As I was talking with London-based artist Helen Marten, my mind kept turning to Robert Smithson’s assertion that his “sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas—i.e. ‘printed matter.’” There are many ways to understand Smithson’s statement, but one would be to take him seriously and to try to understand language as material, as stuff, as a medium with which a visual artist can create. Of the artists who use language in their work, Marten seems to me to be the one who comes the closest to using language in this manner: text is how she begins in the studio, how she understands her work once it is completed, how she implicates the viewer. It is also something, as she suggests in this interview, that might cast a shadow, if only we permit our imaginations to run along those lines.

Evidence of Theatre
Greene Naftali, New York
September 21–November 4, 2023

Marten’s newest solo exhibition opened on both floors of Greene Naftali Gallery on September 21, 2023. Called Evidence of Theatre, it showcases all of the media deployed in her practice: sculpture, installation, architecture, drawing, video, sound, and indeed, language, in a book produced for the gallery and in a text created by the artist for the video, read by actor Gwendoline Christie. Marten gave me a preview of the show and conversed, gorgeously, about the allure of language and Christie. Marten gave me a preview of the show and

RAIL In the theater there is, presumably, some level of control. There’s a director; there is an stage-projection, we sit somewhere... versus the home where we have to move through, we possess, so we have to mess it up and clean it up and do it again. It sounds like you’re merging these two built elements for us.

H. M. One of the beginning points of inspiration for Evidence of Theatre was a book by the architect Bernard Tschumi, called The Manhattan Transcripts. It is a slender, but unbelievably poignant book of abstract architectural diagrams that explore the idea of space as a set of spatial transcripts, whereby incidental things like a tree or a trash can or a fence become complicit parts of an event. In the same way that theater is staged, the built landscape has an emotional tone. It has symptoms; because it has a rhythm, it has the possibility to interrupt or change how a daily action might occur.

The book narrates volatile and extreme events, violent and sexual events—theoretical proposals of murder, or suicide for example, diagramming in convoluted and not necessarily legible terms how those sets of actions unfold. The gestures are cinematic and abstract, not in all cases total, but more like vignettes of civic action. I thought it was such a beautiful way of imagining a ludic space of chance and play, and how the written terms of simulation which describe how we exist in the built landscape are co-opted and changed by the architecture that we’re around.

Inevitably, simply moving through the space of a park or down the street becomes part of an alternative form of critique that in its most husked-down version is a script. The subtext of theater is daily, global, infinite, obsessive. Each day holds billions of permutations. And I just imagined how fun, how melodramatic it would be to create an exhibition held by this experience of performing on two floors of a building where you might be spatially confused, where the qualities of the granular architecture would be similar but the imposed scenography, or setting of spaces would be very different. I liked the idea of the two levels of the exhibition behaving as a Möbius strip of activity where your participation in a viewing event on the ground floor might contribute a new form of terminal scripting to the content occurring on the eighth floor. I was thinking in a very wide way about theater because the new video is called Writing A Play (dark blue orchestra) (2023) and within that action of programming language and image in a tethered format, he might physical form or the participation or looking become tangled with a similar reciprocity or
conflict. Everything is part of the meta-play of making an exhibition: we receive and translate and understand information whilst also living simultaneously as moving parts in a domestic explosion of theater, little people in little homes creating stages. All of those systems of looking and calibrating might be crammed into both "evidence" and "theater," two loaded and polarizing bits of language: they can be both political and civic, but also incidental and scrappy, empirical or speculative. Evidence might be a bloody footprint, but it might also be dust, time, breath, sound. These kinds of micro and macro ways of looking at the social world are infinitely gymnastic; details can be Baroque, if you want them to be or elemental, if you want them to be.

**RAIL** And do you envision the viewer becoming an actor in the play? Or are we meant only to be spectators?

**H. M.** I'm not entirely sure yet. There is no directional script, per se, for the viewing audience. But I love the idea of different registers of participation: if you visited the exhibition alongside many people, your natural choreography of looking at things might be disturbed or interrupted, your individual privacies secrete onto one another. Individually governing self-awareness might be abandoned, you might sit there alone and casually pick your fingers or scratch your crotch and the translation of what you're looking at becomes something very different, because your private register is more innate, more deeply unguarded. There are so many images of critique, of mirroring, or self-engagement so I do hope that bodies become like syntax, an underlying grammar that contributes to understanding the viewer is part of this set of potential transcripts—not necessarily that you individually have created a narrative or performed a role—but more like the Bernard Tschumi idea of portent, of abstract relationships between people and spaces. Theater encourages a mixture of fear and pleasure. The process is collective, but deeply subjective as well.

