

FAILING BETTER

Andrea K. Scott

Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

—Samuel Beckett, “Worstward Ho,” 1983

Success Is the New Failure

—Title of a Sean Landers painting, 2006

The eighties ended on November 6, 1990. That night, at Sotheby’s in New York, the audience applauded when a painting by Julian Schnabel, its broken plates emblematic of the decade’s heedless excess, failed to elicit a bid. (Apparently, the same crowd that inflated the art-market bubble took perverse pleasure in watching it burst.) The results of the sale were so brutal—less than 50 percent of the lots sold—that *Time* magazine dubbed the auction “The Great Massacre of 1990.”¹ Ten days later, Sean Landers opened his second solo show in New York.

If it seems like bad form to open with money in an essay on art, consider the impact of the crash on Landers, who came of age as an artist at the height of the hoopla. He moved to New York’s East Village in 1986—the same year that Jeff Koons exhibited his *Luxury and Degradation* series just a few blocks away. By 1989, Landers had been pegged, in print, as a star of the next generation.²

But success was the new failure. In 1991, Landers wrote (and went on to exhibit) a series of absurdly personal letters to his student-loan officer explaining why he’d fallen behind on his payments: “Miss Gonzales, not one single artwork sold from my show in Chicago. This dizzying fact has not only squelched the raging fire of my artist’s ego, it also rendered me penniless for the ensuing four month period before my show here in New York.”³

Or was failure the new success? As Landers later wrote in *Frieze* magazine, “I was lucky enough to have been one of the ‘1990s artists’ who suddenly emerged after the irrationally exuberant New York art scene of the 1980s crashed. I felt like a singer/songwriter wearing thrift-store clothing and playing a worn-out acoustic guitar, thrust on stage directly after a spandex-wearing, hair-sprayed, heavy metal band with their double-necked electric guitars just exited in a blazing pyrotechnics display.”⁴ Landers may have been down-and-out, but at least he was down-and-out in the spotlight.

The fact is that there is no “bad form” when it comes to the early work of Sean Landers. Formally, he’s promiscuous, moving between text, painting, sculpture, video, drawing, audio, and performance. His practice swings from the de-skilled



Sean Landers in his studio, East Houston Street, New York City, 1992

(setting a chimpanzee loose in the studio, as he did in 1995) to the traditional (casting figurative statues in bronze, as he’s done, off and on, since 1991).

As for content, bad form is Landers’s stock-in-trade. He established his reputation by shamelessly disclosing the details of his life, from the banal to the painfully personal, in stream-of-consciousness texts scrawled in ballpoint pen on legal-pad pages (one lengthy text was published as the 1993 book *[sic]*), then written on giant sheets of paper, and eventually painted on canvas and paired with images (breasts, clowns, monkeys). In all these texts, Landers simultaneously indulges and sends up ideas of narcissism, offering a portrait of the artist that recasts James Joyce’s semiautobiographical “young man” as a comically confessional bad boy.

No subject—not his debt, not his doubt, not even his dingleberries—was off-limits for Landers. From 1996 to 2000, when *Spin* magazine gave Landers the last word every month in his hilarious back-page column “Genius Lessons,” he could

be so politically incorrect that Howard Stern seemed like a spokesman for the FCC by comparison. (See “Genius Lesson #20: Soapsuds Afro,” chronicling a pubescent mishap involving hygiene, onanism, and the artist’s urethra,⁵ or “Genius Lesson #18: Send Naked Photos,” a plea to his female readers.⁶)

As big as a billboard, the 1993 drawing *Dingleberry Sean* mocks Minimalist repetition in its accumulation of line after line after line of prose, while subverting the movement’s hands-off ethos with its laborious handwritten process and the inclusion of narrative content. While he monkeyed with Minimalism, Landers also broke the rules of Conceptual art and its disavowal of spontaneous expression. In his 1967 “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” Sol LeWitt wrote, “When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”⁷ Landers upended the formula with his stream-of-consciousness prose. Language had been freeze-dried in the sixties by Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth; in Landers’s hands, words became a hot mess.

In the fifties, Robert Rauschenberg wanted to work in the gap between art and life. In the nineties, Landers wanted to close it. Every [*sic*] misspelling and sick sexual thought was laid bare for the sake of his art. At first, he adopted the alter ego Chris Hamson for his interior monologues, a nod to the nameless hero of Knut Hamsun’s 1890 proto-modernist novel *Hunger*, about a starving young writer’s mental unraveling.⁸ The respelling of Hamsun’s name transforms Landers’s narrator into a “ham” and a “son”—a Conceptualist comedian burdened by the anxiety of influence. The name Chris may conjure thoughts of Chris Burden, whose *Full Financial Disclosure* in 1977—an exhibition of the artist’s canceled checks, bank statements, and income-tax forms—paved the way for Landers’s *Student Loan Letters*. But in fact, Landers had lifted the name of his best friend from childhood.⁹ It doesn’t hurt that “Chris” is one letter away from “Christ”—Landers was raised Catholic, a theme that figures prominently in his work.

