

ICH MACHE MICH

Michael Bilborough

Split *Sean Landers* into two meanings. That dualist eponym could refer to the human identified from birth by that name (Sean Landers) or to the persona cultivated in that human's labor ("Sean Landers"). The former makes the art; the latter is the art. In the studio, the artist and art become fused, intersecting as in a Venn diagram (both Seth Brundle and his Fly). One way to distinguish Sean from "Sean" is by examining the transfer of privacy: Sean's secrets become "Sean's" public attributes. Sean selects and reveals his inner thoughts, and every secret he divulges becomes a characteristic of "Sean." The more privacy Sean sheds, the more he articulates his stand-in. Sean sculpts "Sean."

In this exchange of privacy, as the art expands, the prolific artist descends to the pedestrian terrain of the rest of us. That is, the transparent candor he masters enables us to recognize him as someone quite familiar. Through this recognition, the rest of us profit by finding in his sacrifice of privacy our own personal acknowledgments and reconciliation. As Sean describes this bonus in *[sic]*, "Not like you also don't have your own internal voice. How do you live with it, minute, after hour, day in day out? Doesn't it piss you off? Or freak you out. I guess the idea is to occupy your mind with the writing of people like me. In that light then perhaps I am a hero."¹ Through Sean, we quell the tempestuous waves tossing the vessel of our own introspective expeditions. This is a blessed unburdening. Thank God for Sean Landers.

Hence, privacy is the shifting currency in this Faustian deal with the devil. After all, he does bait the dark lord in *[sic]*: "Hey Satan! Lets have your best offer."² In exchange for sacrificing privacy, Landers would get many shows, sales, reviews, glamour, and fame, but it would cost him many intimate secrets. He would have to dredge deep and produce sacrificial gifts—disclosures ranging from physiological, prurient distractions (such as skin fungus, premature ejaculation, acne at thirty, beer gut, masturbation) to psychic tumult (such as depression, jealousy, isolation, grandiosity, and conflicts with friends and family members). A deal is a deal. Along with the Good and the Bad, there was the Ugly. Released into the public milieu, these secrets would circulate in heavy rotation forever. Immortality cuts both ways.

Indeed, attempts to analyze and understand these dualities have reverberated in the echo chamber of criticism about Landers's work. To reconcile the alter ego "Sean" and the artist Sean, some critics settled on the compromise that Sean was



Sean Landers sculpting *Ich Mache Mich* at Bruno Brunnet Fine Arts, Berlin, 1994

ironic about being ironic. They held that despite claims of sincerity, if he were managing an artificial persona, then that artifice created distance as much as irony would—making him not so sincere after all. For example, as Michael Kimmelman wrote in the *New York Times*, "Everyone who writes about Mr. Landers points out how we're supposed to feel unsure whether he is serious and pathetic or just kidding."³ Or as Jan Avgikos wrote in *Artforum*, "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."⁴ These writers scrutinize the tactic of casting the persona "Sean Landers," though each is unable to come to a conclusion on the significance or ultimate sincerity of the character.

Landers himself has always defended his earnest and face-value sensibility. In his Kunsthalle Zürich catalog, Landers stated that "for me, it's the point where irony has gone full circle and begins the return to sincerity."⁵ But can we trust him, this unreliable narrator? To even flirt with the possibility of sincerity might betray a Landers novice as naive. Noted. Yet I still prefer the foolhardy leap of faith over the suspicion of irony stalking Sean's eponymous repertoire. I prefer to trust in his sincerity as self-evident and embrace Sean as an aggressively introspective, yearning craftsman in his studio who assiduously calls out to the multitudes through curtains of concept.

Through his words and actions, Sean offers us extraordinary transparency, letting us really see him. Shamelessly, he does goofy dances, wails in falsetto along with the radio, melodramatically berates himself, picks his nose, and even strips literally naked. Through his presence, or rather the



Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture (still), 1993
Video and special edition of the book *[sic]*, video: 41:33, edition of 10, 2 A.P.

permanent video record of his presence, Sean alleviates our embarrassment and helps us by proving that other people struggle with their pathetic lives. He, too, watches television, poses for the mirror, and imagines being a movie star. Full disclosure from him feels like solidarity. Everybody hurts.

