

“Feelings and Things”: Gene Swenson and The Other Tradition

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The *other* tradition is not formal. It is less easily appreciated with the familiar critical tool known as formal analysis. Its major importance lies outside or beyond “significant form,” and its application is useful chiefly to non abstract art: that is, in general it deals more with the movements known as Dada, Surrealism and Pop Art than with those known as Cubism, Early Abstract Expressionism.

The other and the formal tradition often intertwine; in some ways it is artificial to separate them. Yet it seems important to do so at a time when critics and historians—and often even painters—ignore and even deny the validity of the non-formal approach.

The relationship between object and emotion, in the other tradition, is not traditional; the difference may be subtle, but it is as vital as knowing, for example, whether one is listening to the voice of the poet or of his speaker. “Emotions” have been objectified; perhaps some would say they have been mechanized. The author sees nothing necessarily sinister in this; in fact he finds in it an exciting variety of possibilities of human awareness.

(The *other* tradition throws a different light on what Freud is reported to have said in front of Salvador Dalí’s paintings: “What interests me is not his subconscious but his conscious.”)

—Gene R. Swenson, *The Other Tradition*, 1966

The Other Tradition is a forty-page essay published in 1966 on the occasion of the exhibition of the same title held at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia between January and March of that year.¹ The author of the essay and curator of the exhibition was Gene R. Swenson. A passionate critic, he was born in 1934 in Kansas, a place that gave him a witty sensibility for the vernacular, thanks to which he was one of the first critics to embrace and support Pop art.²

Interwoven in the essay are two urgent critical goals, two lines of force in open opposition to the best-established critical and historical modalities of art in the milieu in which Swenson had been trained and worked: first, the need to attack Clement Greenberg's formalism (more prevalent in 1966 than is generally recalled); and, second, the desire to redefine the history of avant-garde movements, to present, that is, an alternative and more complex account than the unequivocal and unimaginative narrative that all modernity derived from the Cubist revolution.

The corollary that arises from these aspirations is the description of an encounter between a work and a viewer marked by a relationship that is neither symbolic nor based on identity but that is instead based on a form of emotional sharing; this third argument is emblematic of a critical attitude that had astonishing topicality. Linked to the Duchampian idea of the viewer as responsible for at least "half" of the work of art, to the question of the role of the author raised shortly thereafter by Roland Barthes, and to Susan Sontag's discourses on interpretation, this line of inquiry, which today continues to be fertile, addresses the role of the observer in the work and the exhibition. Discussions regarding the

value of “participation,” such as those carried out by Claire Bishop, and regarding the status of “spectatorship,” such as those exemplified by the positions of Jacques Rancière on the emancipation of the observer and Slavoj Žižek on alienation, and their critical and poetic refashioning by curators like Pierre Bal-Blanc, illustrate the extent to which the nature of the relationship with the spectator remains crucial in the debate over what it means to put a work on show.

The approach taken in Swenson’s essay expresses an antiformalist perspective that reveals the continuity between Dada, Surrealism, and Pop. In “Feelings and Things,” the third of the four short sections into which the essay is divided, Swenson concentrates on Dadaists and Surrealists. He speaks of Marcel Duchamp, of the close relationship between *The Large Glass* and the notes the artist collected in *The Green Box*, and he comments particularly on the note on the “delay in glass,”³ taking it as an example of a use of language that is neither descriptive nor signifying: if we were to habitually use “delay in glass” instead of “picture on glass,” we would open up new and freer possibilities for interpretation of the work. The logical, apodictic, Occidental linguistic system normally used for critical writings on art and also conventionally used for describing the subjective encounter between a work of art and an audience, is not at all satisfying for Swenson. In this sense, the witty, seductive, and multilayered Duchampian language seems to provide him with an “other” way of creating artistic discourses. Looking speculatively for open methods, Swenson similarly challenges himself and the viewer to experiment with the paranoiac-critical method advocated by Salvador Dalí, who held that cognition is an irrational mechanism, based on delirious associations and interpretations that are objectivized. Swenson notes that Dalí uses the adjective *paranoiac* in its etymological sense (and not in the way it is used in psychiatry), i.e. to describe the activity of an

alternate, “para-” mind (we might say an “other” mind). What interests Swenson is the result: he sees it as a method that permits the objectivization of feeling, of irrational intuition, of a “para-” mode of using the mind (one in which the mind does not wander off into the fanciful but instead infers the image from an experience of the real).

