

ARTFORUM

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INTERNATIONAL

CHARMIN MATTS
IN MY ASS HAIR.
SCOTT IS A SUPERIOR
PRODUCT. WHITE
CLOUD SUCKS TOO,

SELF LOATHING
ISN'T PRETTY,
NIETHER IS
SELF LOVE,
WHAT IN GOD'S
NAME AM I
LEFT WITH
THEN,

N JACK
YCICH
TONIGHT.

I USE
FRIZZ
EASE.

ARE YOU MY MOTHER

WITH
M.

PAINTING MAKES ME FEEL LIKE AN
ARTIST. READING THIS MAKES ME
FEEL LIKE AN IDIOT.

I'M HAVING AN
OTHER MOMENT
WITH MYSELF

I'M
HUMAN

BOOK ISN'T VERY GOOD
S IT?... DAMIT! I THOUGHT

EVERYTHING IS STILL DEAD BUT
I FEEL ON THE VERGE OF BE-
COMING SAD.

WHAT'S THE
DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN
ME AND
STUART MALEY.

Let us pray
HUH?

TOMMY SCORES

IS THIS THE BAD
ART IDEA I THINK
I FEAR IT IS.

ST

ANYBODY OUT

FROM FAR AWAY
THIS PAINTING
LOOKS LIKE IT
MIGHT BE SMART
ART. I FOR ONE
AM DAM GLAD
IT'S NOT

HELLO, I'M IN A GOOD
MOOD TODAY. I'VE
DRESSED MYSELF IN A
WACKY ARTIST OUTFIT.
I'M ENTRENCHED HERE
NOW FOR A MONTH.
I WON'T SHAVE, OR
BATH MUCH. I WON'T
EAT MUCH AND I'LL
HARDLY LEAVE MY
LOFT.

I LOOK INTO
EYES SEARCHING
FOR LOVE
I LISTEN FOR
COMPASSION
AND I TRY
LIKE HELL
NOT TO BE
CORYN BUT
IT'S A LOSING
BATTLE

I'M NOT GOING TO
GIVE UP SHOPPING ON
RODEO DRIVE.

HELENA JUST
CALLED ME FROM
ATHENS. I LOVE
AND MISS HER.
I WON'T CLEAN
MY SHEETS SO
I CAN SMELL
HER AT NIGHT

I LIKE TO GOLF.
"SO FUCKIN WHAT"

SIMPLY IS MY
A GOOD ANY WORK
ONE THING ABOUT
ME IS THAT I CAN
REALLY SUCK.

COME ON SEAN
SAVE THIS THING

I CAN'T TELL IF I'M GETTING
BETTER AND BETTER OR
AS AN ARTIST OR WORSE
AN WORSE. IF I AM GETTING
WORSE PLEASE GIVE ME
AN OTHER CHANCE!

RON BROWN
IS COMING
DOWN

I SAW ERIC WALKING
MY DOG AND FELT
LIKE MURDERING
HIM.

I REALLY HAVE TO
CHANGE THE WAY
I MAKE ART. HOW
LONG CAN I GO
ON LIKE THIS.

I NEED TO BECOME
FUNNIER, LESS
WORRIED.

HEART BREAK

RICHARD
LINKLETTER
DOES IT
AGAIN.

I DON'T CARE
THAT I DON'T
HAVE MY FOR-
SKIN.

THIS PAINTING
IS A COLABORATIVE
EFFORT BETWEEN
MYSELF AND
ROBERT RYMAN.
"OH SEAN, DON'T
BE SO STUPID"

TURNING ART INSIDE OUT, THAT'S
WHAT I'M TRYING TO DO. HERE,
IF SO TODAY IS THE DAY WHEN
THE ARTIST RECOGNISES HIS OWN
FAILURE.

AN INVISIBLE THREAD IS PULLING
ME THROUGH MY LIFE.

I HATE THE FACT
THAT I LOVE
MYSELF SO MUCH

SWEATE
LODGE

I RECENTLY DISCOVERED
THAT I'VE GOT A REAL
CRUEL STREAK. I DON'T
THINK IT BECOMES ME.

WATCHING T.V.

ONLY IF I
LOVES ME. RIGHT?
I SHOULD STOP
THIS BECAUSE
IT SUCKS

LOOK NOW
70'S ALL
AGAIN

CAN I HAVE
YOUR EAR
FOR A MINUTE

I'VE GOT A LOT OF
WORK TO DO.

LOVE, HA, HA,
HA, HA, HA, HA...

MOST OF ALL I
NEED TO GO TO
SLEEP.

I NEED TO SHAVE, AND STOP LOVING M

14 HOURS OF
NON STOP
ART MAKING
TODAY.

Love is all
around, no
need to waste
it

MORE, I NEED MORE QUANTITY AND
MORE QUALITY. COME ON SEAN,
THINK, MAKE THIS BETTER. YOU
WANT IT TO BE EXTREME AND
THIS IS SIMPLE BORED FORMALISM
IT'S NOT WHAT I'M ABOUT, I'M NOT
PUSHING MYSELF. I CAN MAKE SUCH
BETTER ART THAN THIS

MY LANDLORD HAS BEEN
BEEN AWAKE FOR DAYS
ON COKE AND IS CARRYING
A GUN. I HAVEN'T PAID
RENT IN 6 MONTHS

LAST YEAR I FANSIED
THAT I WAS SAMUEL
ADAMS BECAUSE I
LIKED THE BEER SO
MUCH. THIS YEAR
I THINK I'M PARIS

FACE IT SEAN T
ISN'T A GOOD

WHY CAN'T I
KEEP MY PANTS
ON ON VIDEO?
WHAT'S WRONG
WITH ME?

THIS IS A WHOLE
LOT OF NOTHING
BUT ~~POWER~~
NOTHING UNITED
HAS POWER.
"WHAT?" IS THIS
ANYTHING.

