

An Ode to 'What If' Thinking

The World of Mark Manders

224

[DAVID STROBAND]

It's not easy to explain the characteristic style of artist Mark Manders, who was born in 1968 in the Dutch town of Volkel (Netherlands) and now lives and works in Arnhem (Netherlands) and Ronse (Flanders). Opinions on his work are available, it is true, but any single descriptive and interpretative text very soon falls short of the mark.

Mark Manders' world unfolds in all manner of configurations in which every object becomes a building block in an ever broader visual poem. Coffee mugs, dangling ballpoints, teabags, tables, chairs, big, indefinable objects, imitation animals, human figures, bits of rope and drawings: these are just a handful of the many objects that bolster Manders' visual language.

Every time I come in contact with his idiom I am seized with admiration and confusion. His language makes me introspective, and leads me to question whether I am sufficiently curious and uninhibited in the way I look at the world around me. Manders once wrote of this world: 'In the past, when I went for a walk I would go through streets where there might be a clothes peg lying on the ground, or when I went inside somewhere there would be a table with, for example, a phone and an empty vase on it, in short, I found myself in a world that I had not myself arranged. I decided to construct a building alongside or, rather, inside this world. A building in which a changing stillness reigns, in which and through which I am constantly confronted with my own choices, with Mark Manders' choices'. Early in 2009 I visited an exhibition of a great deal of Manders' work at the SMAK in Ghent. I was a little afraid that the combination of so many diverse elements from this artist's world might generate a lot of disquiet and fuss. But the opposite was the case. Walking through the rooms containing the various works you seemed to have entered a domain of tranquillity where every object seemed to be whispering to you, seducing you into inner contemplation. The title of this exhibition was *The Absence of Mark Manders*: at first glance a paradoxical statement. But in fact the more you are drawn into Manders' world, the greater his absence becomes. He has left too much behind in his spaces for there to be any room for himself. At first I wanted to scream for his presence and ask him to guide me through his enigmatic world. I wanted to understand this world, and I needed the artist to help me do so. Later I realised that it was precisely his absence that I liked. It ensured that I had all the space I needed to

decipher his language in my own way and to make it my own. And then, what a fantastic space it becomes.

Manders is a linguistic artist. In addition to the fact that he speaks in images, he also knows how to give verbal relief to his visual work. His comments in interviews, for example, add an interesting dimension to his work. Whereas that time in Ghent his absence gave me so much pleasure, now I am recruiting him to help tell you about his world. And so I shall be quoting him regularly in this article. Not out of laziness, but for the sake of precision. To get as close as possible to the specific language of this artist.

Finally, I have to say from my heart that I am amazed that in the last fifteen years there has not been one major solo exhibition of Manders' work in the Netherlands, the country where his roots lie, when there have been such exhibitions in the rest of the world, including in Belgium. Not surprising, given that country's strong surrealist tradition. Though this last sentence won't please Manders much. He hates any interpretation of his work that smacks of Surrealism.



Inhabited for a Survey
(*First Floor Plan Self-Portrait as a building*. Mixed media (sculpture). Writing materials, erasers, painting tools, scissors. Variable dimensions. 1986-1996-2002. © Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

Self-portrait as a Building

In 1986, at the age of 18, Manders created his first work. *Inhabited for a Survey* (*First Floor Plan from Self-Portrait as a Building*) shows a floor plan, laid out on the floor and made up of felt-tip pens, pencils, ballpoint pens, rubbers, scissors, sponges, tubes of paint and rulers. Together the various objects form seven oblongs of varying dimensions with circular spaces at the short ends. You can interpret this floor plan as two schematised human figures; heads and trunks are there, arms and legs are missing. This plan, which as you observe it so easily turns into two rough sketches of human figures that are incapable of movement, constitutes the beginning of an increasingly sprawling world which Manders henceforth has consistently called 'Self-portrait as a Building'. Manders has this to say about this seminal work: 'This floor plan

from 1986 is made up of all the writing materials I had at the time, and served as the basis for a future written self-portrait. It related to a building in which seven people together formed a self-portrait. It was to be a book without beginning or end, on which I would have constantly to keep working. I thought it was interesting that it was a dry, formal floor plan with no observable movement whatsoever. I wanted to project a mental self-portrait onto it, in which everything would play out exclusively in language. To create a self-portrait seemed like the most fundamental thing to do. However, I realised when I was writing that I didn't like the fact that I could dictate to the public, by means of written sentences, exactly what they should be thinking. I didn't want the self-portrait to become genuinely personal, it was supposed to remain abstract.'

