

domus

The creative storm of Helen Marten: "art must show how democracy works"

From sculpture to video, from installation to the writing of novels and essays, leading up to theatre. We met the British artist, Turner Prize winner and one of the most anticipated names at Art Basel Paris 2025, on the eve of *30 Blizzards.*, her first performance.

There is great anticipation for *30 Blizzards.*, the performance that will animate the Palais d'Iéna in Paris from October 22 to 26. Built in 1939 and now home to the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, the building is a modernist landmark by Auguste Perret, rarely opened to art. It is likely the most awaited off-fair event of [Art Basel Paris 2025](#) – not only for the allure of its architecture but above all because it marks Helen Marten's debut in the field of performance.

Regarded as one of the most compelling voices of her generation, the Turner Prize-winning artist – known for installations that combine heterogeneous materials and layered cultural references – brings her work to the stage for the first time, weaving together writing, sculpture, music, and a public dimension.

We met her for an exclusive preview to retrace the stages of a practice in which language becomes a visual material, and to understand how this new experiment expands the boundaries of her research.



MIU MIU PRESENTS 30 BLIZZARDS. by Helen Marten. Video still, Widow, Widow monologue by: Kathryn Hunter. Courtesy by Helen Marten

The language of things

At first glance, Marten's work seems to originate from objects: everyday elements, either found or made in the studio. Cotton swabs, coins, bathtubs, lime peels, billiard chalk, chess pieces coexist in her works with specially constructed forms, creating a disorientation between what appears real and what is artificial. In reality, these fragments are conceived as part of a much broader system of signification:

"Language is a system that we know very well how to exploit and wrap around things."

"There is a kind of unusual topology, a counter-mapping of our expectations of how texts and objects work together."

Helen Marten

And if the visual becomes just one component, the real core of her research remains language: “Words communicate, but at the same time they also roll back on themselves in a chaotic knot of images.”

Texts and titles therefore do not simply accompany the works but become an integral part of them: “There is a kind of unusual topology, a counter-mapping of our expectations of how texts and objects function together.” Contradicting these expectations or sometimes reinforcing them, Marten builds systems in which different signifiers, once brought into relation, open up new forms of meaning.

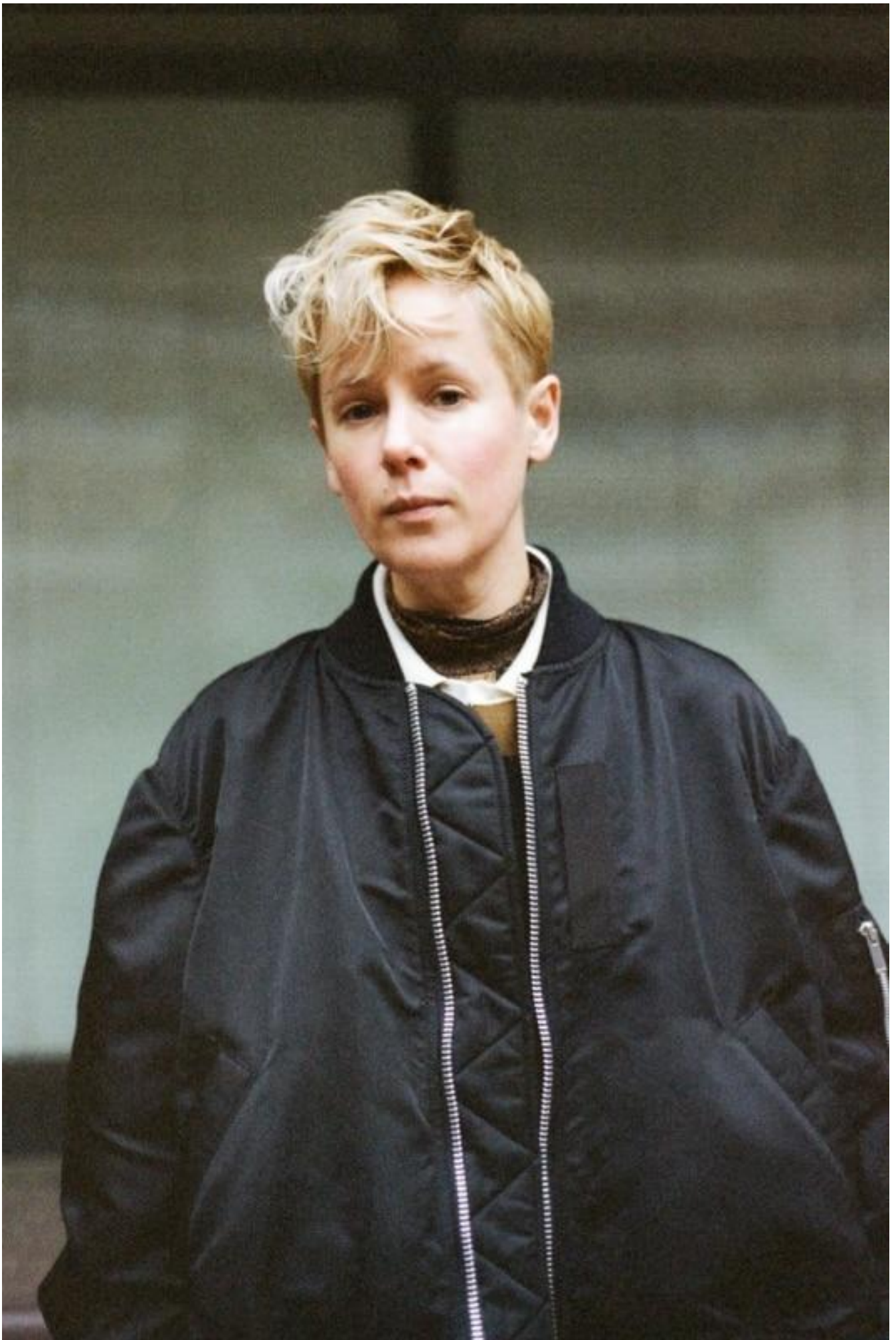
Writing as a method

The centrality of language is not confined to the work itself but runs through her entire practice: “This idea of a work that retains productive syntax, in my case, is always very much embedded in the work itself.”