WHO AM I ANYWAY I MISS HELENA

CAN AMERICANS
WEAR KILTS
WITH DIGNITY

FRANCE IS CURRENT

I WEIGH
350 POUNDS
AND I'M NOT
GOING TO
APOLOGIZE
TO ANYONE
THE MOSHOW

IS IT BAD T
I THINK I'M
BEAUTIFUL
SHOULD I
MYSELF AS
AS I DO.

I B
PE
IN
BE

AREN'T Y
THIS IS
TWAMB

THAT. OR NOT,
WHO KNOWS.
I LIKE CHRIS,
HE'S A NICE GUY.

TREK
2:15 AM
AND I'M
GOING

SEAN SUCKS...

NOT



The Très Boring Hours

Andrew Hultkrans

I'm a loner/I'm a sorry entertainer

—Daniel Johnston, "Sorry Entertainer," 1983

Yet there was a voice within me that said: Someday you will be considered the most intense and, in a certain sense, the most significant young prose writer in America. And I listened. . . . My advice to the young people of today? I'm tempted to say: Surround yourself with flunkies and yes-men and have naked slaves, perfumed with musk, fan you with plastic fronds as you write. Because that's what's worked for me.

—Mark Leyner, *Et Tu, Babe*, 1992

Are you bored yet?

—Sean Landers, *[sic]*, 1993

The following are transcripts of a series of telephone conversations taped by the author between 24 February and 10 March 1994, coinciding with his unwanted introduction to the "work" of Sean Landers.

ANATOLE "TOTO" DEJOUISSANCE [editor-in-chief, *Whitespace: Art and Beyond* magazine]: Hello, Andrew? Toto here. I have something that's just *too* perfect for you. Surely you've heard of Sean Landers, leading star of the neo-Conceptual abject multimedia ironic-self-promotion loser movement?

ANDREW HULTKRANS: Uhh, nope. I'm in Siberia, you know—I mean San Francisco.

ATD: Oh . . . *quite*. Well, he's generating quite a buzz here *in the city*, and I think you'll find his work fascinating. In fact I see you as, well, *contemporaries*. He's got that ironic-self-promotion thing *down*, and his milieu is that same disenchanting-overeducated-underemployed-self-obsessed-white-male-twentysomething-angst thing that you wallow in so artfully.

AH: Thanks . . . I guess. . . .

ATD: You'll do it then? *Fabulous!* I'll have some things Fed-Exed to you today: slides, videos, a book, and press, of course. We'll need 2,500 words by the 13th of March, and. . . .

AH: Waitaminnit Toto, I'll need *cash*, *lots* of it, my name in 24-point—preferably

Sean Landers, *Naked in Nature*, 1992, 58 color photographs, each 4 x 6". Edition of three. Photo: Michelle Reyes.

in deep violet—at the top of the opening spread, and a grainy black-and-white shirtless portrait photo on the contributor's page or I won't even *consider*—

ATD: Yes, *yes*, my dear, anything you want. Now just make sure you're awake before ten tomorrow or the Fed-Ex man will see you in your undies.

AH:—and sidebars on my weightlifting techniques, my shocking sexual aberrations, and—

[click]

ATD: [audible bursts of French; something about Foucault and pastries] Toto Dejouissance speaking. . .

AH: Alright Toto, I got the stuff. What's the deal with this book? I mean, [sic]?! That's like turning in a college paper called "Untitled 1." And the *cover*? Looks like he's clowning David or something, although he looks more Koresh than Michelangelo. I can see the title of my article now—*under* my name, of course: "Sean Landers: Loser or Poser." What are you getting me into here anyway?

ATD: [sic], ah yesss. Well, the title is a multivalent pun that mockingly appropriates a favorite barb of Sean's critics. As you'll see, Sean can't spell, so reviewers quoting his texts often write "[sic]" after the misspellings, in smug condescension. Sean brilliantly deflates the pejorative nature of the word by recontextualizing it as a badge of honor—much as the gay community has with words like "queer"—thereby exposing the petty jealousy and creative frustration that pervade art criticism. Of course, the title also connotes "sick," raising questions about the artist's health and sanity while glorifying the perverse, the sordid, the *malaise d'artiste*.

As for the nude pose, it's a still from the provocative yet inviting video piece *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, in which Sean campily echoes poses from classical sculpture while listening to Mass on the radio. The piece simultaneously explores male identity, the artist's ambivalence about Catholicism, the intersection of the voyeur and the

Landers' rantings vacillate schizophrenically, recalling now the naked love/death obsessions of institutionalized singer/cartoonist Daniel Johnston, now the steroid-fueled megalomania of novelist Mark Leyner. He is both a maudlin auto-confessor and a pornography-warped pervert. A sap whose sentimentality is balanced by his ability to find God in *D Cup* magazine.

ping off' some male painter, and go nowhere?" is a nice riff on how the art world railroads women artists into P.C. because it's fashionable. But then again, we all *know* this. Is Landers gonna show me anything *new*? At least the videos look promising. Lessee . . . *Drunk*—I can relate to that. *Anyone's Orgasm*? As long as that includes *my* orgasm, I'm down. *Wisper, Italian High Renaissance . . . sic* is right. This guy went to Yale? What did he write on his application, "I rully want to be a sculpter"? *Jeez*. I mean, I'll give him a shot, but don't expect anything on the sculpture. I'll only end up saying something like "Mr. Landers knows a great bust when he sees one," or "Mr. Landers has a fine eye for a figure." Isn't sculpture dead anyway?

ATD: [sigh] As long as collectors are *buying* sculpture, my dear, it isn't dead. Really you are *so* ribald. Forget about the sculpture. Sean's really evolving into a *multimedia* artist. It's his videos and writings that have made him the talk of the town. By the way, his phone number is [deleted] in case you want to chat. Now remember, we need it by the 13th. Ciao.

AH: [desperate] —Toto—about that *cash*—I'm running low on aminos, and—

onanist, and the electronic mediation of worship—of both "God" and self. It's *truly* post-Modern.

AH: Stuff it. I had my fill of that Bo Drillyard bunk in college. The only worthwhile idea any of those Frenchies ever had was Lacan's five-minute shrink session—now *that* was a scam. Speaking of scams, how'd Landers convince his vanity press to publish 454 pages of arthritic handwriting? Publicsfear Press? Come *on*, Toto, do you really expect me to *read* this drivell?