The allusion to Knut Hamsun is thorny. The Norwegian’s writings—and his belief that the mind itself is the great subject of literature—are unarguably brilliant, a bridge between Fyodor Dostoevsky and James Joyce. Unfortunately, late in life, Hamsun became a Nazi sympathizer. It’s important to note that Landers was unaware of the novelist’s notoriety when he discovered *Hunger* and is now adamant that he would never have made the reference if he’d been aware of the novelist’s politics.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Hamsun’s deplorable paradox—a genius marred by profound moral failings—serves Landers’s interest in expressing the internal struggle between hero and antihero, as well as his desire to present an unexpurgated portrait of an artist’s mind in all its shameful complexity.

The Chris Hamson period was brief, the subject of just one show, in 1990, and a related book, titled *Art, Life and God*. But it foreshadowed the spate of fictional artists, from Claire Fontaine to Reena Spaulings, whose careers took off in the early years of the twenty-first century. (The 2006 Whitney Biennial actually credited a fictional curator, Toni Burlap.) The conceit of Chris Hamson owes an obvious debt to Marcel Duchamp’s alter ego, Rose Sélavy. Still, it’s uncanny how much of Landers’s early work anticipated subsequent cultural trends. His diaristic writings predate the blogosphere by more than a decade. And when Sean Landers documented Sean Landers’s jaunts to ancestral stomping grounds in Ireland and Greece, it was years before the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer sent his protagonist, Jonathan Safran Foer, to Russia.

As Landers shed the identity of Chris Hamson, he began to experiment with videos that anticipated reality television—not to mention YouTube—while harking back to the seventies and the direct-address videos of Vito Acconci, the site-specific studio performances of Bruce Nauman, and the comic shorts of William Wegman. (In a 1992 review in the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith wrote of Landers’s videos that “one has the sense that William Wegman and his Weimaraners have been rolled into one.”)¹¹ But the entertainment value of Landers’s antics feels tinged with a sense of desperation, as if the artist were trying to prove his existence on camera. When Landers disrobes and poses nude, with his jeans around his knees, in a parody of a classical statue in the video *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, it’s like a watching a strip-o-gram version of On Kawara’s *I Am Still Alive*.¹²

Landers wasn’t the only young artist trying to making sense of himself through his work in the early nineties. “Identity” had replaced “deconstruction” in the argot of the art world, as the mediated imagery of the Pictures Generation and the commodity critique of Neo-Geo gave way to more personal—and often explicitly political—approaches. The shift was sparked, in part, by the AIDS crisis, which demanded a direct and socially conscious engagement. Needless to say, the ascension of long-marginalized voices (women, gays, people of different races and ethnicities) was a major cultural breakthrough. But for Landers, it also meant having a “mistaken” identity: straight, white, and male.

Landers handled his identity as he did everything else: with hilarious impropriety. In the aftermath of a fight with his girlfriend, he writes in [*sic*], “Perhaps it’s time to seriously consider homosexuality. No shit. Between men power boils down to two things: dick size and wealth. All I have to do is find a poor guy with a little dick and I win.”¹³ He lampooned the (hetero-normative) men’s movement and its self-help shtick about unleashing the wild man within, in such works as the photographic self-portrait series *Naked in Nature*, a



A Midnight Modern Conversation (An Altercation), 1996
Oil on linen, 50 x 72 in. (127 x 182.9 cm)

mash-up of Caspar David Friedrich and Robert Bly. He also made fun of the objectifying male gaze.

In the large-scale canvas *The Ether of Memory*, giant disembodied breasts float amid a text that muses on the artist's matrilineal lineage. (A noteworthy fact emerges: both his mother and grandmother were painters.) Landers later conceded that the choice of imagery was "provocative. . . . Shall we even say political? It was just so taboo in those knee-jerk politically correct times that I couldn't resist. The objectification of women is nothing to be proud of. But I have never believed that women were anything but men's complete equals."¹⁴ Landers put his masculinity where his mouth was in 1993 when he played a supporting role to the artist Cheryl Donegan in her videotaped performance *Kiss My Royal Irish Ass*, a Bronx cheer to identity politics and feminist ideologies.

Landers didn't escape censure for skewering political correctness. When *Artforum* magazine reproduced one of his text paintings on the cover, in April 1994, the issue included a dismissive take on his work by the African-American artist and critic Lorraine O'Grady, as well as a more favorable analysis by the art historian Jan Avgikos. But bad press did not thwart his progress. By the mid-nineties, Landers had installed solo shows in New York, Los Angeles, Zürich, Chicago, Paris, Cologne, London, Berlin, Athens, and Milan. Yet, just as a reversal of fortune had helped launch his career at the start of the decade, a return to "business as usual" would soon change the rules of the game.

Ironically, it wasn't Landers's words that altered his circumstance—it was the lack of them. As he shifted his process, from working on paper to painting, he began to experiment with imagery for its own sake. Satire persisted, as in the colorful stripe painting *I'm With Stupid*, which pairs a T-shirt slogan with a riff on Duchamp's rejection of "retinal" art—specifically, the apocryphal anecdote that he dismissed painting with the old French expression "bête comme un

peintre," or "dumb as a painter." Then, in 1996, Landers shipped his gallery in Los Angeles five entirely figurative canvases, all based on William Hogarth's 1733 painting of colonial-era male bonding, *A Midnight Modern Conversation*.