**RAIL** Theaters and galleries prescribe actions for us. We have certain ways that we feel we're meant to behave in those spaces. It will be really interesting to see when those two are blended: are you thrown out of your expectations of how to behave as a viewer? As you're walking through a museum, you might walk with your hands behind your back. But if you sat in a theater with your hands behind your back, that would be incredibly uncomfortable. So even just something small, like an incidental gesture, could wind up creating critical self-awareness.

**H. M.** My friend takes her three-year-old daughter to exhibitions, and she continually looks with her hands behind her back. My friend calls it "gallery mode." I think about this new blueprint of behavior that is assumed as soon as you move into a type of space where the tonal qualities of that space are imposed. Different spatial questions are asked of you as somebody receiving critical content. Your agency is there—to leave, to move, to disagree—but it's also compromised by virtue of a set of known expectations.

There are a lot of mice in the exhibition, whether fleetingly, or calligraphic inflections of mice in paintings, or quite literally cast aluminum mice that populate the top floor. I love the idea of the audience behaving like rats or mice. They are constant variables in a city, part of an abject, low level, streaming of anxiety. Mice make the perfect analogy for bodies as units of currency, dumb moving vectors instead of translators or participants in a legible way. The pace of viewing between the two floors is very different—downstairs has many more works. The unfolding of imagery, of materiality, and of language in these spaces is not the same. I don't have a preference which way round you would engage with the exhibitions, but I'm curious how it will feel. The atmospheric density changes. It's almost like upstairs is more atomic and molecular: you're aware of the sound, the sound is very specific, it's very loud at points, very deep and bassy. The LED screen is a luminous wedge of light, you see it entirely in daylight. It's a twenty-eight-minute video, so it will inevitably be seen sitting on a very long bench, whilst this enormous plane of light unfolds in close-proximity before you. Downstairs, there is an obsessive laminating of information. Motifs and ideas are rhythmic and repeated. The only way to get through it is to keep moving.

**RAIL** Each gallery, too, has its own approach. For the lower gallery, you're in the city, you have to walk between buildings, and underneath the High Line, and you're hearing things, you're being brushed by people, and then you enter this quieter gallery space.
continue throughout the twenty minutes? Or is there an active that's being spoken, a voiceover. Does that connect? I'm curious about that. In the trailer, we have a narrator necessarily sets the scene. Are there pieces that navigate how meaning is joined in the space of rearrangement and referral, where translation is not immediate. Sculptures mirror one another in the sense that at their most elemental, they are equally sized rectangles. Each could be an approximation of a domestic setting: a table, a roof, a game board, a sofa. All are networked forms with the offer of alternative semantic routes of exchange or collapse: bridges, beds, pillows, windows, lateral surfaces on which to lay down details that navigate how meaning is joined in pieces together.

**RAIL** You mentioned the sound of the video and I'm curious about that. In the trailer, we have a narrative that's being spoken, a voiceover. Does that continue throughout the twenty minutes? Or is there more of an aural component? H. M. There's a voiceover by Gwendoline Christie, who is unbelievable. And there are thirty-six— I'm calling them tenets—there are thirty-six numbered sections of texts that Gwendoline repeats throughout. And from zero to twenty-eight minutes, you're cycling through a sequence of interrogative disquisitions. They are syllogistic and intimate, but abstract. Gwendoline begins each section with an ascending number, so you understand there is an imposed chronology. The voiceover always speaks in the first person, so she co-opts you into this relationship with her—the protagonist and listener. But the video itself in terms of its characters doesn't have a single narrative representative. There are qualities and animals. There is snow, there's mud, there's water, there's earth, there's asphalt. We move through different natural and built environments, dragged along by a text that doesn't have a fixed arc but speaks mournfully and actively about loss, about family, about desire, about the ephemerality of love and longing, about the material qualities of handling substance that suddenly shifts its personality. And then, alongside the voiceover, there is a composed soundtrack.

Beatrice Dillon and I worked very closely and had some incredibly rich conversations about how the sound would match or disappear against the framework of the spoken language. Beatrice used a generative sound composition program called physical modeling synthesis, whereby almost everything that we created, apart from the live clarinet and a live piano, was synthesized sound. You can construct the terms for those sounds to exist because the format is mathematical and algorithmic: the waveform is computational and follows certain equations to synthesize a type of instrument. For instance, you might want an emotional tone, say, I don't know, sadness. You could imagine in spatial terms what sadness might look like and create a tonal equivalent by setting out a synthesized “room,” a blank, hard, empty space. Perhaps. Maybe that room is a metal room: you create a metal room and then you adopt a beater, whose material characteristics you also define. And maybe your beater is made of wood, or it's made of paper, or it's a feather. You define the action of striking, the intensity, the speed, the rhythm, so you have your input variables and your output variables, alongside the wholly synthesized space into which you pour and “record” that sound. Everything is generated and adopted, so sound is newly formed as a set of fluctuating qualities where you can sift between different generative terms. You can create incredibly non-organic and alien sounds, but in a delightfully empirical and controlled way.

