

FAILING BETTER

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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 ideologues.

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.