

MANFRED PERNICE

Manfred Pernice speaks to Jennifer Allen about his sculpture, history, and the Venice Biennale.

Manfred Pernice is precise about being ambiguous. The Berlin-based winner of Germany's 2000 Piepenbrock Prize for Sculpture is unafraid to leave marks of hesitation on his works—unfinished edges, half-painted panels, interrupted series, and stray holes—that give the impression of an exacting builder who has attempted to follow too many master plans at once. Pernice's equivocal constructions lie somewhere between autonomous sculpture and expansive room-size installation. Using rough building materials such as chipboard and unfinished plywood, Pernice fabricates modular and serial works with a distinctly modernist flavor, strange prototypes with no apparent function or promising future.

Yet if Pernice is a poor builder, he is a master at deploying architecture to explore collective and unconscious histories. His structures—carefully constructed, yet endlessly flawed—are often directed toward the past. Texts, found images, and photographs appear throughout his installations as silent guides, resonating with allusions to historical events, literary figures, and even political turmoil.

With solo exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Zürich and the Witte de With in Rotterdam under his belt, Pernice is currently participating in "Public Offerings," an exhibition of artists' early works currently on view at MoCA in Los Angeles. He is also preparing his contribution to Harald Szeemann's exhibition "Plateau of Mankind" at the Venice Biennale, which opens June 10. Before packing up his toolbox, however, the artist found time to speak about his plans for Venice, where his work will appear alongside installations by Joseph Beuys selected by Harald Szeemann as a point of departure for the show. The proximity to Beuys doesn't seem to phase Pernice, despite his intense interest in questions of history, in particular the artistic and political history of his native Germany. As usual, Pernice is ready to build his unique blend of memory from the spaces of the present.

—Jennifer Allen

Jennifer Allen: You have often used groups of Dosen (Cans) which are in fact hollow, cylindrical sculptures about five feet tall, made out of wood and often set on small wheels. Could you explain the role of the cans in your work?

Manfred Pernice: When I began making the cans, I didn't have a precise idea of where they would go. The cans seemed banal, but now I'm happy to have them. In my work, making cans is an attempt to create a kind of order, even in a nonsensical way. The can is a working process, a tool or method for dividing up elements into separate parts that can subsequently be brought together in different ways. Some cans are numbered, and these numbers reappear on the walls beside photographs and texts that I have collected, establishing certain relationships with history. When I place the cans together in a given room, it's like creating a chemical reaction that will affect the various elements in unknown ways. I'm curious to see how the cans will work in a particular space—and that goes for the contents of each can as well as how they relate to one another. Since the cans are movable and can be linked to any set of found documents, they offer many possibilities for seeing how events react upon one another.

JA: When you won the Hartwig Piepenbrock Prize last year, you created Dosentreff '00 (Can meeting '00), 2000, for your prize exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. What connections were made between the cans and the collages assembled on the walls of the room where the cans were displayed?

MP: I used some cans to explore the circumstances surrounding the exhibition itself and aspects of the Berlin Wall, which was located next to the site. I used a text by the collector Hartwig Piepenbrock, who runs a major security and sanitation company in Germany. He writes about acquiring a painting by Bernhard Heisig, a significant painter from the former German Democratic Republic. Heisig's painting *Die Zeit der Haie* (The time of the sharks) cites a self-portrait by Felix Nussbaum, a Jewish painter who lived in Berlin during the '20s and '30s and later died in a concentration camp. Piepenbrock offers an evaluation of the link between Nussbaum, Heisig, and himself, but his discussion of each painter's relation to Fascism seemed somewhat naive. I made one can for Piepenbrock, which bore the same number as the text on the wall, and another can for Heisig. There was no can for Nussbaum. I also used a newspaper article about an East German soldier who was shot by the West German police as he tried to stop someone from escaping over the "anti-Fascist" wall—an event that took place near the Hamburger Bahnhof. The report came from *Die Neue Zeit*, a major newspaper from the former GDR, and it described the soldier as a sensitive individual who made drawings in his spare time. There was yet another can for a reporter from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* who currently writes about art for the newspaper. Other cans, which were unnamed, were clustered together in a corner near a newspaper article about a commune in Berlin-Kreuzberg. I also made a can for my assistant.

JA: Why did you combine these cans and how did you make them interact?

MP: I wanted to bring these elements together to create a strong situation, to confront these histories with one another. In a way, the cans work like Bert Hellinger's *Aufstellungen* (Presentations), a therapy developed in Germany to help individuals deal with their pasts by having other people act out the roles of their family members, whether deceased or living. I tried to use the space to create the possibility for these confrontations, though they are related to collective rather than individual family history. The Piepenbrock and Heisig cans were placed more or less in the center of this confrontation. At an apex between them, one could find the can for the East German border guard, which activates a local history. The can for the newspaper art critic was placed alone in the corner, giving him a vantage point from which to witness the entire installation. He was overseeing things without really being a part of them. The can for my assistant also had a good vantage point, but his position was singular, facing the unnamed cans, which were clustered close together in the corner near the article about the commune.

JA: What are you planning to present at the Venice Biennale?

MP: I'm starting with material from the exhibition I did at the Witte de With, where I presented stacks of containers made out of wood. Some will appear in Venice. The container is a metaphor since these pieces are not built to be usable storage or shipping boxes. Rather, the installation is an abstraction of the strange situation of containers, where all sorts of disparate things are organized together for a certain period of time, just as in an exhibition. The very next day, they may be transported to a new destination to join yet another configuration of containers. Several containers will be brought together in Venice, but their contents have not yet been completely decided. One will have a vitrine with a newspaper article about a woman who committed suicide and another article about a storm in Oklahoma. A television monitor will be fitted into another container and will show a video sequence.

JA: How do you feel about creating an installation next to Beuys?

MP: I'm not exactly nervous, but I can't say I'm entirely happy about the situation either. My piece will be right between two of his installations. It's impossible for me to relate to the great über-Beuys, though I could relate to his some of his students, for example, Franz Erhard Walther. My work should appear more rational and be able to transform some of Beuys's energy.