Landers later confessed, "The end of the '90s for me was the instant that the crate containing these paintings was pried open and [my dealer] got her first glimpse of them. In a fraction of a second, her big pretty brown eyes shot me a look that said, 'Your career is over honey!' I'm not saying that it wasn't a sympathetic look but it was like buckshot through the heart just the same. What I didn't realize was that 'playtime' was officially over and 'business', which had been suspended since the late 1980s, was back on."¹⁵ Sean Landers had failed again. There was only one thing to do: try again and fail better.

¹ Robert Hughes, "Art: The Great Massacre of 1990," *Time*, December 3, 1990.

² Alexandra Anderson, "The Next Generation," *Smart*, September–October 1989.

³ Excerpted from the drawing *Dear Miss. Gonzales*, 1991.

⁴ Sean Landers, "Onwards!" *Frieze*, January–February 2009, 16.

⁵ *Spin*, January 1998, 124.

⁶ *Spin*, November 1997, 163.

⁷ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, June 1967.

⁸ Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith and Beatrix Ruf, "Interview with Sean Landers," in *Sean Landers: Kunsthalle Zürich*, ed. Beatrix Ruf (Zürich: JRP|Ringier Kunstverlag AG, 2004), 33.

⁹ Based on conversations with the artist in December 2010 and January 2011.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Roberta Smith, "Examining a Multi-Media Personality," *New York Times*, February 21, 1992.

¹² Coincidentally, the self-deprecating first line of *Green Book*, a 1991 unpublished text by Landers, reads, "My only credential is that I am, like you, alive." The book, in the form of a leather-bound journal, was commissioned by an art collector but never published. The author saw it on a visit to the artist's studio in December 2010.

¹³ Sean Landers, *[sic]* (New York: Publicsfear Press, 1993), 202.

¹⁴ Ruf, *Sean Landers*, 40.

¹⁵ Landers, "Onwards!" 16.

CALL ME ISHMAEL

Cynthia Daignault

Only the Lonely

We say the sea is lonely; better say
Ourselves are lonesome creatures whom the sea
Gives neither yes or no for company
—William Meredith, “The Open Sea,” in *The Open Sea and Other Poems*

In 1968, nine men embarked from London on the first solo, nonstop, round-the-world yacht race. Each hoped to become the first person to circumnavigate the earth uninterrupted. The voyage would require each to sail alone at sea for almost a year, crossing the oceans’ most treacherous waters. The journey was so dangerous, in fact, that seven of the men shipwrecked or abandoned the race before finishing. The remaining two were Robert Knox-Johnston and Donald Crowhurst. Knox-Johnston won the race: he was the first and only man to return to London, for which he was lauded, was knighted, and secured a place in nautical history. The other man, Crowhurst, was the last at sea. A relative amateur, he had staked everything on the race. Yet after a series of problems at the outset, he attempted to fake the voyage. He spent months hiding off the coast of Brazil, making no radio contact, circling, falsifying coordinates, and scribbling ever more incoherent entries into his logbooks—poetry, philosophy, ramblings, and outright madness. In the end, as his plans splintered and the certainty of discovery and disgrace became clear, he threw himself into the sea, succumbing to the swells of an indifferent ocean.

In 1993, Sean Landers embarked on a parallel voyage in writing his novel *[sic]*. He, too, set out to cross an epic geography of space—one thousand blank and landless pages—on a voyage that would consume his life for just over a year, roughly the timeline of the 1968–69 circumnavigation. Much like Crowhurst, Landers embarked as an amateur driven by dreams of fame, glory, and money, but more deeply by a primal urge toward selfhood. And Landers, too, staked family, reputation, and honor on the achievement. Yet sheer intention cannot guarantee success when crossing an unpredictable void such as the sea, and in many ways *[sic]* would prove to be a journey as dangerous as Crowhurst’s. Just like a solo sail around the earth, to write *[sic]* was to float through one thousand pages of undulating, shark-infested uncertainty with only the caged tiger of the human mind as company. Or, as Landers put it in the painting *Sea[sic]*, “when one commits to [a solo circumnavigation] they not only put their lives into the



Alone, 1996
Oil on linen, 72 x 96 in. (182.9 x 243.8 cm)

mercurial will of the sea, but their minds are turned over to the mercies and horrors of itself. . . . All the waves and wind in the seven seas contain not the power and horror of the dark corners of the human mind.”¹ No wonder, then, that passages in *[sic]* read like the increasingly delirious babble of Crowhurst. Even the victorious sailor Knox-Johnston remarked that “anyone who goes to sea and says they do not feel fear is a liar.”² Landers set his stakes between the fates of the two sailors: either write the epic and go down in literary history, securing immortality and unquestionable selfhood, or else fail and bring shame upon family, leaving behind only the logbook of a madman who threw himself into the depths.

