

MARK MANDERS

Curculio bassos

Curculio bassos is the first individual exhibition in a Spanish gallery by the Dutch artist, Mark Manders. The project includes a number of his most acclaimed works, and others which have been revisited and adapted for his exhibition in the Santiago gallery, designed by Álvaro Siza. Any curator of a Mark Manders exhibition will always find himself staring into the abyss of uncertainty when deciding how to 'describe' his work. Where do we start? In which contextual setting do we place it? From which historiographical viewpoints? With regard to prescriptive curatorial norms, this exhibition, like his work itself, is in the middle of no man's land. In part it has a retrospective viewpoint, so there would be no sense in wasting an opportunity to show the artist's work at some length. But neither would it be appropriate for us to divorce ourselves from the setting of this exhibition: the CGAC, the Spanish institution which has possibly written the most beautiful pages on contemporary sculpture in recent museography; and a city, Santiago de Compostela, which is a magnificent emblem of the Romanesque tradition. The exhibition also places *Hallway with Sentences* (1999-2003) in context, a work comprising vinyl lettering owned by the CGAC which brings together many of the significant key aspects of his work.

At first glance, *Curculio bassos* brings to mind a technical name of some living being in the world of flora or fauna. The *curculio* is a weevil, a type of insect we know as a beetle. But that is not where we are going. For Mark Manders, language is akin to a potter's wheel, upon which he works the clay. Words and phrases can be modelled, transformed, giving rise to unexpected, almost always offbeat forms. We know—as Nauman told us—that only when language starts to break down does poetry arise. This quality of the poetic is essential when referring to Mander's work, but we would need to verify whether language has come into being, if it effectively came about at some time, or whether, on the contrary, it has yet to be born, yet to be fashioned.

Visitors will move through the exhibition and note that, in the main, the rooms have been denied natural light, as the windows have been covered with newspapers. These, however, are not ordinary newspapers. Their language has been slightly

transformed to preclude a logical reading, so that everything we have assumed is transformed into an expectation. 'Expectation' is a highly suitable word for defining Mark Manders' work, as nothing is usually what it initially seems to be, and absolutely everything requires a detailed reading. These are newspapers that bear no date; they could have been taken from any day in history, or all of them at once. *Curculio bassos* takes up a full headline in one of these newspapers and, far from recounting the events, as one would expect from a normal newspaper, it offers us a window to what lies ahead. Because *Curculio bassos* does not mean anything; it has no semantic significance. It is merely a strange, somewhat rough sequence of phonemes, open to any perceptive contingency.

All of Manders' output is encrypted in the tension between language and form. While still a teenager, he discovered that he had developed a rare affinity with the language of the visual arts. In 1986, when barely eighteen years old, he created an early work, *Self-Portrait as a Building*, which would trigger the voluminous body of work you now behold. His entire output was conceived at that key moment, and the extraordinary, clairvoyant trickle of works that he has been unveiling ever since is merely the visibilisation of that seminal moment. It is a



Mark Manders: *Life-Size Scene with Revealed Figure*, 2009. Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp (Belgium). Photo: Roger Wooldridge



Mark Manders: *National Cupboard*, 2003. Kunsthaus Zürich, Vereinigung Zürcher Kunstfreunde Gruppe Junge Kunst. Photo: Peter Cox, courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp (Belgium)

work that, in the words of the poet Carlos Marzal, eludes 'the simple whim of chronologies.' It anticipates all that will be and brings together all that currently exists. In the extensive list of his exhibitions over the almost three decades spanned by his career, he has shown different fragments or parts of that self-portrait, a self-portrait without a biography, but one that is steeped in life, as, if anything can be gleaned from his work, it is the unmistakable sensation that something is going on at that precise moment, that things are indeed happening. And, as the artist himself tells us, they often happen without us. *Self-Portrait as a Building* is an imperturbable process through which thought acquires form. The building is the language and, consequently, it contracts and expands, oscillating as if shaken by an unnameable force. Everything starts with a word. *Hallway with Sentences*, which forms part of the CGAC's collection, is an extraordinary example for understanding this process. It is a textual work comprising a set of around seventy alphabetically ordered words, on the basis of which sentences can be randomly composed. Significantly, many of these phrases have given rise to large installations, and soon we shall see how his sculptural processes are closely connected with this practice.