I mean, the cartoons are kinda funny. The one with the naked woman with the box over her head saying "This is all you really want" bleeds truth for me. And the young woman painter thinking "Should I do 'angry woman' political art and sell lots of paintings, or paint what I want, get accused of 'rip-

SWM

Lorraine O'Grady

Ever since that bloody Monday in October 1987 when the stock market dampened Euro-American certainty, young white artists, like young, upwardly expectant whites in general, often seem not to know what's hit them. It's this confusion that gives their work expressive drive. The new crop of artists has a free-floating intensity, set harshly adrift from the confident subjectivities of that brief shining moment when it was possible to believe in an information-age millennium.

Julia Kristeva's term "abjection" has been appropriated to describe these artists and their mood. But without a full theorizing of the differences between "abjection" and "subjection," "abject art" can sound suspiciously like another last-ditch attempt to keep European subjectivity centered (self-abasement as the twisted obverse of self-glorification). And the need to take endemic mental states and extend their sphere through universalization seems out of synch with this art's desperate particularities. The "Abject Art" exhibit at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art last summer, for example, dragged in the quite different work of David Hammons and Adrian Piper to validate its nomenclature; the desire for the clean comfort of the universal not only illustrated the downside of multiculturalism, it deprived even the white artists of their messy, sadly deflated, but still vibrant beauty. Another epithet for this work, borrowed from the title of Richard Linklater's movie *Slacker*, seems both more modest and more apt: this *is* "slack" art, art that has had the wind knocked out of its sails.

Opposite: **Sean Landers, Dingleberry Sean [detail], 1993, ink on paper, 78" x 25'.**

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Slackers, as one commentator put it, “are beatniks without a beat—a lost generation minus a sustaining poetics of loss.”¹ In a group that defines itself by its weakness, the conceptual artist Sean Landers seems one of the stronger: by putting words to the loss, he makes it clearly visible, if not necessarily bearable. Pictures alone

won’t do here: they are too coded, and a more defined self-awareness is called for. No matter that the loss may be only one of unreasonable expectations (i.e., that the market would continue providing rewards without limit and that, as white artists, they would never have competition), it is a bafflingly real one, and is shared by an entire culture.

Landers is a fast-babbling Irish-American whose words can snake over the walls of several museums and whose charismatic physical presence is able to hold up against dozens of hours of real-time video. That he is articulate, though, does not mean he is always in control of the implications of his speech. Blissfully tone-deaf, he writes as if unconscious of how a phrase like “Surely pity for a whiner of my magnitude must be impossible” echoes differently in the corridors of power than when it is overheard by someone who *really* has something to whine about.

Landers may not have “a convenient trust fund,” but his lack of power is relative, cushioned by forms of earned and unearned luck. Unlike the Latin American would-be artist who in the early ’80s rented wall space and graffitied “René: I Am the Best Artist” all over SoHo, Landers is neither without talent nor unchic. And, closer to home, he is unlike my friend George: a child art-prodigy whose third-grade teachers paid him to make their Christmas cards. George didn’t take art seriously until late high school, when he saw a picture of Salvador Dalí wearing a top hat and cape and carrying a gold-knobbed cane. With dreams of limousines and good-looking broads, he went off to Cooper Union and discovered he was black a few years before multiculturalism. That was the end of that. How sorry can you feel for Landers when, with two group shows and a one-person exhibit covered in a single 1990 issue of the *New*

York Times, and with *The New Yorker* taking note of his every move from the beginning, he has reaped the benefits of his perfect placement in time?

This doesn’t mean he’s not entitled to a sense of thwarted ambition. The contradiction between subjective feelings of powerlessness and the real power inherent in being at the center of a trendy discourse is the heart of ambiguity in the work of Landers and others of the abject/pathetic/slack group and, as much as anything, is this art’s motor of fascination. That others declared culturally, nationally, or racially out of it may feel this group already has most of what it’s entitled to certainly doesn’t lessen the pain, and may, in fact, add to it. But for these artists, empathy is not the point; their positioning is.

What sets Landers above many of his peers is his healthy degree of self-loathing. Self-aware, he seems to have a sense of the historical moment, though he cannot *see* it or *make it seen*. The shtick he has adopted—and with Landers the decision-making seams invariably show, often intentionally—allows for the illegitimacy of his own situation, both psychological and cultural. This straddling of the chasms between need and the reality of privilege is the true referent of what reviewers call his “sincere insincerity,” his “manufactured schizophrenic personality,” and his “inspired transformation of infantile demands into art.” Whether or not he’d agree with what I’m saying, there’s no law that says he can’t be better than he thinks.

When Landers moans “Oh God, I only wish that there was some *content* in what I say and do,” or “I don’t want a life of mediocrity, I’ve been born into the middle, of the middle, of the middle and I’m claustrophobic [*sic*],” he knows he’s not alone. But does he realize that to those outside the charmed circle these stifling monologues of the self, superficially chaotic and decentered, sound like the orderly discourses of the bourgeois subject, still holding the upper hand? (But then, how many of us know how we look from the outside?) There is a good bit of *art politique* in Landers’ “sincere insincerity.” His constant positioning and repositioning in relation to the current argument may often seem dogged, the products of a subsistence diet of alcohol and too many is-

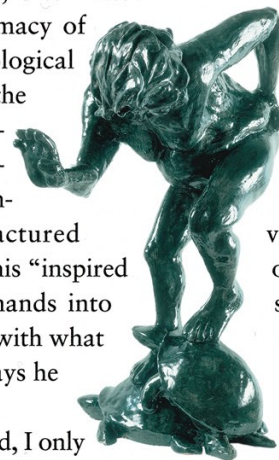
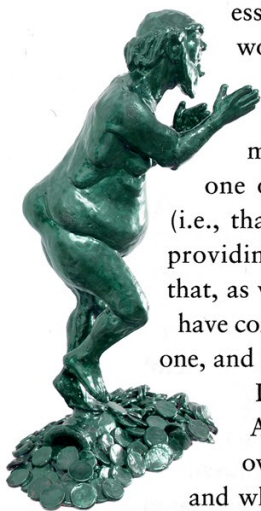
sues of *Artforum*, but they’re also unapologetic and at times deft. And how much can you edit a stream of consciousness engaged in at such length? *Something* is bound to slip through. His bravery feels real.

