

Van Duijvenboden Nickel, 'Mark Manders. Reasonably complete'. Metropolis M, nr.6, Dec.2012 / Jan.2013, p.6 / 58-65.



Mark Manders, Voormannhuis, Gent, 2012, installatie in het kader van TRACK, Gent, foto Dirk Pauwels

8 INTERVIEWS

MARK MANDERS

Behoorlijk
compleet

Hij presenteert zijn meest complete werkoverzicht in boekvorm en wordt tegelijkertijd uitverkoren om in de zomer van 2013 Nederland te vertegenwoordigen op de Biënnale van Venetië. Mark Manders, Nederbelg, mag zich verheugen op een jaar vol hoogtepunten.

door Nickel van Duijvenboden

MARK MANDERS

REASONABLY COMPLETE

He is presenting the most complete publication on his work to date and has been selected to represent the Netherlands at the 2013 Venice Biennial. Mark Manders, a Dutchman living in Belgium, can look forward to a year filled with highlights.

by Nickel van Duijvenboden

Nickel van Duijvenboden: During the presentation of *Mark Manders – Reference Book*, the catalogue of your oeuvre, at the Stedelijk Museum in October, someone in the audience asked you what your sources were. You answered that your work was virtually self-contained. What did you mean by that?

Mark Manders: 'I have the idea that my work increasingly generates images from itself; the next work is actually already decided in the previous work. A language that I can call on has developed, which is completely separate from events in my life. I no longer have to think about what I am going to do. I let my work lead me.'

Your contribution to *Documenta 11*, ten years ago, seems to have been a benchmark for you. What has happened since then?

'My work has become instinctively slower. But if I leaf through *Reference Book*, which is reasonably complete, I realize that at the same time my work has become broader. That is also logical, if you look at what has become possible over the last ten years, and how accessible information is today. It is a process of ever-expanding knowledge and increasing simultaneity.'

You once compared your work to a 'super-slow-motion explosion', begun a little over 20 years ago. Are you actually still open to new influences?

'Of course. You can also see it as a cloud that keeps getting bigger, but that can certainly still change direction. I do not stand outside society. I am very preoccupied with the fact that the world has changed so much since I began working on *Self-Portrait as a Building*. It is subject to its time, to today. It could not have been made fifty years ago. It is true that in some works I have a relationship to art history or to ancient civilizations, but as a whole, my work has only been possible since a short time ago. A simple example is the series of fake newspapers that I publish and also use in my sculptures. They are made up of all existing English words, with no single word being used more than once. It is only very recently that such a work could be made. In the past, you would have had to type out all those words, as it were.'

Do you see it as unavoidable that the complete range of possibilities that have become available under the influence of globalization are put to use?

'As an artist, I try to remain as alert as possible, to absorb as many images as I can and take advantage of new possibilities as soon as they appear. You could also just set that aside, but I find it interesting that there is always more that I am able to make, that I can think and make decisions more and more quickly. For some people, that is a problem: you can do so much and make such quick decisions, that it becomes increasingly complicated. For me, however, it means enormous wealth. Today it is possible to create an entire mini-culture all by yourself.'

Does this play a role in your plans for next year, when you will be representing the Netherlands at the Venice Biennial?

'It is difficult to say something about work that does not yet exist. Because of Venice, I am a little less busy, because I have been able to cancel a number of things. It is good to be able to work on a single exhibition for a period of time. I am now concentrating primarily on the "heads", a series of faces between vertical pieces of wood, and I am making sculptures that come across like an abandoned studio, with tools floating around and a provisional layout. I am also work-



Mark Manders, *Life-size Scene with Revealed Figure*, 2009, 170 x 305 x 190 cm, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

ing on a series of glass cabinets with cement floors on which something takes place. They are a kind of "wish places" – three-dimensional photographs. If you experience something exceptional, finding a clothes-peg in the garden for example, then you can take a photograph of it, but you could also cut out a piece of the ground and take it to your studio. The sculpture exudes the desire to hold on to an observation. Actually, I take a moment like that much too literally.'

Is it true that you are against pedestals?