I could say something cryptic and odd, like, okay, there's a dead deer lying on the snow, bleeding profusely into that snow and we need a sound that encapsulates the same kind of dendrite density of the blood’s swell, the molecular feel of hot liquid moving through cold solid, the sadness and emotive motion of this blood leaking into the snow. And of course, the poignancy of an animal dying on white ground. How can we reflect all of this with the sound? Playing with those emotional switches in such a flexible, magical, and poetic way was so much fun. It blew my mind, this acoustic propulsion, this true molecular flexibility. I had a very fixed idea that I wanted to replicate the feeling of a classical piano refrain. Something known that already harnessed an immediate human response. I had in mind one of the Gymnopédies pieces by Erik Satie, but I was thinking about Philip Corner’s re-mixed versions, “Satie Slowly,” where these pieces of music are exploded and re-parsed in slowed down and economical terms. Every bar of the piano is like wading through mud or pain; its cleanliness is newly formed as a set of fluctuating qualities where these pieces of music are exploded and re-parsed in slowed down and economical terms. Every bar of the piano is like wading through mud or pain; its cleanliness relative to emotional intent is shocking. I loved the idea of trying to replicate that sense of deploying music for theatrical means. We took that Satie piece as a kind of a baseline script in a way. Beatrice re-wrote a short pianistic score, and we recorded some live piano with all its creaks and pedal density, mixing it alongside sounds created with the physical modeling synthesis tools.

**RAIL** Given how much control that you're able to exercise over something like the score, how was it then to work with a person to read the script? How much direction did you feel that you had to give Beatrice? H. M. It was really fun. We had an amazing day where we recorded for about eight hours. We did the whole thing in a day. She didn’t want to take a break, so we just powered through with green tea and water. And I would give enigmatic and abstract direction like, “Speak like a debased toad,” or “Talk to me as though your

Helen Marten, wood; maple; birch plywood; particle board; magnets; nylon inks; sand cast aluminum; cardboard; cast resin; cast jesmonite; cast pewter; glazed ceramics; paper; stitched fabric; LED screens; CGI animation; sound, 111 x 203 x 191 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: 

...or poetry, I find almost the only way I can concentrate on my voice? When you wrote it, did you hear it in her mouth? When someone is talking, do you read aloud by someone else? ...not always have the voice or the platform or the space or even the confidence to articulate in the same way. You might go through a day of being surrounded by hundreds of people but not actually say a single word, whereas optically and via touch it is near impossible to avoid being stupefied with information. I always love to find grammatical or linguistic patterns in the things I do. I start every work with text. I’m reading or making notes, maybe there’s a word that implies a certain beginning structure, or maybe there’s something truly physical in a sentence that gives me an implication of form, or parts bizarrely stacked together.

It’s interesting to imagine staggering and tripping over deliberately to perceive something, that a mark of intent which might, say, appear like “x” at eye-level becomes something wholly other when you’re lying on the floor. I like the gaps between things, especially gaps in language where there is generative possibility for entirely new and radical meaning. And what something becomes when it morphs into metaphor or slides into a joke or a punch line, or even a literal script where your creation of that authorial awareness, that authored awareness, that self-reflexive or tautological sense of speech has become overt. Fundamentally, I just really enjoy messing with meaning, crafting new possession or action in shifting quantities.

RAIL. I’m reminded of Derrida writing about the idea that citations, first of all, are additive, that they exist to be added to, which feels to me very much like an additive sculpture. But also that they’re magic because they re-create, that the way that magic happens is through repetition and reversal. His example is abracadabra, which is both repetitive and also reversed. It’s wonderful to hear you talk about this in this way that seems so organic and natural.

H. M. I love things like that. The longest reversible word in the English language, I think, is a Joycean term “tattartatt,” which he conceived as being the noise that would be heard when somebody knocked repetitively on a door and the door wasn’t answered. It’s like creating language with no explicit one-to-one correspondence, but instead a sonic inference that opens new possibilities between human insight, and all of its corroborating ideas of the mercantile, the miserable, the expectant, the proud. I just think that’s such a beautiful way to be seduced by the world. It’s this constant, elegiac, deeply felt way of experiencing language. And so much fun. The beauty and humbling luxury of being an artist is like that, making a festive plea for newness in some discursive way.