The level of reflecting-pool intimacy reaches its highest decibel on the videos, featuring physical as well as verbal masturbation. Landers, blessed with “Black Irish” good looks, with a tendency toward beef and bad skin (sorry, when you keep your face six inches from the camera hours at a time, you get what you get), has a shambling grace that renders his manic storytelling and solipsism surprisingly easy to take. The most fascinating of the videos, though, star not Landers but his father. For one thing, the tapes offer an eerie glimpse of how Sean will look when he grows old. For another, they show how honestly he comes by his logorrhea: Landers *père* talks nonstop, without prompting and with seeming unawareness of the camera, about nothing. On, and on, and on he goes. And his way of shaping his ramblings is identical to his son’s. After hours of watching Sean and finding him eccentric but diabolically clever, we discover that he has taken a family trait and, by pointing it in the direction of the “right” subject matter, elevated it to art. So what else is new?

White male adolescence is hardly my favorite vintage, and at 31, Landers is approaching the outer limits of his ability to work it. In a few short years, the “single” he happily announces to the ladies on his invitation card will turn into “unmarriageable.” There’s no judging unconscious contents, of course; they simply *are*. But we can address the choice to reveal them. For me, Landers’ decision to let it hang out, outdated macho and all, is performing a vital service.

In defense of Robert Mapplethorpe, the black gay British critic Kobena Mercer stated, “One might say that what is staged in Mapplethorpe’s black male nudes is the return of the repressed in the ethnocentric imaginary. . . . His work begins to reveal the political unconscious of white ethnicity.”²

The invisibility of the white political unconscious to which Mercer alludes, its opacity even to itself, may be this moment’s most pressing obstruction for white and nonwhite artists alike. Besides forging a bond between conceptualism and expressionism, Landers’ compulsive self-revela-



tions, that hammering away through writings and videos ad nauseam and drawings and sculptures (such as they are), have an unintentional side-effect: they are helping to unmask whiteness, beginning to take its lid off.

Even so, certain distinctions continue; and it pays to maintain their subtleties. There remains a *difference* between the endless smooth talking of having nothing to say and the stuttering that may be heard in a minoritized art's excess of accumulated, unexpressed meaning, which, having exceeded the space allotted to it by the history of expression, can now only explode or be repressed in a display of dark-glasses cool. Mercer and others have spoken of the "burden of representation": when only one or two voices at a time are allowed to be heard, there is a tremendous pressure to try and say everything in a single mouthful. And when your experience is more complex than the language, which was created for another purpose, has words for. . . .

I find a *difference* between Landers' logorrhea and the way my own work is driven from medium to medium and from style to style by the compulsion to get it all in. This lack and this overabundance are dialectically related, and I don't want to choose between them. Hal Foster, in a repudiation of his own, earlier post-Modern theories under the pressure of what he calls "multiculturalism at its non-identitarian best," now asks: "Whose 'postmodern' . . . whose 'today?'"³ Even the dumbest of us should by now be able to sense that the cultural projects of the West and the non-West are each implicated in a larger history. And if we don't all keep getting it said, how will we find out what that is?

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1. Jack Bankowsky, "Slackers," *Artforum* vol. XXX no. 3, November 1991, p. 96.
2. Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," from *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices, Seattle: Bay Press, 1991, p. 187.
3. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: An October Book/MIT Press, 1993, pp. 211-12.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Artist

Jan Avgikos

I'm banal. We're all banal, that's the point right? Yup, I think that's it.

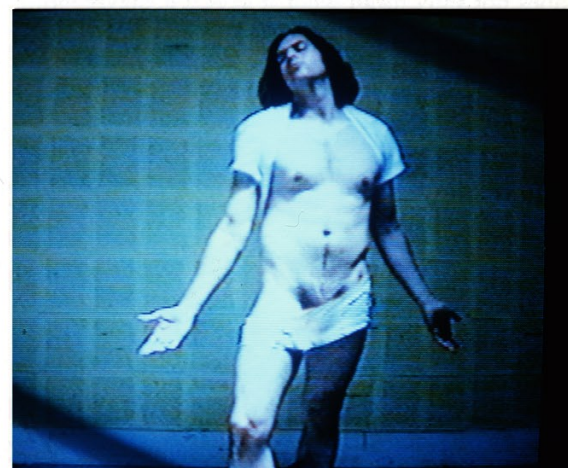
—Sean Landers, [*sic*], 1993

Sean Landers, the artist-cum-writer-cum-artist, is always crying about wanting to be a "genious" and questioning whether everything he does has to "mean something." On the merits of his handwritten book [*sic*] (hey Sean, I read every word, on all 454 pages), and also of his shorter epistolary works, numerous self-indulgent and narcissistic video performances, and bronze sculptures caricaturing average working-class schmoes and other "loser" types culled from the novels of his arch rivals in the literary field, I would say there's plenty of "meaning" in his work. For openers, let's call it humorous, prattling, seriously insincere, self-deprecating nihilism. As Landers writes, "No wonder Duchamp gave up and just played chess. The more you think the more you realize how pointless everything is. To enjoy anything you have to delude yourself."

By his own admission, Landers is a member of a new "lost generation"—the white middle-class offspring of baby-boomer America, lacking the exigencies of an unjust war to oppose, a countercultural revolution to fight, or even a strong intellectual left to join. This generation's art is steeped in ambivalence, always at odds with its own worth. When Nirvana sets its mental ma-

Landers' constant repositioning in relation to the current argument may often seem dogged, the product of a subsistence diet of alcohol and too many issues of *Artforum*, but it's also unapologetic and at times deft. And how much can you edit a stream of consciousness engaged in at such length? Something is bound to slip through.

