

Burnett Craig, 'Mark Manders - A Glossary'. ArtReview, vol.72, nr.4, Summer 2020, p.76-93.

**Mark Manders
A Glossary
by Craig Burnett**



*Composition with Yellow and Blue, 2014-18,
painted bronze, painted canvas, wood and glass, 69 × 50 × 42 cm.
Photo: Peter Cox, Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*

M is for Mud

Mud, Parmenides told a young Socrates, has no form. Unlike beauty, justice, a chair, or the human, mud is available only to our senses. When we hold a cold clump of clay in our hands, we do not imagine that it is a token of some perfect idea of mudness. Yet clay, for Mark Manders, is an ideal medium. A grey substance that can take any form, embodying an infinite range of ideas. Manders throws mud like a bookish Prometheus, engendering beasts that look forever frozen at the edge of being born, and at the edge of collapse.

A

is for Absence

The first work Manders made was in 1986, when he was eighteen. He wanted to be a writer at the time, and he placed pencils and writing instruments on the floor as if it were the footprint of an empty building, or the outline of an abstracted human body. He called it *Self-Portrait as a building*. He realised that he preferred the mute evocations of objects to inflexible words, awkward approximations that need to be translated. "You can build a room like a wordless sentence," says the artist. For the past 36 years or so, he's been pursuing that task: a self-portrait – A is for autobiography – through rooms and objects. If the artist is absent, his rooms are thick with matter, and the artist's oeuvre is an ever-expanding image of its maker.



Inhabited for a Survey (First Floor Plan from Self-Portrait as a building), 1986,
writing materials, erasers, painting tools, scissors, 8 × 267 × 90 cm.
Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York & Los Angeles



Fox / Mouse / Belt, 1992–93, painted bronze, belt, 15 × 120 × 40 cm.
Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York & Los Angeles

R

is for Ruse

Manders presents half-formed creatures, semi-sculpted, abandoned, all sculpted from cracked and crumbling slabs of clay. Or so it appears. It's a trick, a ruse. In 1992–93 he made *Fox / Mouse / Belt*, cast it in bronze and then decided to paint as if it were wet clay. All of his hulking, silent heads, the sliced faces, the crumbling beasts: he wants them to express an “extreme, vulnerable nakedness”. But the seemingly wet clay, soft and ready to submit to anyone's hand, is an illusion of fragility, of the incomplete. Cast in epoxy or bronze, and painted, the seemingly unfinished is hard and permanent.

Consciousness, according to a lot of recent studies in neuroscience, doesn't perceive but predict. We don't know what we perceive, but we perceive what we know. Manders revels in this chasm between what we see and what we know. The bust in *Composition with Yellow and Blue* (2014–18) is enclosed in glass, away from our fingers, a slice of yellow wood pressed into its malleable face.

We see wet clay, not the bronze beneath the trompe l'oeil surface. We can only close our eyes – like the figure herself, away from the visible, the mundane, the mud – to find pleasure in knowing that we have been deceived by our senses. Manders conjures a peculiar kind of longing in the viewer: a desire, however futile, to unify the data we receive from our senses and our knowledge.

K is for Knowing

M is for Monumental

Manders preinstalls future ruin into his monuments. The figures in *Composition with Four Yellow Verticals* (2017–19), with their enormous 'shattered visages', brings to mind Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ozymandias' (1818). If that famous pharaoh declared his immortality in the vast monuments he commissioned to mark his reign, he was, inevitably, erased by the implacable force of entropy. Manders likes to think of his work as inhabiting a perpetual now, an ever-present immediacy. He infests his monumental sculptures with the ravages of time to ensure they never grow old.



Landscape with colours, 1997, painted wood, sand,
painted ceramic, 173 × 300 × 200 cm. Photo: Dirk Pauwels.
Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York & Los Angeles

A is for 'As If'

'My work is an ode to the fictional, "As If" way of thinking,' writes Manders. If a building were a person, if a monumental bronze sculpture were a fragile, ephemeral chunk of mud. As if a coloured table (*Landscape with colours*, 1997) were an Impressionist painting. As if everyday teabags could be arranged, as in *(- / - / - / - / -)* (1998) or *Finished Sentence* (1998–2006) into a perfect image of the beautiful. As if, in *Mind Study* (2010–11), some unlucky angel, or armless martyr, were forced to attend a corporate board meeting.

N is for Necks

Mark Manders is fascinated by the necks in Piero della Francesca's paintings. Look at the necks of the guards in Piero's *Resurrection* (c. 1460). They bend and extend, creating a sculpture presence distinct from the faces they support. The skin is open, naked and vulnerable, like the raw surface of a Manders sculpture. Or look at the angels' necks in the National Gallery's *St John the Baptist*: the necks are still, strong, unblemished, like that of the figure in *Room with Unfired Clay Figure* (2014).



Room with Unfired Clay Figure, 2014, painted bronze, wood, iron, plastic, painted ceramic, chair and painted epoxy, 273 × 440 × 620 cm. Photo: Peter Cox. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York & Los Angeles



Composition with Four Yellow Verticals, 2017–19, painted bronze, wood, iron, 266 × 391 × 419 cm. Photo: EPW STUDIO. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York & Los Angeles

D

is for Demiurge

If the demiurge has many iterations, he is often some version of God's potter, fashioning the earth's creatures from muck and matter. When I last walked into a Manders exhibition and encountered *Composition with Four Yellow Verticals* (2017–19), I felt as if I had wandered into an art school for demiurges. A room stuffed with impossible piles of mud shaped into faces, these quiet, gargantuan sculptures balanced on crutches in some hybrid state between mind and matter: here was a piecemeal and precarious vision of creation, seemingly unfinished, yet cast in bronze and built to last forever. If I came back a week later, would I find the artist hunched over his creation, finishing the bodies of his golems? Or would the sculptures have creaked into life and hit the road, loping through the city like a gang of giantess philosophers, nodding sagely at our fragile flesh?

E is for End

To what end does Mark Manders make art? Imagine a world without Kafka or Mondrian. Inconceivable, says Manders. They have transformed our culture, and the world as we understand it is impossible without them. "That's what I aspire to with my work, that at some stage it will be impossible to imagine a world without me. If I didn't have that aspiration, I couldn't do what I do."

The writer Raymond Roussel (1877–1933) deployed linguistic games, systems and constraints to compose his books. Similarly, Manders, a fan of the Frenchman, uses combinations of (English) words to compose his sculptures, such as *Table / Corner / Typewriter* (1998). A word becomes an image. Language does not describe the world, but predicts and creates it. A world conjured from systems, constraints and reductions becomes more beautiful.

R is for Raymond Roussel



is for Supermarkets

Mark Manders believes that his work could survive without the label 'art' to distinguish it from other objects in the world at large. *Documented Assignment* (1992–93) consisted of a bronze mouse, taped to a shelf, in a Tokyo supermarket. When he represented Belgium at the Venice Biennale, in 2013, he placed *Fox / Mouse / Belt*, prone and vulnerable, seemingly sculpted from fresh clay, on the floor of a Venetian shop. "All my works", says the artist, "can survive in a supermarket."

The Absence of Mark Manders
is on view at the Bonnefantien,
Maastricht, through 23 August



Documented Assignment, 1992–93, patinated bronze and cello tape (AP), 9 × 13 × 3 cm.
Photo: Peter Cox. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York & Los Angeles