His nudity in videos such as *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture* (1993), *Songs of Love and Hate* (1993), and *Remissionem Peccatorum* (1994) instantiates Landers's full transparency. His body is as available as his mind. Sean gives us his naked body in these videos, and we find indisputable humanity in his anthropometric specifics and imperfections. In reality, Sean's penis is no more, no less normal than the billions of penises preceding it in nature; however, it is still human, which necessarily renders it wayward of the marmoreal ideals built into the iconic works that Sean performs in *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*. His manhood confirms his *manhood*. Accordingly, when he fondles himself, he summons the erotics of the silken marble curves in, say, Michelangelo's *David* or *Dying Slave*, yet his consequent arousal proves his vulnerability as flesh, not stone.

Together, his nudity and sensuality are his annunciatory *ostentatio genitalium*,⁶ a term Leo Steinberg uses to describe the traditional depiction of Christ's penis, a trecento-initiated tradition. In *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, Steinberg traces ways in which Christ's penis was signaled, manipulated, and trumpeted through centuries of Christ imagery. Master artists baited a viewer's eyes through a pictorial device specifically to illustrate the proof of divine incarnation, which demanded that the Son of God must be "complete in all the parts of a man."⁷ Moreover, his penis must be functionally responsive to temptation, because his chastity would be meaningless if he were immune to lust. Christ must be endowed and virile; otherwise, he can't pass as a man, can't die for our sins, and can't bring life everlasting. Christ's naked penis is his accreditation, and without a good once-over, we can't be sure.

Sean's naked body, like his confessional porousness, puts him in the same post-Eden, carnal captivity as the rest of us. In a museum, when we encounter his paintings and videos, with all that embarrassing content laid out, we presumably do so while



Remissionem Peccatorum (still), 1994
Video, 01:03:09, edition of 10, 2 A.P.

clothed, sober, among friends, and feeling assured enough to have gotten out of bed and leave the house. His voluntary exhibitionism is his consent, but it gives us the power and sets him prostrate to our mercy. This consent escalates our voyeuristic engagement. We have license to watch, read, and respond as we please. We can sympathize with him or ignore him, laugh with him or laugh at him, follow patiently or check our watches. We can even weigh our comparative piety: “I would never do that.” Sean can’t fight back, yet this passivity redeems him. For the viewers willing to look deeper, Sean offers profound self-recognition. His confessions, fact or fiction, alleviate the isolation we suffer through our insecurities. As Sean writes in *[sic]*: “maybe you’re escaping your own miserable worries for a while and laughing at mine then I’d be doing you a service. In that case perhaps this is a noble endeavor.”⁸

Christ underwent a Passion that began at his birth and ended at his crucifixion. Landers will undergo a Passion every time he exhibits one of these recordings, and there is no reversal in sight. Perhaps it is this yielding Passion that Sean evokes in

Songs of Love and Hate. In that video, Sean listens to Leonard Cohen’s funeralary “Love Calls You by Your Name” while nude and slumping limply in a chair, his arm dangling, almost the way Jacques-Louis David’s dying Marat slumps in his bathtub. To see glimpses of himself can be painful for Sean; the pain of unflinching self-reflection through self-flagellation that he enacts in *Remissionem Peccatorum* concretely demonstrates the pain he risks through this divine surrender. Whipping himself, Sean really gasps when his belt really cracks against his skin, and he avoids hitting the same spot more than once. He feels pain—as is elaborated on in *[sic]*—which implies that he must have a sense of self-preservation.