Solo circumnavigation is not an arbitrary metaphor. The idea of artist as lone sailor is one of the most central symbols throughout Landers’s work, invoked both literally and allegorically from the earliest works (*[sic]*, *Sea[sic]*, *36 Hours*, *Worry Wart*, *Alone*) to the paintings of his forthcoming 2011 exhibition at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York (where Landers qua sailor returns to the helm, much as Knox-Johnston did, to circumnavigate the earth again as an older man). Perhaps the most moving of all these works is the 1996 painting *Alone*. The painting, invoking Édouard Manet’s *Rocheport’s Escape*, depicts a diminutive clown in an insufficient rowboat, alone on a formidable sea—seemingly so hopeless, but embodying what Samuel Beckett wrote of life, “You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”³ So, too, the clown; so, too, Landers; so, too, each of us. Landers describes the mind-set of such a clown further in the text painting *Sea[sic]*, which imagines a solo circumnavigation and literalizes the metaphor between sea and *[sic]*:

You are buoyant and you drift in the current of the wind. You see, you think, you are a soul in the shifting winds of limbo. The only voices to be heard are those of your mind. You realize that your mind never really forgot anything you ever saw and heard. There in the watery desert with nothing new to look at day after day, your mind supplies you with everything you ever did see, every sentence you ever heard uttered. . . . You think that you are alive but you have difficulty proving it to yourself. This is when you begin talking to yourself. You talk to yourself so much that you realize that you are sitting down listening with rapt attention to yourself who is standing up and going on and on about the most interesting damn thing you ever heard, and to this day you cannot replicate that monologue as you promised yourself you would. There on deck, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, you thought as you listened to yourself how this would be the most compelling book ever written and that you must convince the fine fellow to put his elegant words down on paper.⁴

And so he did in *[sic]*, which stands as the first circumnavigation of oceans that Landers would cross many times in subsequent voyages. Yet Landers was not the first artist to see a metaphor for art, creation, and life in solo sailing. In 1975, the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader set out to cross the Atlantic Ocean alone on a boat just thirteen feet long, as diminutive on the swells as the rowboat of Landers's melancholy clown. The voyage was to be part of an artwork entitled *In Search of the Miraculous*. In it, Ader declares that the meaning of the artwork lies squarely in its action: the work is the event, the crossing, and the conceptual undertaking. This assertion, treacherous journey as performed artwork, equates the literal action of solo sailing as metaphor for creating art, and it constructs a framework where the outcome of the artwork is determined as much by the mercurial wills of weather, chance, and ocean as by the heroic gestures of the artist. A point made most chilling in the truth that Ader himself was lost at sea during the voyage.

Ader's voyage is the conceptual framework underlying *[sic]*; the undertaking, the action, and the performance are at the core of the work. Like Ader, Landers shares responsibility for the outcome of the work with chance. There was no editing, and the plot was determined by the luck (good or bad) of the events that befell Landers while he was writing. This methodology is conceptual and performative, and it is present in much of Landers's work from the period. In so many of the drawings, paintings, and videos of the early 1990s, Landers set out to cross topographies of bounded blankness: one page, one hundred pages, a piece of cut canvas, a sixty-minute tape—

empty spaces to sail around in, fill, and conquer. As Landers wrote in *Daily Reminder 1991*, a precursor to *[sic]*, "I see the words and the empty lines and I realize it doesn't matter what fills them. It only matters that I pass through them, as each page represents a day, each word a thought, it simply states that I was here, then, now, alive and thinking."⁵ Each of these works is a conceptual constraint to cross a fixed geographic or temporal plane. Once afloat, the passage is a performance; Landers turns himself over to the sea, shares the outcomes with the fates, and leaves the finished artworks as records of these crossings.

Even the image paintings, seemingly so silent in comparison to the text works, stand as accounts of these conceptual crossings. As Bernard Moitessier, one of the other seven sailors in the round-the-world race, wrote, "My real log is written in the sea and sky; the sails talking with the rain and the stars amid the sounds of the sea, the silences full of secret things between my boat and me, like the times I spent as a child listening to the forest talk."⁶ How unsurprising, then, that Landers's first textless image paintings were of the sea. Devoid of words, yet still real logs of epiphanous silences, indescribable events, language failures, and secret things. None of these works are diaries, autobiographies, or self-portraits, as is often misunderstood. They are logs—records in real time of specific crossings with defined boundaries. In the aggregate, these early works amount to a black box of Landers's first journeys as an artist, voyages that leave the work behind as ship's log. To read *[sic]*, or any of the text paintings, is to relive the journey through its log, to view the performance as if it is live, to bear witness to the act of creation. And like every log, they bear all the requisite passages of boredom when traversing the doldrums, madness when solitude takes hold, and rare epiphany when staring at the sublime whiteness of the page, like a sailor staring into the depthless infinity of the sky.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Gilligan

Gilligan: Hiya, Professor. What are you doing?

Professor: I'm making notes for a book. It's to be a chronicle of our adventures on the island. . . . I think it's a book people will want to buy, don't you?

Gilligan: Sure, I'll buy one. I'm dying to find out what happens to us.

