

# The Laser Thing

Rhonda Lieberman

## Mastery

*Before Marcel Proust began the Search, he slavishly devoted himself (with the help of his mother) to the translation of Ruskin's art-historical writings, even though his spoken English was not good enough to order chops in a pub. He worshiped Ruskin as the arbiter of esthetic value and even made slavish pilgrimages to the sites in Europe where Ruskin wrote about Gothic architecture. He wanted to drink in the spirit incarnate about which Ruskin wrote so compellingly: to pay a personal visit to those small figures carved by anonymous medievals on church surfaces to see how they embodied the eternal fine points about salvation and oblivion. Sadly, he was disappointed with what he found and eventually blew off Ruskin as a fetishist.*



*Nietzsche's apprenticeship to Wagner was also abject if ultimately effective. He misrecognized his own genius as his mentor's, projecting onto him the dynamic role of Dionysus that he later took for himself (perhaps at the cost of a definitive psychotic episode: his final 11-year-long Twilight stint of catatonia). As a sassy young philologist, he fastened onto Wagner as father substitute and eventual rival, abjectly devoting himself to being the Wagner's houseguest, worrying whether they liked his dress coat, and even having a total crush on Wagner's fabulous wife. Eventually, however, Nietzsche refuted Wagner, dumping him and everything he stood for, and became his own god or rather Antichrist. Under the laws of narcissism or ego development, the only thing to do with a lost object is to (kill it, eat it) become it.*



*Samuel Beckett had such admiration for James Joyce, who was vain about his small feet, that he literally tried to walk in the master's footsteps by buying the same shoe size. He had to stop because his feet hurt...*



**A**pprenticeship is a constitutionally abject activity: you wannabe the Special Stuff you admire in your hero, while implicitly cutting yourself off from it as long as you wannabe it. Special Stuff is a real imaginary appendage that is produced and circulated as long as everyone believes that other people have it. The fan is, by nature, split off from this organ of real imaginary plenitude; the glamour industry institutionalizes the lack-in-being when it swerves back and attacks you with accusations that you're not someone else.

As a comic genius in the classical sense, Andy Warhol transvalued "lack" into happy profitable outcomes. Using the real market fetish magic of art to turn wannabes into instant "superstars" (with the right institutional backing), he was one of the first artists to embrace affirmatively the wannabe moment as the generative power of the work, lucidly noting that he was so jealous his left hand envied his right, and when the left side of his mouth had candy, the other side felt deprived. According to Maurice Blanchot, art's truth is always vindicated retrospectively by future work; we can see Warhol's origin in the rich flowering of abjection in the art world today, the excess poverty, with each new move seeming more and more as if it is slighter, and somehow cheating. While no one is making masterpieces anymore, no one is trying to make them either. Abjection means cast off, existing in or resigned to a low state—dumped by yourself, as you psychotically misrecognize yourself in ideals.

