would leave its imprint on the image. And yet de Kooning played down the significance of this image transferral. This personalised, albeit haphazard, printing press was denied by its printer.

The flatbed painter: It would take de Kooning's ardent follower Robert Rauschenberg to admit newspaper's significance as a legitimate material for painters in the early 1950s. Fascinated with the newspaper techniques of de Kooning, Rauschenberg would use newspaper to prime his canvases, so that the printed material might activate the ground of his paintings.⁷ Experiments in dissolving the printing ink into his paintings allowed Rauschenberg to recast the newspaper as a collective *wunderblock*, embedded and reified within the classical medium of paint. His startling combinations of paint and print declared the performativity of the newspaper.⁸ Critic Leo Steinberg often compared Rauschenberg's canvases to a flatbed printing plane, the horizontal bed that supports a printing surface. The flatbed allowed for a plurality of positions and perspectives by flattening each element into a single plane,⁹ images made contingent by proximity rather than intelligibility. The process allowed painting to enter into the realm of collage previously inhabited only by printed matter and photography.

The zero painter: Following Rauschenberg's newsprint image transfers, the veracity of the newspaper image as material was again contested and extemporised by Sigmar Polke in the 1960s. Similar to the work of his contemporary, Roy Lichtenstein, albeit with a drier

humour, the German painter enlarged, distorted and reconstructed raster patterns newspaper's then-form of image printing which comprised clusters of Benday dots that gathered to form photographic impressions. In contrast to the seriality of Warhol's silkscreened canvases of Hollywood starlets and gruesome reportings of roadside accidents, Polke painstakingly hand-painted each Benday dot and consequently rerouted the casual repeatability of the mechanical press into the durational process of the painter's touch. In a typically dry acknowledgement, Polke knew the primary symbolic element of the raster doubled as both circle and zero.

Images dictated by print

At the dawn of the printing revolution, the rigidity of typographical possibilities within the standard printing press directly affected the production of imagery; the machine dictated the means by which images might be created, reappropriated and comprehended.¹⁰ Printed images, for example, did not proliferate with the same speed and variety as the printed word. In the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493), a woodblock print of Mantua was reused to represent Verona. And later, in that same chronicle, we see an illustration serving as a portrait for two different men, Baldus and Lorenzo Valla. Visual cliché expanded as a consequence of a dearth of new imagery, and placed urgency on the need for new visual vocabularies.

Given the rigidity of the image, and the rise of cliché, there is a sense in which the image is a highly resistant element. It possesses wholeness. Irreducible to the same extent as moveable type, the image refuses to be derailed quite as easily as text and, even in its reappropriation, an image can't seem to let go of as much context as a word or even a phrase. It exhibits its origins yet.

Print and the event

'Press': it is not by accident that we use the same word for both the people and the mechanism involved in newspaper publication. With 'press' there is no differentiation between the authors and the machine. In each case, the word describes the effect of the contact that occurs between contingent elements – a collision between the things that generate

the newspaper, a fugitive pattern of information made material, developed under great pressure.

As if by alchemy, the press' application of ink transforms blank pages into the depiction of an event. This is content as event – the pronouncements of things made newsworthy for the reason that they lack the character of the pedestrian, the everyday, the banal. The press constructs the newspaper as an everyday product that nonetheless denies 'everydayness' by only choosing to print the remarkable event. As Maurice Blanchot notes with a certain horror, 'In the everyday, everything is everyday; in the newspaper, everything is strange, sublime, abominable.'¹¹

The press does not merely find events that take place, but in its dissemination, the press *takes up* time and generates history. In its process of printing, newspapers not only make events for public dissemination, but they also put events in the 'just-past'. This just-past is the not-quite-history, an event whose recorded unfolding is still tangible through its ripples. In its daily reportage, the press dictates the length of an event to those who do not participate in its coming.

Painting, meanwhile, is a preservation. The presence of a painted image serves to encourage contemplation without the urgency of the fugitive event. Indeed, painting requires us to return to its presence over time. It has the capacity to conceive of new lines of time,¹² in order that its meaning might resonate through history and acquire different meanings, experiences.

Swain's paintings repurpose the 'eventfulness' of the press. Speaking only in terms of its formal qualities, his paintings are full of flat light. Without any adherence to single point perspective (that might mobilise the logical patterning of shadow), his paintings produce a vacuum of time; these collaged viewpoints do not produce an image with multiple temporalities, but rather generate an image of time without end. The architecture of the painted space occurs outside of time, providing a different route to the strange, sublime, abominable – an event in an unreasonable space.

Notes

1. Tom McCarthy, *C: a novel*, New York: Knopf, 2010, p.146.
2. When printed text is occasionally visible in Swain's paintings, it appears more as a means of introducing tone than for the display of a word or a linguistic pun.
3. Gertrude Stein, *Look at me now and here I am: writings and lectures, 1911–1945*, Patricia Meyerowitz (ed.), London: Peter Owen, 2004, p.42.
4. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.98.
5. Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981, p.20.
6. E.H. Ramsden, 'Paul Nash: Surrealism in Landscape', *Country Life*, 2 January 1942, p.28.
7. See Grégory Picard's 'Advancing the Artist's Legacy', an interview with Ealan Wingate, *Artinfo.com*, in October 2011; and Leo Steinberg, 'The Flatbed Picture Plane', *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, p.85.
8. Carolyn Lanchner, *Robert Rauschenberg*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009, p.7.
9. Steinberg, op.cit., p.82.
10. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent Of Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p.255.
11. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.243.
12. See Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.62.

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