RAIL. In this way of playing with words, then how do you edit yourself? As a person who loves language myself, I would wonder how could you stop? Theater can also be threat. Theater can be heart. Where is that moment of editorial control for you?

H. M. That’s a great question. I don’t know. I think that part of the pleasure–pain principle of being any kind of creative producer, whether that’s writing, making movies, or music is the point of difference between capture and release, and where you as the author exert your thumbprint or obliterate en route. How much scaffolding or how much debris you want to leave for your audience or your viewer or your listener to use as a guide for understanding what you’ve done is changeable. I think the most successful ideas give you both space and breadth for rediscovery, but also enough of an intent and belief in atomic honesty of that idea to give you some form of foothold within it.

I’ve been thinking for a long time about writing a text about the mutual qualities of a practice of creating that uses both images and words. The condition of making things and writing things. I was exploring this idea of...
not as one kind of concept, and vectors as another. With both language and material, there can be a brick-to-the-head moment of something being so clear, so obvious, so overt in its descriptive terms, that there’s no question of not understanding what it is, where its intent lies. So that would be a vector, a straight-line route of communicating. It’s expedient. It’s like an arrow pointing and explaining; you are there. And you have the same thing in language where text might be cleanly descriptive even if it’s not factual language; there’s no underlying current, no subtext, it just is what it is. Then there’s an opposed method of communicating where the corruption of qualities, of syntax or more singular parts of language is odd and disruptive. Things are buried with other things atop and beneath. This method celebrates the idea that there’s another, longer, weirder, more complicated shadow in operation, and that shadow doesn’t stop, but rather combines and elongates, that in combination with multiple “othernesses,” it deliberately does something completely unexpected. It’s treacherous and belongs to a technique that traces a peripheral intent, that holds in its grasp many competing lines of thinking or wanting. This is the net. There is a sense of set parameters, but within it, hierarchies are a mess. Ideas are just about contained, but they are willfully osmotic. This is not the economy of the billboard that you understand from a distance. It is a magical re-wiring of deciphering or authoring where you are permitted clarity and restraint in varying quantities. There may even be a sense of deliberate withholding, where the very basic components of something can only be understood by being left alone. We shuffle around this planet mostly knowing that we can be both verbal and nonverbal in a matter of seconds, flip between the two.

RAIL. Do you think that your writing or, frankly, any writing can be ekphrastic? Can writing or speech be the verbal or literary equivalent of an art object? Do they coexist in parallel? Or are they constantly bouncing off each other?

H. M. I think they can absolutely exist in parallel. Imagining language to have a shadow in the same way that a twig or a stone or hands might have a shadow is such a beautiful and basic way of imagining content, but kind of radical. You know, to imagine that you might literally bump into something that was a spoken word. We speak about it enigmatically, so I’m interested in the literal analogue. For years before this show, I was trying to imagine how you could make an exhibition that would be so maximal, so overwrought and disgusting in image terms, but with literally just a voiceover, and I was like, it’s impossible. I don’t know how to do this. To question the elastic or moral rearmament of spectacle without physicality. How we equip ourselves to instinctively understand context and content changes all the time. A minute cosmos intersects with a global one. It’s a difficult abstraction.

RAIL. I think the Duchampian concept of the infra-thin comes in here as well. When he thinks about how you could smell the cigarette on someone’s breath as they speak to you, he’s thinking about that as that moment of slippage, but we can also consider it a moment where a word could become totally palpable.

H. M. It’s the most exquisitely beautiful concept, I almost can’t bear it. It’s so good. Maybe there’s also something kind of skeumorphic in it, you know, something exerting pretense in a very staged way, trying to be leather or trying to be woodgrain, imposing a weird psychological treachery on an object that is behaving just as you want it to, but it’s absolutely not that thing, only a simulation. Roland Barthes said something similar, describing the stage being like the horizontal path of an optic pencil, a beautiful motif and very similar to the infra-thin, to the trace identity, to minute shades of change or difference. The stage as an optic pencil smashes through the presentation of a horizontal ledge and turns sensation and experience to notional debris. It literally marks the position of us as grabby eyeballs who watch and receive, as simple algorithmic identities: we eat, we shit, we fuck, and we program around new desires, new whims, but ultimately, we have a built-in index that needs to be lanced against to reframe an otherwise empirical or mathematical experiencing world.

RAIL. Barthes also writes about the way that clothing might slightly separate itself off the body. There might be that slight moment of separation between your skin in the collar or right where your cuff separates somewhat from the wrist, and the wrist then becomes the most erotic part of the body, not because it’s being tugged at, but rather because there is that separation. I think that Barthes and Duchamp are really interested too in the way that language might separate itself just in that moment. And then, there is an erotics of language there.

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