Years later, to the present, Sean Landers is Sean Landers, famous artist. A thriving survivor, Sean has recovered from wounds inflicted through betrayals, exclusions, attrition, and even direct attacks. Nevertheless, Sean’s staying power occludes such heretics and apostates. Sean’s prophetic endorsement of talk shows presaged the current age of reality TV, and his work gives us insight into the contemporary moment of incessant reality and endless divulging. As Sean

wrote in *[sic]*, “Talk shows are the best thing to happen in America in some time. I don’t know what the preceden[ts] for them in history are but I’m sure there are many. It seems to be of the most basic human needs to watch real people expose themselves. In every horrid confession and breakdown we see glimpses of ourselves.”⁹ Reality TV is just part of the widespread collective appetite for confession that Sean anticipated. He foretold the mass-market deaccessioning of private moments, a movement that also includes tweeting, status updates, and a lengthening index of usernames. Throughout his videos, he conducts his persistent broadcast fantasy, continuously watching himself, nude or clothed, on a monitor while recording. He stages something like a cable-access confession booth, completes a documentary of his hometown, runs screen tests of himself, and even attempts a mad-as-hell inspired commercial for instant macaroni and cheese. Sean fantasizes about a film crew following him.¹⁰ His paintings have voice-over. For Sean, television, reality, and confession fed his eschatological obsession about keeping himself alive.

He needs to make himself matter, not evaporate into nonexistence. “Ich Mache Mich,” writes the chimp in the 1994 bronze sculpture with that title. Believing that he must record and broadcast himself, lest he dematerialize, Sean pulls the camera through even the most banal activity. He acts, narrates, and looks on while casually listening to music, watching TV, and lighting the new cigarette with the used one. It doesn’t matter what viewers might hope for, and in fact, maybe he is sadistically delaying our gratification by withholding the juicier content. “There’s a good reason the mind forgets what it thinks every second of the day. If anyone cared to remember or record it this is what you’d get,” he reminds us.¹¹ It’s like hideous man #59 in David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, who hijacks us from prurient enjoyment of his masturbatory fantasy as he throttles us through the outer spheres, postponing delivery with each zoom-out. In similar ways, Sean makes us wait and wait for his choice material, instead rambling through elliptical courses best modeled with a Möbius strip.

If classicism involves, among other things, the deifying of the mind in its mathematical prowess,¹² then by contrast, Landers’s work might be counter-classical, in the humanizing of the mind in its neurotic meandering. Not every thought can be genius; not every sitcom episode can be your favorite. In a demonstration of this, a moment in *Improbable History* presents Sean twiddling the dials to enliven a radio program until he randomly turns to another station and lands on “Hymne” by Vangelis. His eyes light up, as if saying, “I can work with this!” and then he boldly howls along with operatic ecstasy. Sean’s introspective excavations require all the

liberal expanses of range that time can supply. And when he connects, Sean penetrates. His ruminative digressions, like the particulars of body and mind he reveals, are just the anomalous bycatch of his indiscriminating net, which trawls deeper and deeper. He’s digging for fire, and Sean invites us to dive with him into the turbulent waves. He will even go first, even though he is only as equipped as we are. If we are brave enough to follow, we will find the placid currents of redemption and even greater treasures: “at the bottom of the well spring of creativity our true genius awaits us.”¹³

¹ Sean Landers, *[sic]* (East Hampton, NY: Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, 2010), 257.

² *Ibid.*, 155.

³ Michael Kimmelman, “Art in Review: Sean Landers,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2001.

⁴ Jan Avgikos, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Artist,” *Artforum*, April 1994, 68.

⁵ Caoimhin Mac Giolla Léith and Beatrix Ruf, “Interview with Sean Landers,” in *Sean Landers: Kunsthalle Zürich*, ed. Beatrix Ruf (Zürich: JRP|Ringier Kunstverlag AG, 2004), 46.

⁶ Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ Landers, *[sic]*, 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106–7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹² Donald Kuspit, “Sol LeWitt: The Look of Thought,” *Art in America*, September–October 1975.

¹³ Landers, *[sic]*, 345.