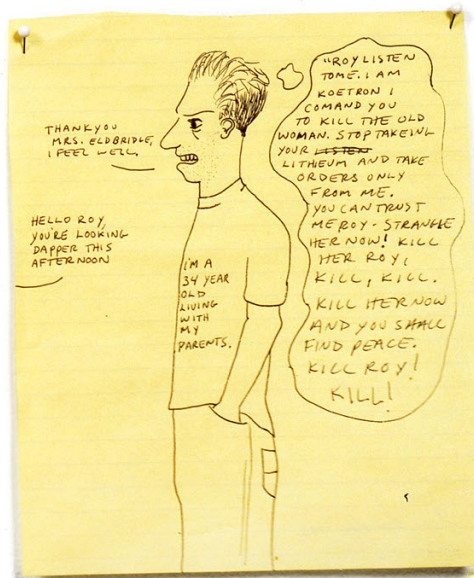
Opposite, left to right: **Sean Landers, Callahan Strikes It Rich, 1993**, terra-cotta and green glaze, 31 x 11 x 18". Photo: Peter Muscato. **Sean Landers, Danny Boy of Dingle, 1993**, terra-cotta and green glaze, 25 x 15 x 15". Photo: Peter Muscato. This page: **Sean Landers, Italian Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture, 1993**, stills from color videotape, 45 minutes. Edition of ten.



chinery at figuring out happiness, the formula that songwriter Kurt Cobain comes up with—"I'm having fun/I think I'm dumb/Or maybe just happy"—is strikingly like the "Leonard Cohen afterworld" that Landers shows us when he videotapes himself jerking off in the studio, or pens his affable but interminable "streams of nothing" and "chronicles of idleness." If misery loves company, Landers might be consoled by his art's part in a larger esthetic and cultural tendency that wears its asocial attitudes and nonintellectual dispositions, its paranoia and its delusions of grandeur, its adolescent tendencies and its obsessional leanings, on its sleeve. He deserves to be singled out, though, for taking it over the top: his efforts to show that the inner idiot is in control are totally convincing. The work gives us little opportunity, perhaps little inclination, to identify with an expressive "consciousness," to appreciate esthetic accomplishment, to enjoy the irony of institutional critique. What's left?

Either the subject who seems to speak in this work is entirely the product of social and unconscious processes that it will never much know, or it does not fully mean what it says. Or maybe both. Not that this genius necessarily deserves a MacArthur, but the work is hardly uninformed. Its aggressive lack of panache notwithstanding, it clearly depends on ideological models in place since the '60s: buried in its prehistory are both Conceptual art, grounded in a philosophical inquiry into art as a self-defined, self-referential practice, and Minimalism, with its exploration of how repetition can both embody and dissolve content. Landers' texts repeatedly reference themselves, self-consciously and tautologically. Pages torn from a yellow legal pad fill a wall, pushpinned edge to edge; dizzying compilations of writings spill over a canvas. Reading becomes a physical and visual en-

In a clearly strategic choice, apathy and doubt walk hand in hand with malice in his work—his "autopilot dribble" is as likely to be turned on the viewer as on himself. Those who persevere against "such utter boredom" eventually encounter a direct "fuck-you everybody."



durance test, defying completion. To the extent that it divests itself of theoretical models once seen as fundamental to progressive 20th-century art, we might even consider Landers' language a form of radically innovative, quasi-heroic abstraction—even as it paraphrases an alternative model in which art's duty is seen as the reproduction of the social world. Thus we are constantly brought back to the form itself: is it novelistic, diaristic, parody, critique? Is it literary at all? Is it art?

Does it matter? Landers' comic language of mundanity divorces his Conceptual and Minimal frameworks from their earlier functions, substituting solipsism for self-reference, routine for serial repetition. His gestures of self-abasement and his loud show of bad faith subverting any philosophical seriousness, he wreaks havoc with prevailing catechisms. The texts lampoon artistic practice, the figure of the artist, and the artist's relation to the market. They also take on the viewer—questioning our desire for art, and the means by which that desire is piqued, or frustrated.

Art has long been charged with the responsibility of upsetting the status quo, challenging convention, and injecting youth and vitality—indeed, life itself—into a sys-

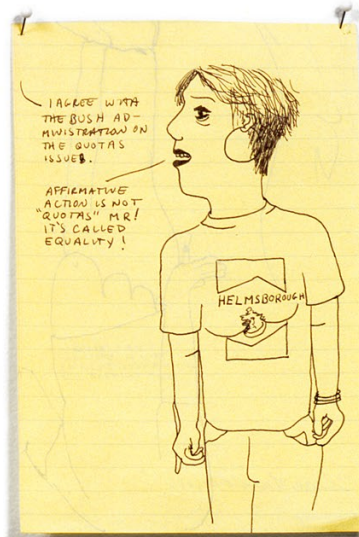
tem fraught with anxiety over its depleted social function and ever pending obsolescence. Younger artists particularly are often expected to turn this trick through some form of insult to the audience—as long, that is, as the "shocks" aren't too disruptive. Many card-carrying members of the art world retain a skeptical conscience concerning this contradiction between negation and affirmation. Biting the hand that feeds you may be cathartic, but once built into the system, it is a compromised form of confrontation. And its familiarity as a strategy can, and has, produced a secondary symptom: a pervasive feeling of contemporary art's impotence and ineffectiveness.

Landers, a virtual heat-seeking missile for soft spots, mines this malaise adeptly. In a clearly strategic choice, apathy and doubt walk hand in hand with malice in his work—his "autopilot dribble" is as likely to be turned on the viewer as on himself.