This is demonstrated by the central role of writing, which the artist sees as both an integral part of the creative process and a parallel, complementary path. “My work has always involved writing to some extent,” she explains, referring to an attitude that over time has naturally led her to engage with the printed page.

With her first novel, *The Boiled in Between* (2020), Marten staged a world of fluid and unstable relationships. Today she is working on *Broken Villas*, which she describes as “unruly non-fiction,” built around an archive of black-and-white photographs sourced from now-defunct newspapers and magazines. “I have hundreds of them, I bought them online or at auctions. A few years ago, I started sifting through them to identify typological patterns. One of the most evident was the motif of the container, whether literal, metaphorical, or conceptual. For instance, a boulder can be a container, a pillow can be thought of as one, a swimming pool is a container.”

The result is a series of essays that, she explains, “take a single image as the starting point for a dialectical and hypothetical journey across myths, languages, and narratives.”



Helen Marten. Photo Credit Benedict Brink



MIU MIU PRESENTS 30 BLIZZARDS. by Helen Marten. Helen Marten, Modern Sluice. Courtesy by Helen Marten.

A shared debut

Sharing is another element that characterizes her diverse artistic practice.

If her international career began with her solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery in London in 2012, Helen Marten's name was firmly established in 2016, when faced with two major awards – the Hepworth Prize for Sculpture and the Turner Prize – she chose to share the prize money with the other finalists. "In light of the political shadow that is stretching further and further across the world, art has a responsibility to show how democracy should work... This is therefore an invitation to strengthen communality and create a platform for everyone," she declared at the time.

“The staging and dramaturgy of the space were deliberately designed for the architecture of the Palais.”

Helen Marten



MIU MIU PRESENTS 30 BLIZZARDS. by Helen Marten. Video still, Patient, Patient monologue by: Eve Esfandiari-Denney. Courtesy by Helen Marten

“The Palais d’Iéna is a beautiful building, above all because it occupies this incredible threshold between something incredibly brutal and something incredibly flirtatious.” Charged with the political weight of the functions it has held in the past, the interior of the building unfolds as a long, linear space, with floor-to-ceiling windows on both sides that have influenced the performance, from the conception of the movements to the staging: “There is something cinematic about the way you move through it, with the progressive sense of passing from one space to another and then having to return.”

And then there is the collaboration with Miu Miu, a supporter of the project, which Marten describes as “a brand that proposes an idea of expansive plurality.”

What to expect from the Blizzards

From *30 Blizzards*, one can expect a true creative storm: a work born from the union of excellence across different fields and conceived as an ephemeral, site-specific experience. At the same time, this debut also becomes a key to reading Marten's practice. Looking at her trajectory, the move into performance seems a natural progression – following her novel – rather than the mere outcome of a commission.

This is confirmed by the method of writing the libretto, which expanded her research on language: "First I started writing the five monologues for the videos. And from those five-voice positions I then began to write outward, until I scripted the entire libretto for the cast of 30 characters."

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"The idea of activating speech using song, using choreography, using gesture within the timescale of a performative or theatrical exchange was a very new challenge. It's been incredibly exciting."

The title of the work also lends itself to different registers of interpretation. "In a literal sense, the 30 Blizzards are the 30 versions of the story, as well as the 30 characters that make up the cosmos of the company performing the piece."

The second register is graphic: "I love this repetition of zed, zed, zed... when you pronounce it: it makes the word onomatopoeic, beautiful and thrilling, capable of evoking both the density of sleep and the jolt of electrocution."



MIU MIU PRESENTS 30 BLIZZARDS. by Helen Marten Video still, Child, Child monologue by: Laura Green. Courtesy by Helen Marten

The third concerns the visual strength of the term: “Think of snow. What happens with snow is that it produces a new architectural coating that softens everything, creating an entirely new surface upon which to write or script a new grammar of theatre, a new sense of possibility.”

Finally, the fourth is metaphorical: “Blizzards becomes an analogy for human emotions: each of us has our own inner barometer, a kind of personal climate. Happiness, sadness, shame, desire, pain, pleasure... each of these states reflects an emotional weather.”

An expanded theatre

Huge graphite silk-screened walls leaning against the columns. Four tall stages designed to mirror the symmetry of the building. A large circular industrial track running around the perimeter, with which the performers will interact by retrieving props.

“30 Blizzards. is a metaphor or analogy for human emotions.”

Helen Marten

“There is also a central stage, the ‘kernel’ of the exhibition-performance, which becomes an expanded space, like a civic square or a place of collective gathering, but which also recalls the classical stage of opera or theatre.”

The installation also includes many windows that allow moments of the performance to be framed or obscured: “This motif of framing came quite naturally, almost as an invitation from the architecture itself.”

Opening Image: MIU MIU PRESENTS 30 BLIZZARDS. by Helen Marten. Video still, Patient, Patient monologue by: Eve Esfandiari-Denney Courtesy by Helen Marten