Using a nondescriptive language, or the paranoiac-critical method, it is possible to avoid thinking of the experience of art as a relationship with an object destined to stir a specific emotion. To take an example put forward by Swenson, in the Odessa steps scene in Sergei M. Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), when we see a soldier’s boot landing a kick, we are induced to “feel” the violence. But between the boot (or the person who has kicked) and the viewer of the film, there is no identity of feeling: the object-boot remains an object, and the feeling of the viewer remains a feeling. An emotion is created for the viewer, who is involved at a symbolic level that Swenson feels is too cramped, too literal, too rational. By contrast, in watching one of Andy Warhol’s films, the viewer is not guided into an emotional reaction by way of a constructed, calculated, and imposed process. Warhol’s films are mirrors: impassive, mechanical. Nothing is transformed, nothing is evoked, nothing is enriched. From one side of the screen to the other (between, let us say, the beautiful Nico or the self-satisfied Duchamp and the viewer), feelings are concrete.

Swenson started out from and remained anchored to a desire to describe an “other” tradition. He aimed to provide a valid historical root for Pop art, but he also arrived at these more absolutist and superhistorical conclusions based on identifying the emotional character of contact with the work. Moreover, he was convinced that the art of the twentieth century was still too fresh to be tackled from an academically historicizing perspective. In *The Other Tradition*, Swenson described the interaction between viewer and work as

potentially disconnected from any reference to a movement or a style. The proof of this can be found in a passage in which Swenson accuses formalist critics of having disaccustomed us to enjoying the intrinsic link between form and content in the art of the past. (And for him the fundamental confirmatory evidence, with regard to his present, is Robert Rauschenberg's claim that "there is no poor subject.")

A few months after the publication of *The Other Tradition*, Swenson curated an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York titled *Art in the Mirror*, which was, for all intents and purposes, a continuation of the same discourse. The "art in the mirror" is the art seen by artists, the art loved by artists—art understood in a nonsystematic manner and relaunched in the present, without a distinction between movements or periods, in the form of new work. Long before the category of artists' artists (of which, as luck would have it, Swenson's friend Paul Thek was the quintessence) occurred to anyone, Swenson wanted to explore the dynamics of exchange and crossover rooted in irony, detachment, aggression, amusement . . . *Art in the Mirror* set out to investigate and reveal artists' attitudes toward art.

In *The Other Tradition*, Swenson more than once refers to the fact that the ideas he is writing about are the fruit of his dialogues with artists, although he couches this assertion in a far from colloquial tone little inclined to use the first person (its protagonist is that tradition!). Those who knew him recall how important to him it was to know artists' opinions, to ask them questions and listen to them. Reading his interviews, one is struck by the provocative style, the urgent rhythm, and, at the same time, the familiar tone in the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee.

If the project of *The Other Tradition* was nevertheless entrusted to an historical perspective, *Art in the Mirror* seems to have been conceived as a way of finding out

whether it is possible to assume an “other critical attitude,” an alternative to the academic methodology, that accounts for a greater complexity of artistic dynamics than does a scholarly historical analyses that focuses on searching for explicit derivations and influences. Can we learn from artists how to look at art as well?

The first of the two exhibitions of 1966 is remembered as a great success and the second as a total flop. The essay on the other tradition had an electrifying effect on many fellow critics and artists; for the second show, there was no catalogue, as a serious attack of appendicitis prevented Swenson from finishing the long text that was supposed to have accompanied it. The exhibition must not have been very clear, to say the least, given that one reviewer wrote that it demonstrated that artists often bore a profound grudge against art.

It is possible to discern an optimism at the base of the critical ambitions expressed in *The Other Tradition* and *Art in the Mirror*, an attitude that at times seems even naively full of hope in the world yet is devoid of simplifications with regard to art. Swenson’s enthusiastic approach to art is evident from his writings. In addition, those who were close to him maintained that for him “art was very much an attempt to effect a kind of self-transformation.”⁴ Swenson suffered from schizophrenia, alternating periods of relative health and capacity for work with moments of paranoia and depression, which led on several occasions to his commitment to mental hospitals. The antisystematic hypersensitivity with which Swenson attempted to frame the critical principles that could be used to describe the art of his time and eventually tackled the great twentieth-century theme of the emotional relationship between work, viewer, and artist seems to have derived in part from a mental disposition (perhaps precisely that idea of the alternate mind, of the *para*-mind, that he had used when speaking of Dalí) linked to his madness.

In comparison with the projects of *The Other Tradition* and *Art in the Mirror*, Swenson's demand for salvation through art remained a private matter; as Henry Martin puts it, it was a question of survival in the sense that Swenson wrote and worked to stay out of the hospital, but this drama did not spill over into his critical research, did not trouble his system of thought, even if it did bring to it an "other" kind of sensitivity to the world.

