

Residents of an imaginary building

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Exuding tranquility as if they have quietly come to a standstill amidst stopped time, these sculptures are mute residents of a certain building. A body formed from clay and head with an archaic smile leans perilously in an unfinished state, fingermarks remaining, her wooden support exposed. As for the chair with armrests against which she leans, it is slightly smaller than the real thing. Like a copy of the real thing yet somehow different. And where is this building? It is, as it always has been, inside Mark Manders' head.

Manders has been working on the blueprint for a single building for a long time now. Since 1986 – when he was still a teenager – he has been visualizing this floor plan, which resembles a residence with several adjoining small rooms on a rectangular site. Titled "Self-Portrait as a Building," this imaginary building has become the grand master plan for Manders' entire artistic practice. Not unbuilt architecture: this imaginary architecture is continually expanding and contracting inside Manders' head. Perhaps it most closely resembles a textbook whose phrases are continually being added to and rewritten. In fact, it started with the artist writing a story whose protagonist was "Mark Manders."

In each of the rooms in the floor plan, a particular sculpture is placed in a fixed location. Manders spends his days absorbed in the task of giving form to each of these "residents" one after another. The imaginary building takes form gradually along with the individual parts of its interior, revealing its shape to the world. What we see is a mere fragment of Manders' endless endeavor.

At the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, Manders covered the huge panes of glass at the entrance to the Dutch Pavilion – a building designed by the De Stijl architect Gerrit Rietveld – completely with fake newspaper that he had made himself. Only transmitted soft light remained in the building, normally bathed in light from the glass façade and skylights. And by making the newspaper – a medium that normally reports the truth – a fake, Manders interrupted the particular spatiality and passage of time normally associated with reality and reset space-time to an imaginary world. The real world "outside" was screened and Manders' world "inside" partitioned, turning the building into a venue for his "self-portrait." The interior of the building was likewise partitioned with semitransparent plastic sheeting that resembled thin skin, rendering the shapes and presence of the things on the other side indistinct and emphasizing how with the absence of the creator the creative process is frozen.

Manders once said he stands with one foot planted in reality and the other foot planted in fantasy. He is like a conductor who is conscious of both the reality of the external world and the fantasy of the internal world and generates and mixes elements of each one. These two worlds, external and internal, are by no means cut off from each other. While breathing the air of the external world, his imaginary world grows and his unrestricted creative universe expands.

Manders always subjects his sculptures to a particular test. This involves abandoning them for a short time in a supermarket. He wants to find out if they sing their own tune even if abandoned in a noisy everyday environment where there is no requirement for them to exist as artworks. Even in the unforgiving real world, the residents of Manders' tranquil building have a commanding presence.

It is said that people who gazed directly into Medusa's eyes, which sparkled like jewels, would turn to stone. Manders does not turn to stone the residents to which he has given form. They only exist temporarily inside a building where the music that was playing has stopped, in a world that has come to a standstill. Furthermore, the delicate balance and connections between the various "things" Manders creates produce echoes of this inaudible music that ought to have stopped.

From Manders' artworks, which call to mind the internal world while standing side by side with the real world, reverberates music that ought not to be audible.