

SEAN LANDERS

(Born in 1962 in Palmer, Massachusetts. Lives and works in New York City.)

Landers has exhibited widely in the US and internationally. In addition to his 2004 solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich, Landers has been included in shows at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Kunstverein, Hamburg; the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans; Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco; the Denver Art Museum; and White Columns, New York; among others. His work is included in numerous museums and public collections including the Tate Museum of Art, London; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Seattle Museum of Art, Seattle; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Denver Art Museum; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Cover image:

Improbable History (still), 1992  
Video with sound,  
1 hour 1 minute 23 seconds  
Courtesy of Sean Landers, New York



To Whom it May Concern (page 2), 1991

Ink on paper, 5 pages, each: 11 x 8 1/2 inches, overall: 11 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches  
Courtesy of Sean Landers, New York

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1 — Main Galleries

# Sean Landers

1991-1994, Improbable History

Expressive and literary, Landers quixotic and elusive practice has since the early 1990s defied contemporary art world trends. For the artist's first large-scale survey in an American museum, this exhibition takes as its subject these early years in the studio. Presenting an overview of Landers oeuvre from 1991-1994, the show includes text works on paper, photographs, paintings, sculptures, and diaristic calendars, with a focus on video. Restaging this critical moment in the artist's career, Improbable History proposes that Landers' formative body of work was one that defined the artist, the persona, and the conceits that he has cultivated and enriched over the course of his twenty-year career.

Key to Landers' practice in this period were his videos, often shot alone in his New York studio, and often backdropped by

works included in this exhibition. Greeting visitors in the museum lobby is the triptych *Tricast (Funeral for a Friend)* by Elton John (1991), featuring Landers, long-haired and close up, wailing at the camera's lens. In fact, we find Landers' framed face in each gallery of the exhibition. Witness to his singing, pacing, confessionals, storytelling, and even self-flagellation, visitors become voyeurs, as Landers reveals the personal cosmos, private life, anxieties and antics of a self-conscious artist and soul. From *Anyone's Orgasm* (1992) to *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture* (1993) and *Improbable History* (1992), his videos remind us of the legacy of Vito Acconci's endurance performances and Bruce Nauman's tragic-comic studio films from the 1970s. Yet in its deep and ostensibly sincere expression of artistic and emotional process, Landers disrupts video art's authenticity and fractures our expectations.