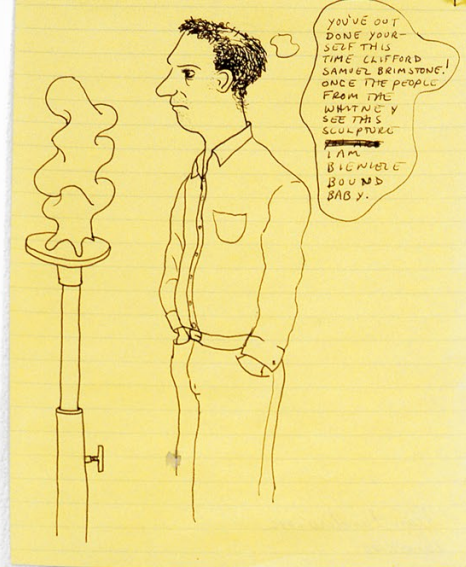
Those who persevere against "such utter boredom" as his writing seems to compel eventually encounter a direct "fuck-you everybody"—fuck you for enjoying his pose of ineptitude, for laughing at his bad jokes, for buying into his shtick, for wondering whether his trite confessions might actually have something to do with "truth." Self-described as "a slice of wonder bread, with a slice of Kraft American cheese and a swath of Frenche's yellow mustard on it," Landers asks himself,

"Why are people paying for my art? Every trip to the Met is an exercise in denial about my own lack of ability. Has our culture really become this thin as to allow someone like me acceptance as one of it's artist." Besides second-guessing his audience's responses, and forestalling them, this passive/aggressive show of insecurity taunts and challenges our tolerance for "transgression" in art.

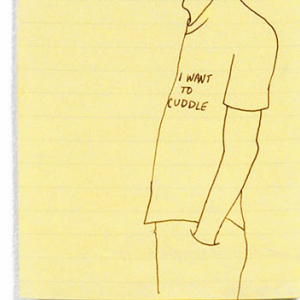
It's not as if Landers' patheticness had pathos. Through a rhetoric of monotony, he reduces the confessional mode to spectacle. The videos may appear to document his life as



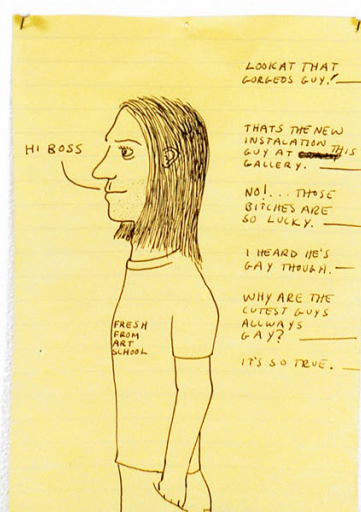
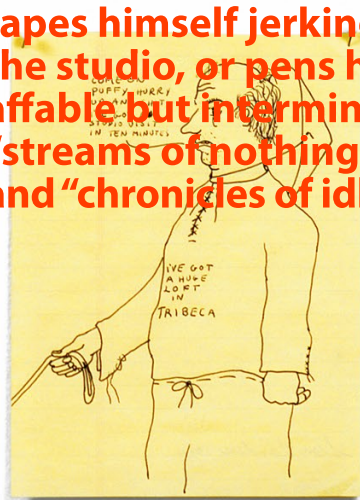
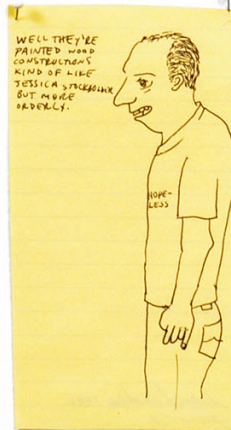
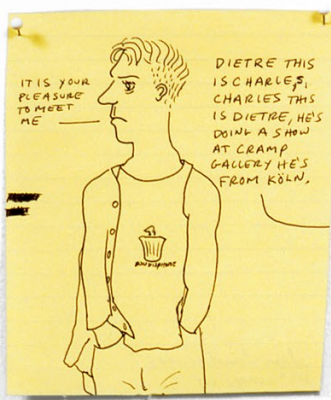
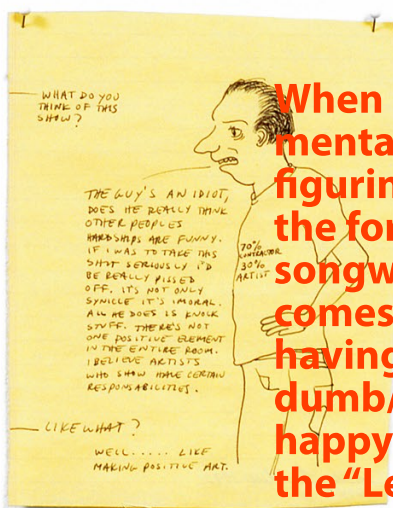
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Opposite, top to bottom: Sean Landers, *Cartoon (Kill the Old Woman)*, 1992, ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 6 1/2". Sean Landers, *Cartoon (Helmsborough)*, 1992, ink on paper, 7 1/2 x 5 1/4". This page: Sean Landers, *cartoons*, all 1992, ink on paper, varying sizes. Installation view.



When Nirvana sets its mental machinery at figuring out happiness, the formula that songwriter Kurt Cobain comes up with—"I'm having fun/I think I'm dumb/Or maybe just happy"—is strikingly like the "Leonard Cohen afterworld" that Landers shows us when he video-tapes himself jerking off in the studio, or pens his affable but interminable "streams of nothing" and "chronicles of idleness."



[click]

[A week later. Landers' answering-machine message—too banal for ink]

AH: Landers, I've been reading your "book" and there's something I thought I'd share with you. There's another wannabe writer who posed all-but-naked on his book cover—that's right, Landers, *Howard Stern*. And you know what? His book was the #1 best-seller for months. All the talk shows want him. Fans line up around the block for him. He gets to do cable-TV specials with ten surgically augmented 17-year-olds in bikinis crawling all over him. He gets to, and I quote you here, "listen to soft rock and have big boobs bounce in his face" *all day long*. You "can't look at a yellow legal pad without dreaming of a Pulitzer"? Hah! Face the Muzak, Landers, Howard Stern will *always* be a more successful writer than you.