'Yes, it used to be that I was not allowed to put a work onto a pedestal. You just did not do that. If you put something out in the world, I felt, then it had to stand on the floor, or on a table. Today, I no longer have a problem with that. Showing things on pedestals is a part of a language. The sculpture *Life-size Scene with Revealed Figure* has to do with that. It is a cannibalistic image, but in the way it is presented it has a clearly Catholic feeling to it. It is in fact a kind of altar. I am not Catholic myself, but I do come from a culture where that has played a strong role. Contemporary art is in my opinion much more Catholic than we think. Very often, works of art are a kind of altar, with an order and arrangement that has Catholic origins. I increasingly let that happen in my work.'

Why do you refer to *Life-size Scene* as a 'cannibalistic sculpture'?

'I wanted to bring together different cultures. It is made up of existing elements. I did not make any of it myself. Cultural cannibalism is really happening at the moment. I have spoken at length about it with the Brazilian curator Paulo Herkenhoff. Cultures are devouring one another more and more and are becoming increasingly identical in form. The visual language of one culture flows into that of others. Some cultures close themselves completely off and fearfully try to hold on to their traditional values, but they are still influenced, primarily by American culture. It is a process that is very relevant, with an eye to what we were talking about earlier, the simultaneity and the ease with which we are able to move around.'

In Texas, partly on your recommendation, I visited the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, where the work of Donald Judd and kindred artists is permanently housed. According to Judd, art should be displayed at the place where it was made and remain there forever.

'That has an element of truth. When I work on an installation, I find it hard to move it. I usually complete an installation at the place where I began working on it. Sometimes that's extremely awkward, in a doorway, for example. My recent work is like that, spaces that have to feel like an abandoned studio.'

Why? Do you imagine that everything here will remain frozen forever?

'Not really, because in the end I want a work like *Self-Portrait as a Building* to truly exist. That's always been the point of departure. In the period after the academy I waited before selling my work because I wasn't sure if I wanted to part with it. There came a point when I decided that it would, after all, be a good thing if it found its way into museum collections. But that meant that the realization of the building becomes virtually impossible. The work is spread all over the globe. But I don't rule out my ever making a building. Preferably two, 40 x 40 meters, connected by tunnels (laughs).'

Focal points form a recurring element in your work: perspectives, spyholes, taut ropes, tripods... Most literally, perhaps, in your drawings. Could you explain this?

'It's a way of looking back in time. The drawings capture all the decisions that I've taken. I want to be able to see clearly where I thought what. That's why, with each decision, a line goes back to the focus. It's a sort of projection from which the image appears all at once. Before I became an artist I thumbed through a book of Picasso's late paintings. I could see precisely what he was thinking at the time: all the decisions were visible, layer upon layer. I found the feeling of being able to look back in time unbelievably fascinating. I suddenly understood that it was possible to look inside someone's head. At the same time I saw a book of paintings by Lucas Cranach. It con-

tained no traces of the processes at all. They were completely stationary images, far more constructed. My work is, in fact, a mixture of these two approaches. It's extremely stylized, but if you look carefully it's purely a sequence of actions.

How old were you when you looked at those books on Picasso and Cranach?