The large installation in the lobby of the CGAC is overlooked by one of his heads, *Unfired Clay Head* (2011). Set on an

iron easel, it is linked with a rare temporality, as it seems to be in a perpetual state of creation. These figures are set in their own particular, intermittent gestation, relative to a time which belongs only to them. Their production entails close links with sound—sound which, needless to say, we do not hear—which Manders associates with musical composition. Many of these heads are formed from a series of vertical rhythms, in the main of wood, which act as chords, and which, taken together, constitute a type of musical score. Each of these rhythms would be to sculpture what each individual word is to *Hallway with Sentences*. Both are the seed for the poetic, the link in that chain which gives rise to the progressive materialisation of thought. Thus, we see how a word or a note can unleash an irrepressible creative flow, in the same way that an unexpected light or a fortuitous interruption of the normal course of events can light the fuse of poetry.

Unfired Clay Head is at the centre of a space which aims to represent the artist's work in his studio. Located in the Belgian city of Ronse, half an hour away from Ghent, the erstwhile textile factory, which the artist purchased seven or eight years ago, is where he now lives and works. Manders says that he hardly ever leaves the place, and that it is here where his entire universe is concentrated. There are specific

rooms for different processes, ranging from spaces in which he works with wood, to zones with kilns where he fires clay. In the mock-up of this studio in the CGAC lobby, we are privy to a small portion of his artistic universe, with this celebrated idea of work under way, which conjures up the life that 'occurs' in each nook and cranny. It feels like he has been working in this studio up until a few moments before our arrival. And, paradoxically, it seems like everything we see therein has been there a lifetime.

It would be a mistake to think that in Manders' work the temporal notions of past, present and future are independent of each other. The artist stresses this through his particular manner of working. The anthropomorphic figures are made of bronze, but their appearance—and this is one of the essential features of his work—compels us to think that they are yet to pass through the casting process, that they are still in a primitive state, as if they had only recently been modelled in clay. Moreover, many of them are seemingly unfinished: some of them lack arms and legs, others the nose, or part of the head. But we soon grasp the notion that perhaps they are advancing in the opposite direction, that at one time they were complete figures, and that they have embarked on a journey back towards nothingness, towards what they were before they were even an idea that needed to be given form.

A good example is *Living Room Scene* (2008), which belongs to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Considered one of his most important pieces, it comprises two large anthropomorphic figures rising miraculously over a geometric copper pedestal, which in turn rests on items of domestic furniture. In an enigmatic solution, Manders has split the figures into two halves, placing the concept of individual in the setting of a weird, hermetic polarity. The extraordinary monumentality into which these figures are encrypted speaks to us of the relationship between the individual and his double, but the individual already comprises a conspicuous duality which in itself, not surprisingly, is divided into two parts which seem to live different lives. The myriad of interpretative nuances yielded by this work is simply endless. Its title confronts us with the familiarity of daily life; nonetheless, there is a palpable feeling of absence which is somewhat disconcerting. The indifferent figures are set in a melancholic time which, once again, is alien to us. Which world do they belong to? To one in which, after an evolutionary process, the defined and the completed,—in short—the realised does not succeed in transcending entelechy, as nothing in Manders' work is more prone to being violated than a linear, logical development.

One could wonder whether this almost obsessive interest in temporality has to do with the frustration of not having lived

through all the epochs of history and thus be able to ascertain the way in which humans contributed to the cultural heritage. Thanks to technology, the artist embarks on an endless journey through time, by way of which he places himself in different historical moments which he would have wished to live and whose cultural manifestations he would have longed to contribute to. Manders is acutely aware of the tradition to which he belongs, but why not form part of all of them at once? In one single work we find allusions to a certain fifteenth century classicism, to the porous silence of a Dutch interior and to the geometric rigour of neoplasticism. One imagines him pondering on what would have happened if the Cretans had encountered the Romanesque, if Vermeer had known what passed through the mind of Van Doesburg, if Piero della Francesca had seen Guernica...