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Yet it may be necessary that we go beyond sentimentalities (morals, religion, culture, values) and move toward human subversion. In the comic and ridiculous situation in which we face both atomic war and affluence, in which we are all about to die physically or spiritually, individual suicide—individuality itself—has become presumptuous and not at all amusing. The traitor, acting toward political and psychological conformity, lacking outmoded and unregimented ways of thought, is the only hero. Only, he is unsentimental. There is, as has been charged, something profoundly negative in Pop Art and the other tradition, and the sense of reality which they express. They express a revolt, and a revolt is negative.

—Gene R. Swenson, *The Other Tradition*, 1966

The figure of the traitor and the proud expression of revolt, in all its negative force, are evident in the conclusions of *The Other Tradition*. Notwithstanding the essential intellectual optimism that sustained Swenson in his project, at its core was a distrust in the present, for which he offered an antidote: antisentimentalism, or rather, the objectivization of the feelings of not only viewers of art but also anyone who experiences the world at large. In Martin's words, "his entirely cogent views on sanity and schizophrenia were not at

all dissimilar to the thinking of modern ‘antipsychiatrists,’ such as Ronald Laing, at least insofar as he always refused to believe in the purely personal nature of his madness, or, rather, in his madness as a problem to be resolved in terms of illuminations of an entirely personal significance.”⁵

This way of feeling part of a social whole is important to the course of Swenson’s intellectual evolution. In the second part of his career, he moved away from mainstream art (initially a painful process) and increasingly became active in politics: his optimism gave way to his realization of the moral inconsistency and gravity of the problems faced by and the sociopolitical system to which he belonged. This violent and deep-seated disillusionment, which for Swenson overlapped with a lack of career success, also coincided with a wider and more general trend in social consciousness: historically it was the moment in which an abyss of awareness opened up and from which emerged manifestations of dissent.

In 1969, Swenson revealed with breathtaking clarity how his attitude to art and politics had evolved: “Art, unlike politics, does not speak to the hopes of society, but to the individual’s fear of death and to the hope of sharing that fear to the extent that misery can be alleviated through beauty.”⁶ Between 1968 and 1969, he had carried out a series of actions in New York that might be seen as located somewhere between militant activism, performance, and practical joke. The most celebrated was his picketing of the entrance of MoMA, during which he carried a blue placard in the shape of a question mark (it seems that Daniel Buren saw him there). The first acts of institutional criticism were to come shortly afterward; in fact, Swenson was a founder of the Art Workers’ Coalition in April 1969. He would die in a car crash a few months later, in Kansas, with his mother who was at the wheel.

Two years earlier, in 1967, Swenson had written a short text, never published, in memory of Ad Reinhard, in which the critic and curator had recalled that one day the artist had called him “the surrealist critic.”⁷ Indeed, one might follow the method indicated by *Art in the Mirror*, looking at Swenson’s critical work with the eye of an artist and viewing it as a Surrealist work: a work that asks for an objective subversion of reality; a work that offers a powerful experiential dignity for viewers that encourages them to start out from their own feelings.

Translated from the Italian by Shanti Evans.

Notes

1. Gene R. Swenson, *The Other Tradition* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1966). The epigraphs in this essay are found on pages viii, 12, 25, 34, and 39, respectively.
2. Swenson published the article “The New American Sign Painters,” in the September 1962 issue of the magazine *ARTnews*, and between 1963 and 1964 a series of eight interviews titled “What is Pop Art?” (in which the exponents of the movement were given a chance to speak for the first time). Chronologically, his 1962 article was the second to have taken a critical look at those who would shortly come to be known to all as Pop artists (the first had been “‘Pop’ Culture, Metaphysical Disgust, and the New Vulgarians” by Max Kozloff, published in *Art International* in March 1962). With his use of the expression “sign painters,” Swenson intended to propose an interpretation of the pop sign that did not stop at banal celebration of a culture of consumption of the vernacular image.
3. “Kind of Subtitle / *Delay in Glass* / Use ‘delay’ instead of picture or painting; picture on glass becomes delay in glass—but delay in glass does not mean picture on glass.” Marcel

Duchamp, "The Green Box," in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), p. 26.

4. With great human and intellectual generosity, for which I am most grateful, Henry Martin, editor of the collected writings of Gene Swenson, in particular, has assisted me in my research. Martin gave me the manuscript of an unpublished essay, written circa in 1985, which he had written as the introduction to a proposed anthology to be titled *The Other Tradition: The Collected Essays of Gene Swenson*.

5. Henry Martin, introduction to "The Other Tradition: The Collected Essays of Gene Swenson" (unpublished manuscript, circa 1985).

6. Ibid.

7. Gene Swenson, "A Tribute to Ad Reinhardt" (unpublished manuscript, 1967).