—*Gilligan's Island*

If writing *[sic]* is to set out on a brave circumnavigation of uncharted choppy waters, then what is it to read it? Really, the TV series *Gilligan's Island* isn't far off as a fitting answer. Landers (a quasi Gilligan) sets off on a bold three-hour tour, crashes haplessly on some unexpected island (Mykonos), and aggregates mishaps and disappointments while we the readers



Old Gilligan, 2004
Oil on linen, 27 1/4 x 31 3/4 in. (69.2 x 80.6 cm)

wonder, “Are we ever going to get off this island?” Seriously, though, Gilligan aside, *[sic]* is not a book without precedent. In its claustrophobic, stream-of-consciousness, unflattering first-person narrative, *[sic]* recalls parts of Beckett’s *Molloy*, James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Andy Warhol’s *A*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*. Indeed, Landers’s voice echoes the first line of Rousseau’s autobiography: “I have begun on a work which is without precedent, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I propose to set before my fellow-mortals a man in all the truth of nature; and this man shall be myself.”⁷ This goal, to present the life of one man, and through him to define the larger nature of selfhood, is the purpose of each of these works. Although the books differ in their specific definitions of selfhood, as influenced by the epistemologies of their times, they are similar in their portrayals of the immutable qualities of human nature (lust, guilt, confusion, melancholy, loneliness, and love). So, too, with *[sic]*, which stands as an unflinching portrait of timeless humanity—even though it is told by a narrator who can be summed up as a totally 1990s postmodern hero dude.

When Landers specifically broaches selfhood in *[sic]*, it is often in relation to television. In the first invocation of the self, he writes, “I watched a video of myself naked watching TV. As I watched, my image seemed to fluctuate between beauty and horrible ugliness. It’s either true or it’s something my mind does concerning its consideration of the self. Self. What a big word it is and tacky in the way I’m using it.”⁸ The notion of selfhood as mediated through television was practically innate by the time Landers wrote *[sic]*. After all, it was 1973 when Andy Warhol said, “Before I was shot, . . . I always suspected that I was watching TV instead of living life. . . . Right when

I was being shot and ever since, I knew that I was watching television.”⁹ It was 1983 when Jean Baudrillard wrote *Simulations*, giving language to the undercurrent feeling of hyperreality in modern life. And by 1993, meta-narratives and the simulacrum were virtually hardwired into the psyches of youths. Baudrillard himself wrote that “you are born modern, you do not become so,”¹⁰ suggesting that artists like Landers and his contemporaries (Bret Easton Ellis, Martin Amis, Paul Auster), who all wrote metafiction as their first language, were the first generation of artists born wholly inside the Matrix. As Landers describes it in *[sic]*:

Somehow I’ve fatefully become an entity who feels he doesn’t exist if not documenting the moment, either by writing, video, drawing or sculpting. I believe this fear is fed by growing up so tightly married to TV, that I somehow reason that TV characters only exist when they’re “on.” . . . As someone who learned morality from the Brady Bunch and Partridge Family, who only had thoughts as deep as prime time TV would allow, I myself never felt I existed unless I felt I somehow was on TV myself. . . . The film crew was always there, and with their film rolling I felt secure that I in fact did exist.¹¹

Thus, for Landers, self is made not in the upbringing, environment, actions, or soul of man (as in Rousseau, Joyce, Beckett, or Augustine, respectively), but in his broadcast, in his serialization as a character on a sitcom with an audience. The self is not real without the film crew, the camera, the show, the script, the stage, the viewer—the context. This notion of television as the new context for identity is perhaps best articulated in George Trow’s 1980 essay “Within the Context of No Context.” In the essay, Trow asserts that television eradicated a crucial middle distance in American life. TV pulled the “grid of 200 million,” or national life, further apart from the “grid of intimacy,” or intimate life, leaving loneliness and alienation for the individual sitting at home alone watching *Gilligan’s Island*. As he writes, “It was sometimes lonely in the grid of one, alone. People reached out toward their home, which was in television. They looked for help.”¹² In this widening divide between the national and personal, only characters, celebrities, and products enjoy identity or true selfhood. Trow adds, “Celebrities have an intimate life and a life in the grid of two hundred million. . . . Of all Americans, only they are complete.”¹³ It is no wonder, then, that Landers, or anyone, aspires to fame. What in Landers’s work was mistaken for egomaniacal narcissism is instead a sincere attempt toward selfhood. Post-television, to desire fame is to desire a real and meaningful existence between the widening grids. There is no selfhood otherwise. Thus, Landers hopes

for identity in celebrity and sees himself as a wannabe TV character. As he writes, “I in fact only exist in my own mind as a character in a sitcom. I live my life trying to be cooler than Chachi. More drippingly human than James at 16. Sillier than Gilligan. More environmentally aware than Jacques Cousteau. But all I am is a TV character in search of a show.”¹⁴

Landers found his sitcom in *[sic]*. To write *[sic]* is to cast his own *Gilligan’s Island*. It is a proactive attempt to claim the selfhood that television promises (and arguably a truer self, not founded on stock characters or forged backstories). In one clever action, Sean Landers becomes a character, Sean Landers becomes a show, Sean Landers becomes a celebrity, and on an even deeper level Sean Landers becomes a product. Trow writes, “The most successful celebrities are products. Consider the real role in American life of Coca-Cola. Is any man as well loved as this soft drink is?”¹⁵ In publishing *[sic]*, a book that claims to be a veritable stand-in for the real Sean Landers, Landers effectively packages himself as an attractive product, complete with naked guy on the cover to rope you in. The book is sold and disseminated. Through it, Landers’s identity is further branded in product placement. Yet, even beyond the book, *[sic]* has a dual identity as a rarefied art object: *[sic]* exists as the stack of yellow legal pages on which it was written. These pages constitute an artwork that, when exhibited, is installed in a massive grid, recalling Vito Acconci, Sophie Calle, or Gerhard Richter. The enormous scale of the installation asserts its concreteness and objecthood. Moreover, this contextualization within the valuations of art world, monetary and cultural, declares that the work and Landers are relevant, valuable, immortal, and expensive. To elevate himself to the level of artwork is to become a kind of überproduct, one that only deepens Landers’s claims on a contemporary selfhood: character, celebrity, show, product, and artwork.