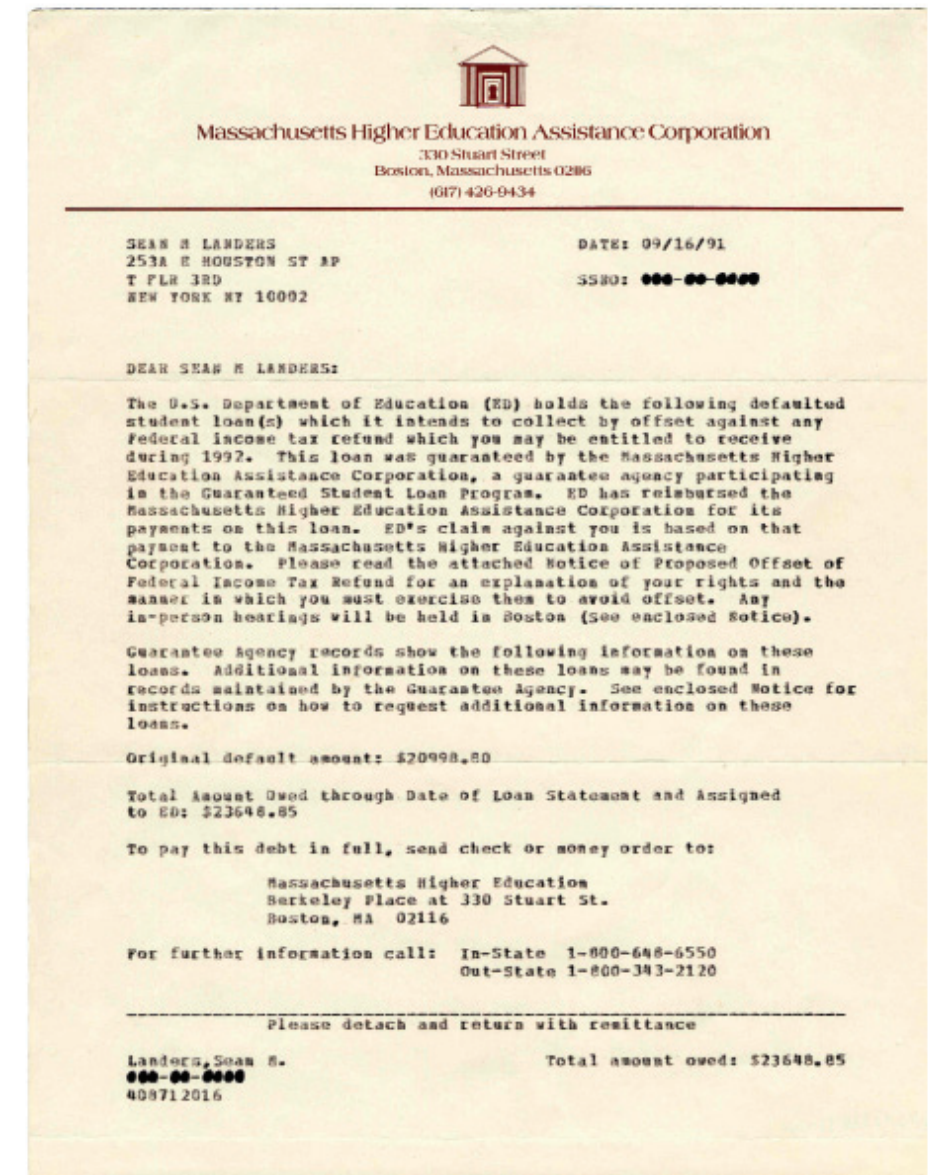
Responsive to his conceptual predecessors, but also deeply connected to classic literature and its flawed heroes (from Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Knut Hamson, to John Kennedy Toole), Landers presents

a holistic set of themes and methodologies, key among them an unflinching presentation of the artist's consciousness. This effort is acutely felt in his text paintings, evidencing a spectrum of emotion from ignoble to its most exultant. Designed to be read piecemeal, rather than as cohesive texts, large scale works like *Dingleberry Sean* (1993) and *Thought Bubble* (1994) become immersive giants, while others like *Fart* (1993) present more legible, if still demanding, reads. Throughout each is Landers' voice, with all of its love, lust, greed, envy, joy, humility, pride and fear—at once dramatic, imagined, and utterly genuine. In the final large gallery are three years of Landers' *Calendar Pages* (1991-1993), for which the artist chronicled each passing day, drawing a three-year landscape of personal and cultural histories.

Populating the galleries and joining us as fellow onlookers in the exhibition is a small community of terra cotta heads and leprechauns, which were until now rarely exhibited publicly. These tragic-comic figures—*The Unfortunate Son of an Irish Drunk* (1991), for one—stand as dwarf beacons in the space and constitute rich supporting cast of

characters within Landers' epic monologue. Sitting on a humble tabletop, a sculpted bronze chimp, *Ich Mach Mich* (1994), guards Landers' Homeric epic [sic] (1993). Shown in its original hand-written form, mounted along the museum's curved wall, Landers' novel, written over the course of a year, tells the story of the artist's losses and triumphs in art, love, and life.

Weaving stream-of-thought text or soliloquizing on lo-fi video, Landers presents the artist as an object of study, from the earliest yellow legal pads featuring as autobiographer the fictional artist Chris Hamson, to the reclaiming of the persona by Landers' own voice. Here he casts himself as subject, proposing the mastery of the artwork is the mastery of the artist. In a relentless articulation of emotion, at its most base and its most noble—from envy and self-doubt, to humility, empathy, and true love—Landers explores the process of artistic creation through the invention, and simultaneous revelation, of the self.



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