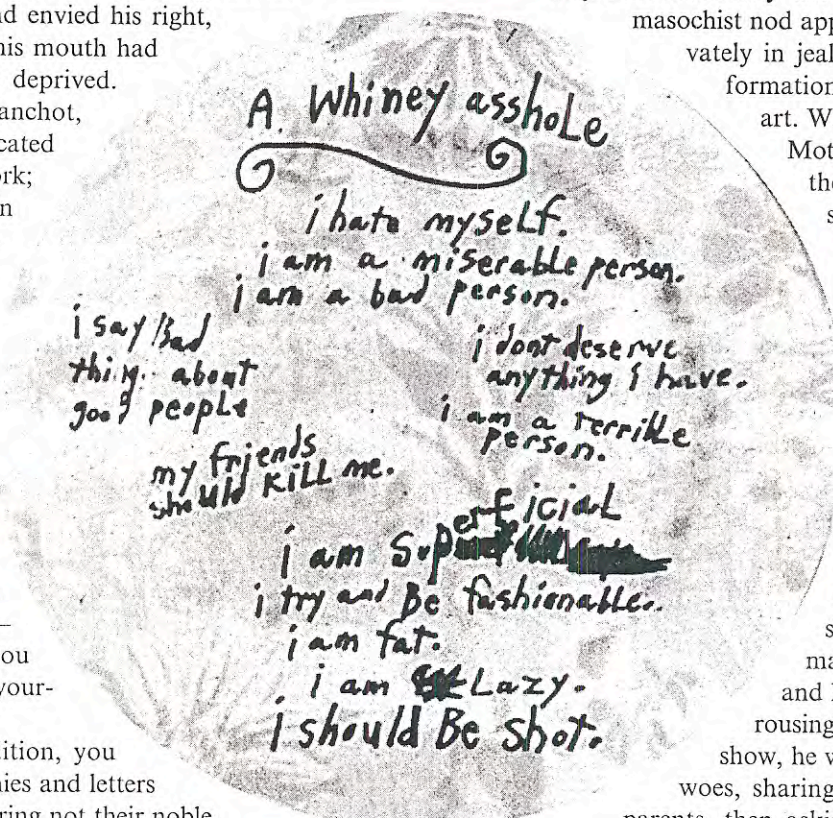
To counteract this condition, you can ferret through biographies and letters of famous people, remembering not their noble moments, which are to be expected, but the petty chinks in character that one can truly share. By bonding with them in moments of smallness, one experiences strange sublime relief. On a collective level, this need is served by *The National Enquirer*. Baudelaire on creditors and procrastination as voluptuous agents of Satan is always a satisfactory read. It used to be that you had to have access to the diaries and personal effects of artists to get the dirt about them; today it is volunteered openly and even constitutes much of the content of the work itself. While I used to feel lousy about looking for the character flaws of my esthetic idols to bring them down to my level, now I can feel lousy about people who have been clever enough to make lucrative careers out of being losers in the art world and in general.

In the '70s, Lynda Benglis and

Robert Morris shook up *Artforum*, if not Western culture, by exposing their breasts in a pair of ads; but they looked good. Eighties artists continued to expose themselves, openly sharing feelings of greed and career-obsessed sliminess hitherto repressed from view. Recent artists like Sean Landers tap into the capacity of public self-abuse to function as a fertile source of artistic inspiration, exploring the richness of student-loan debt, credit-card debt, masturbation, bloated ambition, and enforced downward mobility as the substantive fiber of their work. Landers' aptitude for self-loathing is matched by the virtuosic wretchedness of Cary S. Liebowitz, a.k.a. Candyass, and his products—produced under the brand image of his professional loser persona: a Jewish homosexual with a weight problem who "wants to have nice things." Their abundant displays of indignity and insecurity are guaranteed to make any

masochist nod appreciatively, then writhe privately in jealousy at the inspired transformation of infantile demands into art. While they are not exactly the Mother Teresas of the art world, their constitutionally deflated style is a breath of fresh air after the generally humorless self-righteous and/or slick critiques of mastery so prevalent in the "post-Modern" master-bashing of the '80s.

Paralyzed by fear that he wouldn't be able to repeat the ingenious whining of his first show, Landers nevertheless managed to tap the deep well of shame necessary to incite the masochism, self-justification, and hope that made for another rousing little outburst. In his recent show, he worked his chronic financial woes, sharing the pain of yelling at his parents, then asking them for a "loan." He even resorted to exposing the ultimate badge of misery—his whopping defaulted student loan. Landers' work hovers somewhere between a hygienic confession and a perverse compulsion to display his subjective dirty underwear; in an art market that has seen it all, someone else's mail from collection agencies evokes the frisson of schadenfreude that dirty panties no longer deliver. David Rimaneli has remarked that this work appeals to all those "who . . . persist in the belief that the world owes [them] a living," a group particularly overrepresented in the art world. Landers also shared the personal letters he wrote to his student-loan officer, Miss Gonzales, in which he desperately tries to bond with her as a person, insanely explicating the personal reproaches implied in those nasty bureaucratic statements: "I CARE GREATLY ABOUT MY HOME STATE, MY COUN-



Opposite: photos of Proust, Ruskin, Nietzsche, Wagner, Beckett, and Joyce all courtesy of the New York Public Library Picture Collection. Above: Cary S. Liebowitz/Candyass, *Candyass Kitchen*, 1990, porcelain, 10" diameter. Set of six dishes.

