

SWM (single white male), Lorraine O'Grady on Sean Landers

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By mutual consent, this was O'Grady's last article for *Artforum*. It was also not included in the Sean Landers gallery press kit.

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.

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

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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 "Rene: 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 Mingo: 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 Dali 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 issues 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 eery glimpse of how Sean will look when he grows old. For another, they show how honestly he comes

by his logorrhea: Landers pere 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-revelations, 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 over-abundance 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 dullest 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?

¹ Jack Bankowsky, "Slackers," *Artforum* v30, n3, November 1991, p96

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, p187.

³ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, MA and London: An October Book/MIT Press, 1993, pp211-12.