[click]

[Landers' answering machine]

AH: [yelling, clearly drunk] "HICK/MICK/GRICK," EH? STOP WORRYING ABOUT YOUR ETHNICITY AND CLASS, LANDERS, AND START WORRYING ABOUT YOUR CHOICE OF UNDERWEAR. SKIVVIES? BLECH! NO WONDER WOMEN LEAVE YOU.

[click]

ATD: Hello? Toto speaking.

AH: Yeah, Toto, I've cranked out some paragraphs on this joker. I also paid him a couple of crank calls. Always good to terrorize your subject, eh? Here, lemme read you what I've got. I tried to tone up my language a bit so I wouldn't sound like Al Goldstein in the middle of *The New Yorker*. Then again, Al Goldstein might have an interesting take on this guy. Landers is a perv! I mean, he meticulously describes shoving a toilet plunger up his ass!!! Anyway, here goes: [reads]

On first inspection, the work of Sean Landers takes the "art" of documenting boredom beyond Andy Warhol's eight-hour *Empire* "film"—a work of *laissez-faire* subrealism that should have remained in the narcoleptic slumber it inflicted on its audiences. If you have boring, depressing, mildly schizophrenic days like Landers does, you can relate, but that doesn't absolve him for adding them to my psychic calendar. As I listen to Landers croon "Never get caught between the moon and New York City" yet again, I have to ask myself—is this art?

Landers' work implies that the seal of approval bestowed by the art world of today—by dealers, critics, and collectors—precedes all traditional debates over esthetic value. An artist is "made," to borrow Mafia parlance, and his work is thenceforth received as "art" regardless of its craft, intelligence, esthetic quality, or content. Of course it may then be savaged by critics, ignored by galleries, and shunned by collectors, but these later reactions are irrelevant to the characterization of the creator as an "artist." He may eventually be labeled a "bad" artist, but once he has received the coveted "ARTIST" imprimatur it can never be removed, except, perhaps, by his own volition.

This is the tattoo parlor from which Landers has emerged, though he is currently exploring his badge's clout in other VIP lounges (e.g., the novelist's). Certain critics maintain that Landers' work is about "male subjectivity at the margins," or "notions of ethnic liminality in the melting pot," or "troping the postindustrial commodity"; Landers would have us be-

lieve that it's simply about "sex, death, art, and life." But it is also about knowingly pushing the envelope of what is acceptable as "art" once the creator is officially established as an "artist." In other words, Landers exhibits subcreative studio detritus as a challenge to the art world—an arcane, insular network that nonetheless shares its economy and dynamics of attention with mainstream pop culture.

This parallel is not lost on Landers, a self-declared talk show junkie. His written works and home videos function as the tabloids do for pop-culture icons: they provide fans with every soiled panty, every sweaty session on the leg-press machine, every mundane moment, and every personal anecdote, whether authentic or spurious. Indeed the authenticity of these glimpses of the stars is immaterial, since the tabloid's goal is simply to provide new slides for the fans' projectors. Landers has made this dynamic the core of his art, mutating from a trained sculptor into a paparazzo chasing his own "fame."

Never mind that Landers doesn't have enough groupies to justify his tabloidlike coverage of himself. He *wants* them, and that's what matters. He's an "artist" and this is his "art." For Landers, the "art-work" is the arch commentary the "artist" provides for his work. It is not the badly modeled bust but the price tag dangling from its neck, reading "Fuck you. \$5000, suckaaah! Love, Sean Landers." This is scarcely original, of course, but then again, what is? Landers cops strategies from Warhol's "factory" mass-production techniques and Jeff Koons' Gordon Gekko-in-Disneyworld hypercapitalist kitsch marketing schemes, but more important, he shares their pathological passive-aggressive habit of flipping the bird at the art-world audience while desperately demanding its love.

Let's ignore Landers' place in the metanarrative of art for a moment and take him at face value. Like a manic-depressive venting to his shrink, Landers makes his art a sounding board for the neuroses of an over-educated, media-saturated white boy with a lot of time on his hands. (I should know.) His rantings—on video and in writing—vacillate schizophrenically, recalling now the naked love/death obsessions of institutionalized singer/cartoonist Daniel Johnston (whose verses include "I'll never marry/I'll never wed/No one wants to sleep with you when your flesh is rotting"), now the steroid-fueled megalomania of novelist Mark Leyner. Landers is both a maudlin auto-confessor and a pornography-warped pervers. A sap whose sentimentality is balanced by his ability to find God in *D Cup* magazine. A "kickass artist" and a "weak little maggot who deep down just wants to listen to soft rock and have big boobs bounce in my face." He embraces these contradictions as lovingly as he would one of his wet-dream paramours. And if we take him at his word (a tough proposition), he broadcasts every detail of his "nerotic" (unpack *that*) life "for you."

This apparent generosity is, of course, largely disingenuous: like the freakishly "victimized" guests on *Oprah*, Landers is actually broadcasting his multimedia personality *for himself*. It is the way he delivers his "sincerity" that distinguishes him from the adult victims of Martha Stewart-induced inadequacy on daytime TV. Landers masterfully employs ironic abasement as a self-promotion strategy. In his giant 1993 words-on-canvas piece *Patches*, for example, he writes, "This painting is like a phone call from a nerotic, self-obsessive, depressive friend who is so inconsiderate

they don't realize they're boring you. Well, at least you can walk away. See ya later." And, "Hurculeon efforts make me feel like I'm less of a hoax. If it's a lot of work at least I can appease my conscience. I guess I don't believe in my own ideas <==Bullshit Sean, you think you're great!" Arguably defensible delusions of grandeur are constantly deflated by such insecure disclaimers, and vice versa. This endless circularity of self-awareness seems to insulate Landers from possible criticism—except, perhaps, the criticism that *as art*, endless self-awareness sucks.

That dismissal must be qualified, at least in part. In *[sic]*, for example, where Landers attempts the kind of "automatic writing" that Jack Kerouac wouldn't even have thought was typing, Landers occasionally gushes streams of apparent emotional honesty, specifically relating to his love life. That they are unabashedly sappy does not detract from their effect: momentarily taking Landers out of his in-joke, these passages destabilize what would otherwise be a painfully arch conceit and invite our entrée.