Here Mark Manders provides a little insight into the character of *Self-portrait as a Building*. A character that is difficult to define because it contains such an infinite number of mutations. Manders has been working on it for 25 years now, and when you think you have at last discovered the path within Selfportrait as a Building, you soon find you have been deceived. Seemingly familiar objects keep coming back in varying arrangements, and within the various modules in which they operate they take on a different character each time. The substance of Selfportrait as a Building is remarkably hybrid. It has a multiplicity of inhabitants, and every new edition of this progressive work throws up new encounters: for example, with a schematic rat or fox, a sugar lump, a pan, a shoe or a collection of teabags. All these inhabitants travel the world with Manders and as a result of the continual transformations they have surprising encounters with each other.

In the catalogue for *The Absence of Mark Manders*, by way of justification the artist writes an article entitled: 'A message to the owner of this catalogue'.

'I would like to offer my apologies – this is a book about an unfinished project. Although most of the works in here are finished, they have not been photographed in the right locations. The photos were taken in museums with the wrong floors or bad light, in grubby studios and even in supermarkets. But the main problem is that never at any point is there a connection – a connection such as you get when you look at architecture and its location or style, and especially a connection in time. You can't just walk from one space to the other. I have also shown my work in group exhibitions, in strange locations, in beautiful old buildings, in old factories or schools, and it was fantastic – they fitted the space and that made me very happy. Yet these pictures have in some way been misplaced.

I have also sold a lot of work. Out of necessity. How else could I have carried on working? Now my work is spread throughout the world, which should make me happy. A lot of it is now in major collections or has been acquired by good museums, but it is impossible to buy everything back.'

Here Manders touches on the impossibility of gaining an understanding of his work in its entirety. The essence of *Self-portrait as a Building* is that it is continually suspending itself. Again and again the viewer sees fragments which, despite their seemingly orderly modular appearance of systematic exposition, still do not deliver any evolving, ordered, essentially encyclopaedic insight into the 'story' of this ever-progressing project.

If you put the words *Self-portrait and Building together*, the idea emerges of a vital investigation into the artist's own 'self'. An investigation that must ulti-



Short Sad Thoughts. Brass, nails. 2 x (22 x 3) cm. 1990. Photo by Brian Forrest.

mately be set out schematically in a ground-plan. In various statements Manders acknowledges that his artistic activity does not necessarily fit seamlessly into his personal life. Mark Manders the man is completely at the beck and call of his 'Self-portrait' and for him Manders the artist is a fictitious person.

The great, pure choir of 'Five'

Whenever you come face to face with Manders' world, you find yourself wondering just how, as an artist, he actually relates to his objects. They are the actors in his world; created by himself, or found by him and thus already in existence.

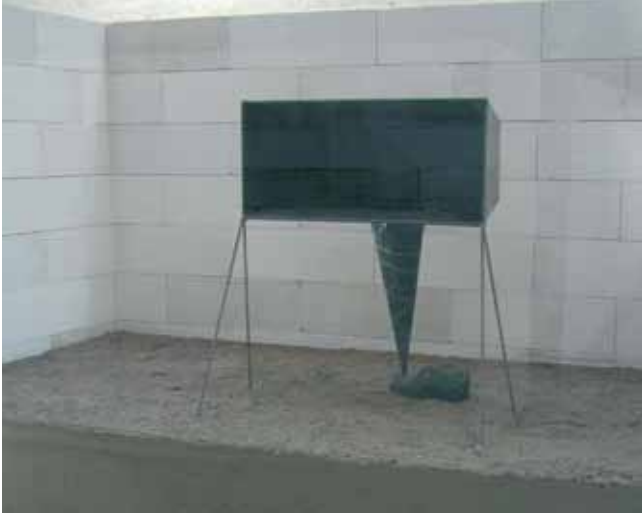
The work *Short Sad Thoughts* (1990) consists of two bent copper wires hanging on a nail. Even before you've read the title, these two wires look melancholy and somewhat mournful. It looks as if by bending the copper wire and then curling it around the nail, Manders has animated the material. Whenever he makes or appropriates objects and then positions them in his *Self-portrait*



Silent Factory. Wood, iron and other materials.

ca. 250 x 387 x 276 cm.

2000. © Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.



A New Entrance for the Night.
Sand, glass, bricks, shoe, fabric,
iron. 200 X 250 X 140 cm.
2002 © Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

as a *Building*, they are transformed into vessels of thoughts and feelings that are essentially foreign to them.

