

SOLDES

Unreliable Narrator
curated by Jan Tumlir
with works by
Matthew Brannon &
Alan Reid

EXHIBITION OPENING
May 27, 2023, 5-8pm

For Immediate Release

Visual artists have long derived the content of their works from written narratives of all sorts, but at some point in the twentieth century, this practice came to be viewed with acute suspicion. The early writings of Clement Greenberg state the case vehemently. In 1940, this critic aligned the becoming-modern of art with “a revolt against the dominance of literature, which was subject matter at its most oppressive.” Accordingly, subject matter as such was denounced within the precincts of painting and sculpture as irreconcilable with the pursuit of non-objective abstraction deemed proper to these forms. But, here and elsewhere, the particular stress placed on literature as a negative influence might point us beyond the doctrine of specificity-to-medium that dominated those years. If some part of the project of modernism was devoted to purging every last trace of writing from visual works, it is perhaps because it had become problematic not only at the level of content but that of authorship. Here, we can observe the formation of a lasting rift between art and literature. From the former we expect, if not direct expression, at least some degree of self-disclosure; from the latter, subterfuge, a proliferation of personae. These subject positions are antithetical.

Of course, there are always exceptions: artists who comfortably occupy the border between these realms. This exhibition features two such artists, Matthew Brannon and Alan Reid, who also happen to be friends. Both are avid consumers of literature, novels in particular, and neither resists the influence of the written word on their studio practice. To the contrary, they take every opportunity to play both sides of the fence, truth-telling one moment and “fictioning” the next.

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“*Je est un autre*,” those oft-cited words of Arthur Rimbaud could here serve as a mantra for this show. Equally, this introductory passage from André Breton’s novel *Nadja*: “Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then everything would amount to knowing whom I ‘haunt.’” And perhaps most fitting of all is the unattributed epigraph that opens Rachel Kushner’s recent collection of essays, *The Hard Crowd*: “What others get from me is then reflected back onto me, and forms the atmosphere called ‘I.’” Authors tend to hesitate before the capital letter that stands for the self; the moment it is set down on the page, it summons scare quotes. In literature, “I” becomes other, another character, and moreover an aggregate of characters. In art, such subjective indeterminacy can appear as a fault. But not here: Reid and Brannon freely indulge in “heteroglossia,” as Mikhail Bakhtin qualified the wide-ranging voice of the novelist. They translate the vaporous thought-worlds of literature into material objects, things that are in the room right along with yourself.

–Jan Tumlir