And yet. . . . In a passage tucked unobtrusively away in *Patches*, Landers identifies the central problem of his art: "I will kiss ass while shamelessly biting the hand that feeds me. And obviously I'll admit to both. Does that then neutralise it, or critique it. If so, is critique merely high faluten self consciousness?" To answer those questions: Neutralize? You hope not. Critique? You're getting warmer. High-falutin' self-consciousness? Sean, I shouldn't have to tell you—it's a crucial part of your art, for God's sake, and it's *paying your bills*.

Well? Whaddaya think?

ATD: [sucking sounds, possibly an Altoid] Yes, well . . . it's certainly *feisty*. I am tempted to ask you to tone down the voice, but then again, Sean's work relies so *heavily* on his idiosyncratic voice, there's a nice echo there. Hmmm . . . you seem to be ignoring the existence of the established neo-Conceptual confessional art school, questions of narrative transgression are entirely absent, and I was hoping for some discourse on the fragmentation of subjectivity by projection through various media, but perhaps you can work those things in with a phrase or two. I must say I detect a hint of jealousy in your writing, but that's part of the reason I assigned the piece to you in the first place: such invidious projections—on canonized precursors, on the institutional exclusivity of culture—and the willful assent to cultural relevance are key tropes of Sean's oeuvre. Despite your attempts to question his status as an artist, your effort to come to grips with his art is clearly analogous to his own trials before the cultural powers that be. And you have to admit that Sean's onto something—he wouldn't be where he is today if his work were *completely* without merit.

AH: Sure, the shtick works, but Landers isn't the kickass artist he dreams of being. I guarantee you that *[sic]* will never be mandatory undergraduate reading. You yourself just pinpointed Landers' *true* talent when you cited the art world's acceptance of him as proof of his artistic merit. His self-declared project is hustling the New York—hell, the *international*—art world into making him *matter*. He's got shows, he's got collectors, he's part of a "movement" or at least a "thing," he's got art-magazine editors calling *me* up for features, he's making *money* ferchrissake! The living embodiment of the slacker dream, he's taken mediocre talents, shameless laziness, ironic self-awareness, and endless angst—qualities shared by so

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many of our generation's accredited white boys, including myself—and is parlaying them into *fame* and *cash*. I tip my Philly Blunt cap to him. But Landers, if you're reading this, and I know you are, remember that I'm right behind you. And you know what? I'm 27. You're what? 31? You ain't getting any younger dude. In a few years those nude videos will be even more embarrassing than they are already. You'll end up as the lurching wino from one of your cartoons—wearing a has-been T-shirt and publicly urinating at gallery openings as critics and art mavens shake their heads and vaguely recall your “moment” back when. Meanwhile, my late-'20s juices are just beginning to flow. I maintain a rigorous workout schedule to hone my rippling physique. By the way, Toto, do you think any galleries would be interested in *my* home videos? They make Landers' look like the Disney Channel. I want to show the world what I'm *capable* of . . . Toto?

[click] □

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AVGIKOS *continued from page 68*

he seems to live it (hanging around doing not much, then showing it to us, in Andy Warhol-like real time), but the principle of translating experience into art has no integrity in this work. (In *[sic]*, Landers writes, “I really do want to be an art genius and describe my generation, and this time and all the humanity for timelessness. Is wanting to enough? Or do you actually have to do it.”) As lived experience becomes a dangling signifier, the critique that might address Landers' appropriations of Conceptual and Minimalist devices is displaced, replaced, by the question of whether we believe that this image of the artist corresponds to the man who has produced it. Landers' use of the conditional voice to qualify his sordid confessions and disclosures (“What if I told you that . . .”) further insinuates the figure of what a literary critic would call the unreliable narrator: the possibility that this portrait of the artist as a young artist lies somewhere between artistic fiction and ruse.

Landers the character and Landers the artist/author are never clearly distinguished here, and never clearly united either. That the literary skills on display announce themselves as inadequate for “real” fiction only muddies the waters. So we want to think we understand the artist's life, are fully in possession of it (as voyeurs, as vicarious insiders and bohemians)? Landers is disgustingly willing to accommodate us. Indeed he delivers himself up to our desire, soul and body: we see him paunchily naked, and learn his tastes in sex (hetero, and lots of it); we meet his friends and acquaintances, his lovers and exlovers, his family, his rivals, his dealer, his collectors; we know his inner torments and doubts, his aspirations and fantasies. Along the way, we also get his views on “the new male sexuality” (soft, sensitive, and threatened by “empowered” women), American literature, contemporary art and its practitioners, and a host of other topics.

Much of this seems like we're getting the real guy, some seems smoke and mirrors. Yet ultimately, of course, what's staged and what's autobiography is beside the point. Sean Landers knows he has a workable gimmick in “Sean Landers,” but the real interest of his work is its strategy as art, the way it functions both to typify and to problematize the state of contemporary art by resorting to a self-canceling play of opposites: take one part conceptual inquiry, one part “realism”; one part truth, one part parody; one part esthetic novelty, one part esthetic debt; one part searching, one part savvy; one part sincerity, one part irony; mix and stir. Thus Landers maps the maze in which avant-garde transgression is wandering—maybe even lifts himself a little above it, looking for the way out.

And for all its shoddy production standards and elevation of low achievement, this is work that puts real art problems on the table—problems of classification and valuation, of the relation between merit and materiality (as demonstrated by the difference between scribbling on yellow legal pads and fabricating bronze sculpture), of the worth of any artistic gesture, of the place art occupies in our culture. In the short term, the confessional overdose Landers feeds us is certainly some kind of antidote to the politically correct seriousness of the '90s—and that's not to mention Modernist art's tradition of sincerity, of expressiveness, of the inner child as boy genius. Landers' overorchestrated excursion into the depths of the soul reveals (surprise!) no radiant core but only boredom and pettiness. Should we want to stay tuned, he's put us on notice: don't expect Jackson Pollock to emerge from the chrysalis of self, expect Walter Mitty. □