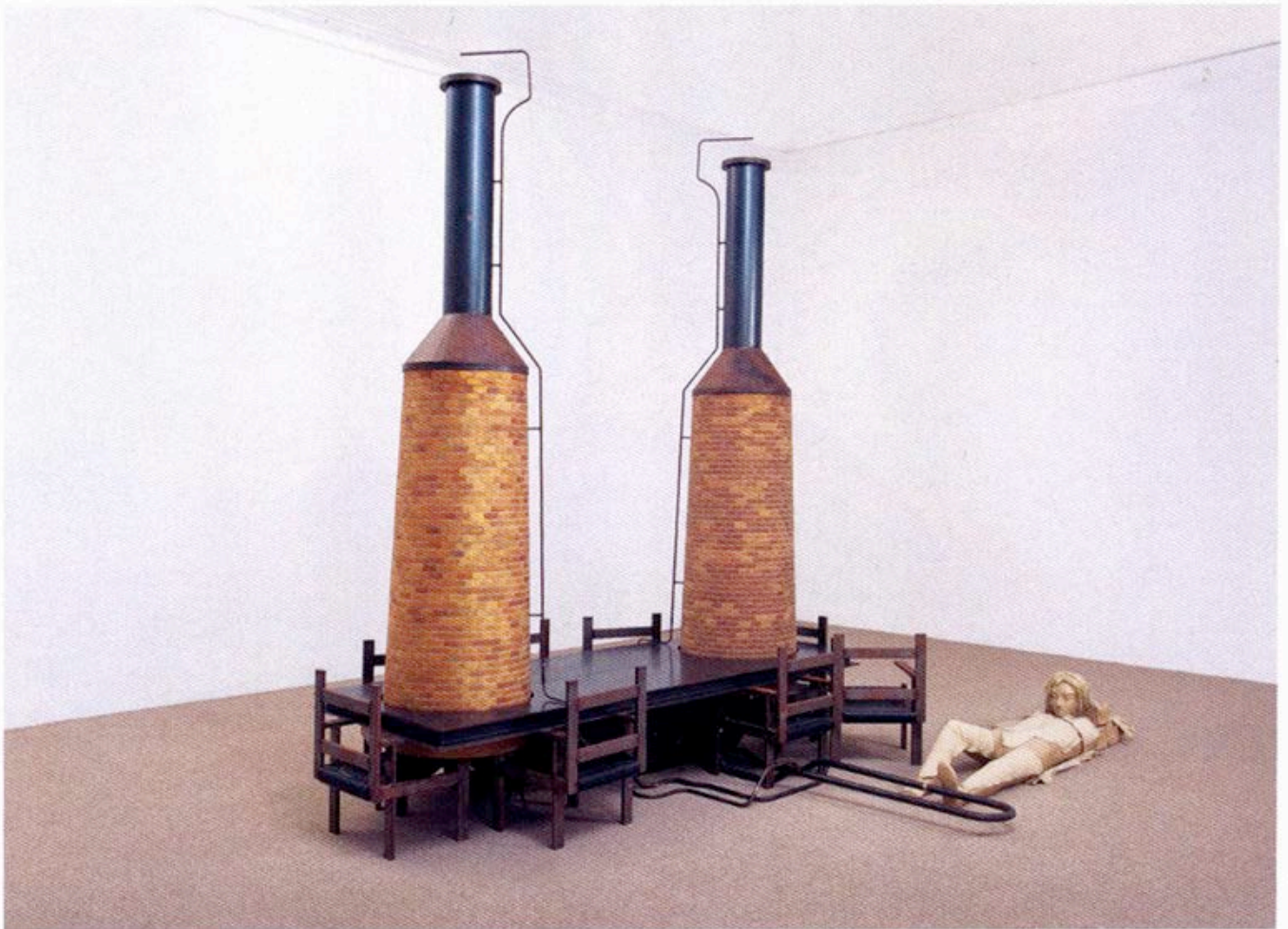
'Sixteen or seventeen. Before going to the academy I worked as a designer at a local advertising agency. There were piles of art books lying round the place and there was a true working atmosphere. That was an important experience. I come from a village where art didn't exist. When young I was always busy making things. At about the age of six I had a sudden, crucial realization. I'd made three things, two aircraft made of matches and a sort of basket made of rope. I remember lying under the table with these objects before me, struck by beautiful light. I realized that I had made those things, that without me they wouldn't have existed. That made a deep impression on me. I had no idea that you could make a living that way. I wanted to be an inventor – I could quite imagine that. An artistic calling is more difficult to grasp, something unfamiliar. It only dawned on me – that you could study this – during my first week at the graphic design department. It took some time before I dared tell anyone about it.'

Now, in fact, you don't appear to be justifying anything and you operate wholly independently.

'The artistic calling is part of me. It was missing at first, but at a certain point in time it "found" me. That means I can do anything I want. I'm an extremely shy person, but not in my work. I feel confident about bringing something into the world, of achieving something. I don't require museums or institutions for that. Of course it's tremendous preparing for an exhibition but, if I prefer not to exhibit any work for a couple of years, that's possible.'

That is something you've accomplished.

'No, it has always been that way. I first had to break through some sort of barrier, but afterwards I shook off everything. I had an excellent time



Mark Manders, *Room with Chairs and Factory*, 2002-2008, 318 x 240 x 405 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

studying. Since I had no workspace of my own, I moved into the hallway. I hung a note up by my belongings: "Will be cleared away tomorrow." I used it as my studio for the next four years. It was a public place, people were constantly passing back and forth. I trained myself to work without being distracted, to concentrate in a public place. At that time, I had also resolved that my work not only had to function inside the museum, but also outside it, in a supermarket, for example. It is a mental test: does it hold out without the context of art, without the aesthetic of the museum space? For some of the larger works, I imagine IKEA. That is a truly horrible environment.'