In 1997 *Stichting De Appel* in Amsterdam played host to a presentation by Mark Manders in which the number five played a key role. With the aid of newspaper pages made by himself and filled with a series of reproduced fives, dice with the five at the front, arrangements of five identical objects, pages containing five words and the numeral five appearing in all kinds of sculptural, reproduced or graphic forms, the visitor was conditioned to such an extent that upon leaving the exhibition the city also seemed full of all kinds of fives and multiples of five. As a viewer, moving from Manders' seemingly infinite universe you end up with a renewed, fresh acquaintance with your own fingers and toes. The work *Broom with Fives* (2001) is a perfect example of the artist's inexhaustible, possibly obsessive approach to certain phenomena that he finds fascinating. In the partially sawn-through handle of this old broom is a newspaper replete with, among other things, depictions of fives, a photo of a girl holding up five fingers and an emblem of a 'five-leaved clover'. Attached to the right-hand side of the broom-head are five red-painted nails and on the left-hand side five green ones. Stuck to the biggest red-painted nail are yet more assorted little images of the number five (some of them in red).

In its many guises, the five is a constantly recurring inhabitant of Manders' world. Of his fascination with this number, he writes: 'I found it fascinating that something outside your body has the power to make you think something specific. For example, if there are five sugar lumps outside your body, and you see them, then the number five forms in your head. It is incredibly beautiful that our brains should function like this.'

Feeling fine without arms

What's clear is that each of the inhabitants of the *Self-portrait as a Building* tells its own story. A story that is far from unambiguous. The materials from which the various objects (inhabitants) are made contribute to their wayward lives. Manders uses material not in a symbolic but in a direct, factual way. He is

averse to attributing meaning to any material for fear that the use of material could acquire an illustrative and, in his eyes, masking effect. Every element of his *Self-portrait as a Building* is a quest for the bare essence of the world(s) around us.

In *Isolated Bathroom* (2003) three human figures made of clay and wrapped in plastic are lying on the ground. Beside them is a rectangular bath, full of bits of clay that look wet and unfired. In fact they have been fired and then painted the same colour as unfired clay. Manders has this to say about the work: 'The figures give the impression that they have just now been abandoned, unfinished, without arms. I love the idea that the figures look as though they enjoy being without arms. If you imagine not having arms you feel very vulnerable, but these figures seem to be enjoying their vulnerability.' *Isolated Bathroom* is one of those works which allow the viewer to make up their own story. The scenario offered to you here is so full of gaps and open spaces that any descriptive explanation is doomed to failure. The human figure in the *Self-portrait as a Building* plays the same role as a cup, a pencil, a table or a made-up cat or mouse. And in Manders' work a human figure can also have a range of cultural backgrounds. A recumbent figure (with arms) in *Coloured Room with Black and White Scene* (1998-1999) looks as much Greek, Etruscan, Egyptian, African as it does Asian. This enormous diversity of origin renders the figure abstract by definition.

Silent Factory (2000) shows three elongated tables, suspended just above the floor and supported by a number of trestles. Beside the tables there is another group of trestles bearing two massive clay factory pipes. On the tables there is a metre-high rod which ends in a shape, made of newspaper, that strongly resembles a loudspeaker. On a projection next to the factory pipes, and supported by two identical wooden chairs, lies the simulated body of a white cat. An armchair stands with its back to the tables. Behind the wooden chairs, precisely organised, all kinds of objects are lying on the floor: these include two aluminium pans, a bag of sugar, a yellow watering can, some teabags, three different-coloured wooden blocks, a beaker, a couple of cups, a bar of soap and a pair of men's shoes.

Manders describes *Silent Factory* as 'a cross between a sitting room, an organism and a factory'. The individual objects on the floor are all from the 1970s, the artist's teenage years, which he is trying unsuccessfully to recover. *Silent Factory* is a good example of Manders' very free interpretation of what sculpture can be. The tradition of sculpture is a narrative one. Historically, sculpture has always been a compact display which had to tell its story in as convincing a manner as possible. In the second half of the 19th century, sculpture acquired an 'autonomous' eloquence, epitomised by August Rodin, and eventually in the 20th century it allowed its traditional narrative function to blend into the expressive language of the visual means employed. In this way, in the 20th century sculpture became yet more abstract and in the course of the 1980s it also became more heterogeneous in appearance. *Silent Factory* is a wonderful example of how far notions of sculpture have evolved since the mid-1980s. All kinds of objects are brought together and at first glance seem to lack coherence. In this Manders again combines self-made props with found objects. Here sculpture is speaking a completely different language. A language that is tied up with all sorts of changing paradigms in thought and reflection in the Western cultural and intellectual world. From the 1960s and

Isolated Bathroom.