This slippage of identity into artwork is familiar from the early 1960s works of Piero Manzoni. He transformed himself and his viewers into artworks, creating contexts for these transformations. In the *Living Sculptures*, he signed living people, elevating the individual into artwork; in the *Magic Bases*, he built signed pedestals that viewers could step up onto, literally elevating themselves into artworks. They are slippery works. Does stripping away mediation remove representation from the work? Do these portraits no longer represent their subjects in that they have become their subjects? Or is the other way around? Are the people no longer themselves in that they have become their representations, suffering Roland Barthes micro-deaths of subject becoming object? Or both?

This is the delightful, mind-tangling bender of *[sic]*, too. Landers becomes the character, in so doing the artwork, but on an even more meta-textual level, the book becomes a portrait

of itself, of the platonic ideal of “book.” I feel we’re traveling deep inside a Russian nesting doll, but Landers explains this idea clearly:

Do you understand me now? I mean there is a reason to write this book right? Need I explain it once more? Do you get it? Every line asks you if you’re enjoying the book, hopes you are, mourns its failure. Just what real books do, I’m just not fucking around you know? I’m not obscuring myself with a fictional character, or a thinly veiled autobiography. I’ve just related the human experience naked. You get it right? That’s good isn’t it? Are you sorry you bought the book? You can tell me. Oh Sean, quit it . . . sorry. . . . But don’t you think I might be on to something here?¹⁶

Yes. And not just in *[sic]*, but in all the text paintings. For instance, in a paragraph where an artist might feel pride at the clever turn of prose or nicely painted passage, Landers simply writes just that; where an artist might base a character on a real-life lover, Landers simply writes her in; or in a section of boredom where an artist’s mind might wander to sex, beer, childhood, or dry cleaning, Landers simply literalizes the mental wandering: beer, beer, beer, beer, beer. It’s a simple idea, maybe, but I can say that when it hit me in my own studio, I was utterly humbled. It was an average studio day. I was painting some such representational work, a landscape, maybe. As the painting progressed, I could hear my own inner voice, prattling on as per usual. I’d been transcribing some of Landers’s earliest text paintings that week, and as close to the material as I was at the time, it hit me profoundly: Landers had already made the painting. Not the landscape on which I was working, of course, but the platonic subtextual painting behind this one and every other. Checkmate.

Fast-forward twenty years. What happens? First, we’re still on the island; Gilligan and his buddies never got off. Actually, it turns out that *Gilligan’s Island* is the perfect corollary for *[sic]*. In Gilligan, we get a glimpse of the long-term dangers of packaging and characterizing oneself. To write *[sic]*, Landers had to invent a novel with artifice and craft. There is inherent inauthenticity in that. When explaining this sort of posing, Barthes describes that moment of inauthenticity as “a micro-version of death.” This was *[sic]*. That moment: when the character is Sean, isn’t Sean, is posing as Sean, and somewhere in that fracas, Sean Landers, the real Sean Landers, must die. Which means that as he becomes the character of his creation, Landers risks imprisoning himself in that other “Sean.” Take Bob Denver, the actor who portrayed Gilligan. The show ended, but Denver had to play the young goofball Gilligan for the rest of his life. His is a fate Landers portrays in the painting

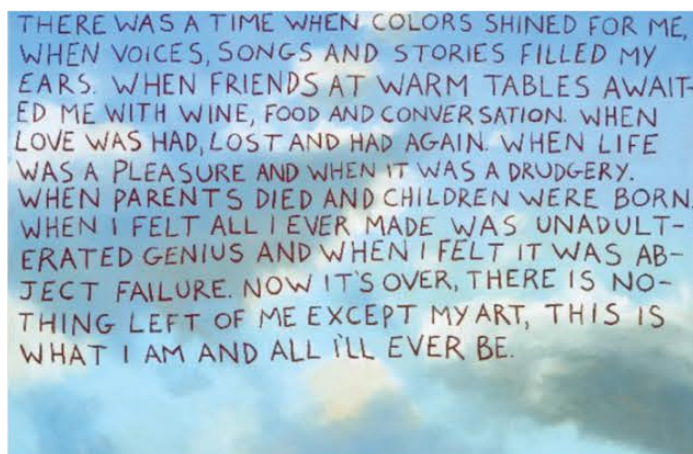
Old Gilligan. Bob Denver is grayed and aging, yet still required to don the absurd costume of his youth, and behind his eyes is Landers, ever winking that the tragedy and irony of old Gilligan might be his own. How many more reviews, articles, and books will be written on Sean Landers that still portray him as the young Gilligan of *[sic]*? How many more times will I read slacker, loser, egomaniac, narcissist, sexist, banal, pathetic, sex-addled, “genious”? Come now, slacker? Landers is one of the most prodigious artists of his generation, and he was then. Egomaniacal narcissist? Landers’s work speaks more about his own weakness, fear, and fragility than that of almost any other artist of his generation. Yet twenty years later, he’s still getting squeezed into that old Gilligan costume. Truly, *[sic]* is a cautionary tale of the damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t dilemma that is postmodern living. And no, Gilligan never got off the island.