Why would you want to relate to such a place?

'It is the reality in which we find ourselves, whether we like it or not. That's what our living environment should look like, in its most common form. My works often refer to a living room. I know for certain that a work like *Room with Chairs and Factory* can stand its ground, even in IKEA. If I were to exhibit it there for a public that has no affinity whatsoever with art it would still be obvious that someone had set up something there. It would definitely arouse a response, probably a stronger response than with a more art-aware public.'

Your work often makes one think of machines or mechanisms. You speak of 'closed systems without wastage', in which you have to conform to certain rules, for example with respect to functionality, scale and colour. What authority imposes those rules on you?

'That's extremely difficult. [Long pause.] You reach a stage when each work adopts its own rules. From the outset it heads in a certain direction and it makes its own decisions. I always ask myself if all the processes perceptible in a work are necessary, or whether one can be omitted. It is like writing a poem. When you begin a poem, it too becomes a machine. I try to imagine that I'm sitting in a machine that generates words. Much of my work evolves from carefully formed assignments that I set myself. It is a kind of visually-made poetry. The work for *Documenta* is a good example. Recently, it has shifted toward being

less emphatically linguistic. The difficulty with written poetry is that so many languages are spoken. I want to make things that don't require translating. I'm currently working on a series of faces made of vertical pieces of wood. Each vertical has a different sound. I try to make a head as if it's a chord, a piano chord. Taken together, these verticals form a face. You see, the entire image is staring at you. It's absolutely mute, but tries with all its might to speak. For me, composing with horizontals and verticals, and more recently with colour, is closely associated with sound.'

Can you explain that?

'If you were to stand beside me while I make these works, you'd see it. When I saw off the wood slightly shorter, choose a thinner or darker type of stave, it produces a completely different face. It's like moving up a chord on the piano.'

I associate geometric compositions and music with Mondrian. These works also have something modernistic.

'Yes, being Dutch is a constant burden. In *Still Life with Books, Table, and Fake Newspaper*, there's a hidden hammer. If I had used an ordinary hammer, I'd have ended up with a slanting horizontal. That would have been unacceptable. With a still life you have to hit the nail right on the head. It would be appalling if objects that should be vertical or horizontal were not. So I had to make a new kind of hammer with the handle at right angles to the head. That's purely because I'm Dutch. It's a little bit culturally determined. It's also a way of tricking myself into inventing a new kind of hammer. As an artist, you have to have tricks up your sleeve to come up with something new. In this sketch [pointing to a model for a sculpture], I have allowed a small beam, at an angle, to stay in the sculpture.'

A dissonance?

'Yes, and that's interesting. You constantly have to be alert, tolerate mistakes so that you can amend them. By deliberately making those mistakes you ensure that, by taking a detour, you end up making what you wanted to make. Creativity is a game. It's a

leap in which you yourself introduce a number of obstacles. If you make sure you leap in a certain way, you can arrive at something good. It's important to be critical, but not at the moment when you're making it. It's as if you're creating something with a number of people, a number of individuals. If you're constantly critical, you're no longer free to think.'

Earlier in our conversation, you began a sentence you didn't finish. You were talking about what you are striving for in your work, and you said, 'Actually, I would like – but that is impossible – for it...' What was it that you wanted to say?

'Perhaps that it is a kind of encyclopaedia. An encyclopaedia contains everything that you can know and is always about "now". In that sense, it is always complete. The same is true of *Self-Portrait as a Building*: if I were no longer here tomorrow, it is still finished. In 30 years' time, it will still be finished. It is in fact always in a completed state. From the beginning, I have had a wish to get the entire world in *Self-Portrait as a Building*. I would like it ultimately to be all-embracing.'

Nickel van Duijvenboden is a writer and artist based in Amsterdam. His work includes essays, fiction and memoirs. He occasionally publishes interviews with artists.

Sections of this interview previously appeared in *Mark Manders – Reference Book* (Roma Publications, 2012). New parts were added especially for this publication in *Metropolis M*.

Translation from Dutch to English by Sarah-Jane Jaeggi (original text) and by Mari Shields (new sections)



Werktafel Mark Manders



Atelier Mark Manders, 2011





Mark Manders, *Two Interconnected Houses*, 2010, dia nr. 10 uit een loop van 80 dia's, collectie Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, courtesy de kunstenaar