Iron bathtub with wooden tap,
water pump,
thin plastic sheeting, painted
aluminium and ceramic, wigs.
450 x 300 x 74 cm.
2003 © Zeno X Gallery,
Antwerp.



'70s onwards post-structuralist thinking gained ground. The concept of 'deconstruction', a term first coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, began to play a major role in many cultural manifestations. In post-structuralist thinking we come across the term 'intertextual'. A text no longer focuses on itself alone but refers to innumerable other texts around it. In any sentence it is no longer the individual words that are significant, but rather the white spaces between them, where different meanings can come together, become interwoven and so generate new ones. Meanings no longer have to be grasped in such a structured or linear way, but far more from the fragmentation or, in other words, from constantly changing, hybrid configurations of knowledge.

The night creeps into your shoe

The more hybrid, and possibly also more open, language of Manders' work invites the viewer to make a much greater physical and mental effort when wandering around in it and to view it as a kind of labyrinth. It is a world in which Manders can happily turn all his fantasies loose. Take for example *A Place Where My Thoughts Are Frozen Together* (2001). A bone from a human thigh (of painted epoxy) lies on the floor and is connected by a lump of sugar to a cup of coffee. This expressive world is enigmatic. In a brief accompanying text the artist attributes a kind of function to the bone and the cup of coffee: 'I like the way both of them, powerless and armless, hold tight to the sugar lump.' It's as if Manders routinely attributes human functions to his objects. He seems to want to inject them with a soul, in the tradition of animism. At first glance this enigmatic element, which is also greatly stimulated by the continuous combination of multiple objects juxtaposed in alienating positions, evokes associations with the world of Surrealism in the 1920s. As I said at the beginning: Manders rejects this reference out of hand. He regards his works as 'conceptual constructions in which poetic representations can sometimes be hung'. He compares Surrealism rather to the 'unsupervised knitting of a tie.'

The titles of fragments from *Self-portrait as a Building* frequently seem to form poetic literary references, or they can be concrete indications of objects that play an important role in them. The titles are invariably in English, in order to have a more 'universal' significance. However, every now and again there

is one that cannot be expressed in written or spoken language. A work from 1994, in which a series of animal-like shapes, a rudimentary human figure and a number of objects are arranged neatly next to each other on the ground, is entitled -(-/-/-/-/-/-/-/-/-/-). Here open spaces are created in the written language, too, in which every idea or interpretation can find a home. And, moreover, there are also titles where words alternate with open spaces (dashes).

In some of the titles used by Manders we see the suffix (Reduced to 88%). Some illustrative elements that feature in *Self-portrait as a Building* are reduced to 88% of their real size (i.e. reduced by 12%). According to Manders, a reduction to 88% tends to be felt rather than seen and thus has an alienating effect. The fact that he reduces to 88% and not to, for example, 85% is a matter of subtlety. Too great a reduction would soon become over-theatrical. He wants to give the viewer a different relationship to the objects. The reduction to 88% highlights the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Manders determines his own realities. He does, after all, call himself the maker of three-dimensional photos.

Typical, and very early, inhabitants of his *Self-portrait as a Building* are a rubber with a pencil sticking out of it, two batteries connected together, a plug on an extension cable plugged into its own socket and an unused match lying in a cup of water. On inspection, these small gestures reveal themselves to be wonderful, self-generating worlds which, in their essence, form the heart of Manders' domain. With no objective, no function, but extremely rich in meaning. They illustrate the subtle power of images. In the 1980s Manders switched from written poetry to illustrative poetry, as he tells us in his article about his first contribution to *Selfportrait as a Building*. For him, illustrative objects have more dimensions than written language. Objects are obviously more tactile, while at the same time appearing more elusive.

A New Entrance for the Night (2002) is a space constructed out of large white stones. The front has a glass wall and there is sand on the floor. In the middle of the space, with its opening facing the front, is a large elongated iron box, supported at each corner by slender spreading legs. A funnel-shape emerges from the underside of the box, its point ending in the toe of a man's shoe that is lying on the ground. In a discussion of this work Manders writes the following: 'At night, if you stand in a field and take off your shoe, the night, yearning for more space, instantly creeps into your shoe, filling the area that your foot once occupied. You may be aware that the night always enters the shoe via the same entrance as when you take it off. This has been happening in the same way ever since the existence of the very first shoe. However, if you seal the shoe completely and make a new hole at the front, and you attach a funnel-like construction to the hole, then you have created a new entrance for the night, just like that.'

That, then, is how simple and strange the world can be. ■

www.markmanders.org

Translated by Gregory Ball