Notional Cupboard (1989-2003), from the Kunsthaus in Zurich, mitigates the accentuated verticality of *Living Room Scene*, this being resolved in an irrevocably horizontal plane. It is hard to explain everything that is going on in this piece, both internally and externally. The formal singularity of this work is unprecedented: a bass drum elongated until it is transformed into a sort of coffin, a phallic thing inside which hang two imprisoned rats alongside images taken from a



Mark Manders: *Living Room Scene*, 2008. Stedelijk Museum Collection, Amsterdam. Photo: Roger Wooldrige, cortesia de Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp (Belgium)

Bataille book... Outside, in strange flight, sordid images of Chranach, Leonardo and Balthus. Supported on an armchair, which one again shows us the familiar, this piece of furniture encloses a plethora of associations around the sexual, around death, around the strangeness that the experience of the everyday can envelop.

A decidedly macabre feeling pervades *Nocturnal Garden Scene* (2005), the dark representation of a nocturnal landscape from the S.M.A.K. in Ghent. Manders speaks of his interest in slack ropes and in the melancholy projected by their curve (a melancholy which harks back significantly to *Short Sad Thoughts* [1990], a pair of small copper wires bent back on themselves). On top of all this is a reflection on questions which are apparently insignificant, but which explain the complexity of the world. The artist is fascinated with reflecting on why the normal course of events happens in one way and not in another; why thought is aimed in one specific direction and under which circumstances its path can be altered. In this case, he speaks to us about the impossibility of two objects, a slack rope and a cat, being able to occupy exactly the same space. In order for both to coexist, there is a need for a radical solution, which the viewer will perceive clearly. There is an intimate rapport between feelings bordering on the tragic and the poetry of the minutiae of life.

It is interesting to view Manders' work in light of the setting of Santiago de Compostela and the tradition of Romanesque sculpture so exuberantly evident here. Henri Focillon, one of the historians who has analysed the aesthetic nature of the Romanesque most incisively, describes the style as mysterious in contrast to the familiarity with which we digest the quality of the Gothic. 'The Romanesque,' he says, 'invites us to form part of a dream which is lost in representations far away in time and space, dreams which evoke a humanity that is not ours, dreams organised into complex, enigmatic combinations.' In Romanesque sculpture, human forms are fused with animal and vegetable forms, but they do not get out of control; rather they remain rigorously linked to the architecture. In *Life-Size Scene with Revealed Figure* (2009), we see a cut-out image against a gold background, resembling a religious altarpiece. This comprises an amalgam of motifs from very different sources which are cast simultaneously onto a single plane. Like all of his work, the piece appears to contain the entire history of art, fused into an individual, specific image. It has religious connotations in terms of mysticism and aura, and connects up with the Romanesque idiom in terms of the hybridisation of motifs and languages, although not with the exclusive character of all religion, given that, as we have reiterated throughout this text, like a Borgian *Aleph*, Manders' work brings together all the motifs of the history of art, all its styles, all its moments.



Mark Manders: *Short Sad Thoughts*, 1990. Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp (Belgium). Photo: Brian Forrest

In the CGAC's emblematic *Double Space*, Mark Manders sets one of his best known pieces, *Staged Android (Reduced to 88%)* (2002-2014), a work presented for the first time in *Documenta 11*, in 2002, and now adapted for this occasion. This is a further episode of *Self-Portrait as a Building*, an organism through which thought flows, and through whose organs it passes randomly. These organs are everyday elements, such as tables or chairs, which here are crowned by a large brick chimney, one of the most recognisable motifs in the artist's work. Alongside them, diminutive in their unfavourable proportion, tiny tea bags whisper a word.

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