This Is the End, Beautiful Friend. This Is the End

A word then, (for I will conquer it,
The word final, superior to all,
Subtle, sent up—what is it?—I listen; . . .
Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper’d me through the night, and very plainly before
day-break,
Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word DEATH;
And again Death—ever Death, Death, Death
—Walt Whitman, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,”
in *Leaves of Grass*

Spoiler alert. At the end of *[sic]*, Landers dies. No, not really, he doesn’t, except in that way that all characters die when a book ends, or in that way people die on TV when we turn it off, or in that way that we all die sometimes, a little every day as we slide into the grave. Yet something does happen. It stops. The voice just stops, at 454 pages, long before even reaching the goal of one thousand pages, at a moment for which, though we may be fatigued, we are not wholly ready. Gone, the way a lover leaves you as suddenly and inexplicably as they appeared. Vanished, leaving only silence. Whiteness. Blankness. Did he throw himself over the boat? Did he succeed? Is he Crowhurst? Knox-Johnston? Ader? Or some other sailor, as yet considered?

I may be the only person who has read or will ever read every word of every Sean Landers painting, drawing, text piece, and scrawled note (and no, I’m not bragging, or I am). And I can say, without hesitation, it is a lot of words. Tens of thousands of pages of writing from a man hell-bent on filling emptiness with words, words, words, and more words. The more I read, the more I wonder: why? What madness is this



There Was a Time . . . , 2004
Oil on linen, 72 x 108 in. (182.9 x 274.3 cm)

epic battle against blankness, the deluge of language flooding over so many surfaces, over so many years? Trying to answer that question, it comes to me, slowly, through Landers’s own hinting, slowly like the tide lapping endlessly as the ocean approaches the shore—I know this story: the sailor locked in a monomaniacal battle against whiteness. Even as I write this now, bearing witness to his fixation, offering some possible justification to his lunacy, and immortalizing his journey in my own writing, I know this story. I am rewriting *Moby Dick*.

Call me Ishmael. For it is all *Moby Dick* (both the Melville novel and the Led Zeppelin drum solo): *[sic]* the work, his life, and this essay. Landers is Ahab. And he hints at this. In *[sic]*, Landers draws numerous comparisons to *Moby Dick*. He likens the waiting, the doldrums, the moments of prosaic nothingness to the tedium of *[sic]*. He writes, “You didn’t skip around ‘Moby Dick’ looking for a whale encounter did you? If you did the meaning of the book escaped you. It’s not even complex, life is tedium.”¹⁷ However, it’s more than tedium, and what interests me here is something deeper about the monomaniacal destruction of whiteness underlying this entire early period of Landers’s work. He hints at this in an earlier passage of *[sic]*: “Can you tell how influenced by ‘Moby Dick’ I am? If you have any inclination to think of me as something slightly more than stupid, recall the endless tedium of describing knot tying while waiting for the white whale. What is my white whale? Love? Fame? Success? Perhaps it’s simply finishing.”¹⁸

Thus, finishing, filling the whiteness, conquering the blank page is his white whale, and, I’d argue, for the same reason as Ahab. In answering the question of why (why the whale, why the obsession, why the incessant battle against whiteness), I would say the same thing that Ishmael does:

But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul. . . . Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of

the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like willful travelers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?¹⁹

OK, I couldn't have said that myself, certainly not better, but it is the right answer to the question of why. Landers, like Ahab, is battling whiteness in the denial of death, of the unknowable, of nihilism and meaninglessness, and of the very postmodern dilemma of disintegrating selfhood that seemingly had us all trapped on that island before. I can't go on. I'll go on.

In all his work, Landers embodies this position that to go on, to push through, to live, to breathe, to fill the emptiness, and to traverse whiteness is to conquer death. It is the fate of all people to die, to struggle against forces we can neither comprehend nor overcome; yet, by continuing and by immortalizing our passages in logbooks and loved ones, we cheat death, though we still die. It's what the painting *There Was a Time . . .* is about. It's what Landers's video *Dancing with Death* is about. It's what the above-quoted Whitman poem, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," is about. And it's what *Moby Dick* is about (both the Melville novel and the Led Zeppelin drum solo). In the end, though Ahab is pulled under by the whale, he still denies the whale victory in the very

act of perseverance against inevitable fate, in his final words ("towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale"²⁰), and in his immortality, gained through Ishmael's telling. (And John Bonham continues to pound the drums though he is high, fingers bleeding, and duct-taped to his drum stool just to stay upright.)

