

Mark Manders: Artist under the Table

'Under a table you have the possibility to test your own absence. The realization that life is taking its course, even without you, is an intense human experience; it shows the finiteness of personality.'

The above is the opening sentence of 'The Absence of Mark Manders', a text from 1994 on Mark Manders' website. *The Absence of Mark Manders* was also the title selected for an exhibition which has been on the road since 2007 (after Hanover in Germany, Bergen in Norway and Ghent in Belgium, it will be in Zürich in Switzerland until June 14, 2009) and its accompanying publication. Book and exhibition contain many parts of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Mark Manders (b. Volkel, 1968) has been creating since 1986: *Self-Portrait as a Building*. A Total Plan that has been growing steadily. But the work will never be displayed in its entirety or in its intended ultimate form. In the preface to the book, that shows its progress until now, Manders apologises for this inconvenience. Although many parts can be considered complete, they have, in his eyes, not been exhibited in the right place, or been photographed under the right conditions, and above all, not been linked to each other. Out of necessity – in order to have the money to continue working – 'fragments' have been sold over the years and it would be impossible to buy them all back. So how should we look at his work? *'... please note that all of the works ... in fact belong together in a single building with a gray concrete floor and white walls, in spaces with varying heights and lit from above – some of them from the side – by natural light. You cannot look out of this building – the windows have either been covered with fake newspapers or they face other parts of the building.'* It will never be really cozy in the building where this artist's body of ideas has to live.

In 1986, at the age of eighteen, Manders took the writing utensils he had at hand and drew up a floor plan of an imaginary building: *Inhabited for a Survey, (First Floor Plan from Self-Portrait as a Building)*. This was to be a decisive point for his life as an artist. He had actually wanted to become a writer, to create one book – with no beginning and no end – at which he would have

to work continually, but he feels more at home using visual means to describe things. The floor plan is the visual equivalent of the plot of a novel. The pens and felt tips neither write nor draw, but with their material bodies represent a system in the process of formation. For Manders, the real and the imagined world are too complex to be captured in words (alone). As he puts it: *'The world itself is more complex than the world of language that has been embedded in the world.'*

With his creations Mark Manders constructs a universe of his own within the world in which he finds himself. In doing so he makes use of images *and* language. The execution he leaves to an imaginary artist who operates under the name of 'Mark Manders' (more about that later).

Visual art and the poetic word greatly enhance each other. The titles Manders gives his work are never purely random. The epigrams strengthen, explain and/or underpin the visual work. Language is one of the building blocks that Manders uses, in the same way as a painter sometimes mixes sand with his paint. He takes this a very long way. If necessary he uses newspapers he has created himself, which are distributed in tiny or large editions depending on the occasion. Together with a partner Manders even runs his own publishing house: Roma Publications. Whether the name contains a reference to the gypsy-like existence of Manders' self-portrait is open to question, though for someone with an associative mind it seems more likely than not.

Conversely, the linguistic can be found in the visual work. Manders takes 'visual language' fairly literally and often regards his combinations as sentences. And just as sentences are made up of words, he will connect objects with, and even join them to, each other. Clamping a sugar cube, for example, between an upper-arm bone made of epoxy and a coffee cup: *A Place where My Thoughts Are Frozen Together* (2001). Or creating a *Still Life with Interconnected Holes* (2006). Sometimes he helps the imagining of a bond by adding a rope or a cord: *Room with Broken Sentence (Cup / – / Cup / Fragment of Forgetting / Cup / Transmitter / Cup / – (– / Receiver) / Cup / – (Chair / Chair / Matchbox / –) Cup / Boomerang / Cup / – / Cup / – / – (Bottle / –) / – (Bottle /*



Mark Manders, *Livingroom Scene*. 2008.
 Various materials, 330 x 350 x 300 cm.
 Courtesy of Zeno x Gallery, Antwerp /
 Photo by Dirk Pauwels, SMAK.

Mark Manders, *Inhabited for a Survey (First Floor Plan from Self-Portrait as a Building)*. 1986.
 Writing materials, erasers, painting tools, scissors,
 8 x 267 x 90 cm.
 The Art Institute of Chicago
 (gift promised by Donna and Howard Stone).



-) / Chair / - / - / Marble / Bottle / Cup] (1993-1998) or chains a post-fox (the animal is carrying a letter in his mouth to transmit thoughts) to a wardrobe with an upside-down table on top: *Parallel Occurrence* (2001/2002). Each of his installations is a meticulously worked out sequence of associations that is so personal, so private that without an explanation – and luckily MM provides one from time to time – they would be completely incomprehensible to an outsider.

These works are not completely static. Manders regularly reviews the setting and composition of the fragments. In that lies a parallel with what people regularly do in their own homes: they move the furniture around and replace parts of their interior. Since Manders' world is in fact a virtual representation of an imaginary construction, he can keep on building in a way very few people can, transcending borders and space. For that reason he constantly has to adjust his floor plan so he can accommodate and display the stream of household goods coming in.

However personal his work may be – and one would not readily attribute any work of his to any other artist – there is always a certain absence of individuality. His human figures are a hotchpotch of idealised forms from classical traditions. In this he shows a certain preference for the effect of unbaked clay: little or no structure, no wrinkles. The same applies to his choice of impersonal objects. Ornaments are ballast. A cupboard must be nothing more than a storage system.

The only 'frivolity' on a bench devised by Manders is a gigantic clothes peg. But that does also have a practical reason: it can hold a newspaper.

The artist Mark Manders is something between a character in a novel, who gives a non-autobiographical commentary from a first-person perspective, and the avatar who in *Second Life* inhabits the virtual world of the internet. The Mark Manders of flesh and blood has consciously created an imaginary artist. He says: 'To me, the artist Mark Manders is a fictitious person. He is a character living in a world that has been logically devised and constructed and consists of thoughts that were halted or solidified when they were at their strongest. He is someone who disappears into his actions. He lives in a building that he leaves continually, an uninhabited house in fact.'

The archetypical artist is absent in Mark Manders' spaces – and when he's not lying under the table, he's looking down from above at the dioramas that are his own creations. Mark Manders keeps his distance.

Frank van der Ploeg
Translated by Pleuke Boyce

Stephan Berg *et al.*, *The Absence of Mark Manders*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007.
www.markmanders.org / www.romapublications.org

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 See www.onserfdeel.be or www.onserfdeel.nl