On the final pages of *[sic]*, Landers, too, is pulled under, disappearing before a thousand pages elapses. Yet, like Ahab, he, too, denies both failure and death in his final utterance: "That death may in fact not be an end but a salvation so long as when you die people love you as much as I love you."²¹ He had been thinking of his deceased sister, of his love for her, how she now lives on in that love. In that, Landers realizes his own salvation: love. For four hundred pages, Landers had been rambling on about love, begging for it, needing it, from Michelle and Helena. It's a love story after all. Yet it was always the love of the reader that mattered most. Even his last words, "as much as I love you," refer not just to his sister, but to his love of You—the reader. In those final pages, Landers asserts that, like Ishmael to Ahab, all it takes is one reader to immortalize him, in heart or in account, and death is vanquished. Secure in that realization at last, the voice goes quiet, the book ends, and he drifts to the bottom of a depthless ocean. Am I that reader? Are you?

I have no doubt that Landers will remain at sea until his death, literal or metaphoric. Just as it was foretold that Odysseus would die at sea, so, too, do I make that prophecy for Sean Landers. Like Ahab, and Donald Crowhurst, and Bas Jan Ader. I can't say why, but some people just seem to belong on vast and unpredictable waters, where a person is but a single drop in an ocean holding billions. The sailor and circumnavigator Bernard Moitessier said, "You do not ask a seagull why it needs to disappear from time to time toward the open sea. It goes. That's all."²² I think about Moitessier a lot in relation to Sean Landers. In that 1968 yacht race, Moitessier rounded South America all but assured of victory. Yet, as he edged closer to London, he turned around and abandoned the race, deciding to sail around the world a second time rather than claim victory. In his mind, returning to London would have meant he had left nowhere only to return to nowhere. Landers, too, has opted time and time again for the path of uncertainty. From the very start of his career to the present day, he has continually thrown his fate onto the mercurial forces of water rather than claiming handy, if hollow, victories. It cannot be overstated how much Landers has staked personally on his works. In *[sic]*, he risked much in writing the book (family, reputation, humiliation, love) and paid dearly in some ways. In his first image paintings, he turned his back on an assured victory in text painting to sail around the world a second time instead. Never returning to nowhere. Landers has made a

career of sailing dangerous and uncharted oceans: the Picasso show, the Hogarth show, the aliens, the chimps, the dancing naked hippies. Some of these journeys were epic ten-year voyages of legend, while others ended in tragic shipwrecks, captain going down with ship. Vincent van Gogh is credited with saying, “The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.”²³ Similarly, I know that Landers must be aware of the dangers to career and family that some of his works have posed; yet, like all solo sailors, the risks never stop him from sailing on. In his work and his career, there is an uplifting and undying hope that out there on the open waters, there may still be some essential truth about art, life, or self worth risking a watery grave over. You cannot really ask how or why. Some people are just seagulls.

¹ Excerpted from the painting *Sea[sic]* (1995).

² Knox-Johnston quoted in *Deep Water*, film directed by Louise Osmond and Jerry Rothwell, 2006.

³ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 407.

⁴ Excerpted from *Sea[sic]*.

⁵ Sean Landers, *Daily Reminder 1991* (New York: Sean Landers, 1991).

⁶ Bernard Moitessier, *The Long Way*, trans. William Rodarmor (New York: Sheridan House, 1995), 86.

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1953), 3.

⁸ Sean Landers, *[sic]* (New York: Publicsfear Press, 1993), 158.

⁹ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 91.

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso, 1989), 73.

¹¹ Landers, *[sic]*, 106–7.

¹² George W. S. Trow, *Within the Context of No Context* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 48.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁴ Landers, *[sic]*, 84–85.

¹⁵ Trow, *Within the Context*, 109.

¹⁶ Landers, *[sic]*, 150–51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 429.

¹⁹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), chap. 42.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. 135.

²¹ Landers, *[sic]*, 454.

²² Moitessier, *Long Way*, 3.

²³ Vincent van Gogh, *Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed. Irving Stone (New York: Plume, 1995), 115.

ICH MACHE MICH

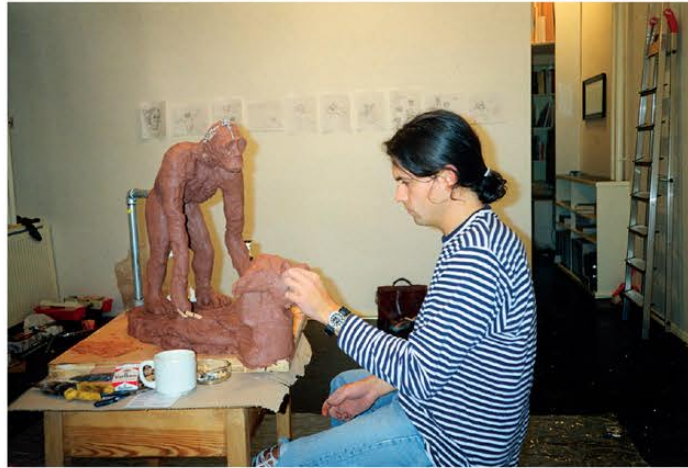
Michael Bilborough

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 Caoimhín 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.