*Abjection means cast off,  
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fetishistic aura of secular divinity. (At the center as usual is the void so brilliantly reflected by Warhol, who transmuted wannabehood into an act of genius, and openly wallowed in his superstar invidium, glamour wounds, and bad complexion, manufacturing genius positivities out of his “lacks,” and embracing sterility and fanhood as a fertile place from which to work.) With the glamorous order of creative genius obsolete in the theory if not the practice of supposedly higher-quality cultural outlets, “personality” or brand image became confused with Special Stuff and somehow endowed—like Lotto, like penance, like writing *King Lear*—with the capacity to save you from your worst nightmares of poverty, insignificance, and flab. In the confused real imaginary of consumer culture, the gap between supermodel and homeless person was squeezed closed in an obscene pincer action forcing everyone in-between out of the picture and turning them into passive spectators. I’m going to skip all the stuff about Bataille and heterogeneity.

It has been said that glamorous media images and commodities violate people with their judgmental gaze. People are frequently bothered by this cultural mechanism, which, on the one hand, commands them to identify or die, and, on the other, to dismiss it as unworthy of their attention. It’s rude. Worked over by this double pressure, we need a place to expel the excremental

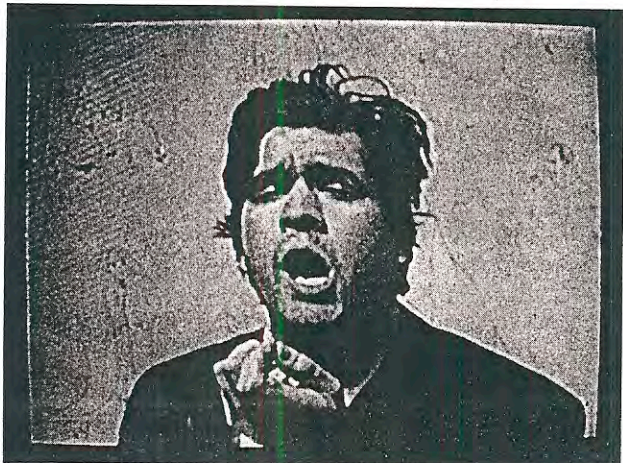
feelings that are its inevitable and relentless by-product. Recently, many disgruntled consumers (of identity) are demanding that their identity should exist as some prepackaged product out there (affordable and accessible), so they can shop for it like a car or pair of shoes. People appeal to representation as some kind of exalted consumer advocacy board that can restore a self-image that you never had (but believe you have lost), a personal Wonder product, at once totally attractive, totally recognized, and totally you.

Who has never felt flabby and shabby compared to a sleek glistening commodity? Rigorously speaking, no one wants to be subject of the gaze, we all want to be fabulous objects. Late this century the lines between wanting to have, wanting to be, and wanting to seem like a commodity have gotten hopelessly collapsed. Under the combined misery complex of capital and fame, abjection—the plight of those who are insufficiently recognizable as commodities, for commodities, by commodities—is a national and personal emergency.

### *Loser Lib*

Joan Rivers said she used to worry about her thighs every time she went to the beach but then she realized everyone else was too busy worrying about their own thighs to notice hers. According to Dr. Johnson, “A book should teach us to enjoy life, or to endure it.” It is incredibly difficult to put your suffering ego into the work and not make people nauseous.

Like a force of nature, like a human dynamo of insecurity, Candyass taps into the abundant feelings of wretchedness and inadequacy brought about by daily interactions with the external world and expels them into a line of assorted low-end art products. By deliberately packaging himself as a defective commodity, he takes revenge upon them all for the indignities we suffer in a culture commanding



us to self-actualize ourselves as apparently self-sufficient narcissistic products. While Jeff Koons hysterically obeys this market command to perfect himself as “product” of the consensus, Candyass obeys the compulsion to market himself too, but throws his personal failure to do so into the package at no extra charge. This is totally poetic, because poetry always says the stuff that’s extra, as if the universe appreciates it. Just as Diao presents a graphic record of his abysmal sales, Candyass includes his weight (145 to 160 lbs.) on his CV. He keeps a close running inventory of his faults and neediness, transforming rich personal resources of self-reproach into a wide variety of items, e.g. pink plastic footballs for sissies, the famous large-assed “Kick Me” pants featured in *Vogue*, and banners proclaiming “Misery Rules” and “Homo State.” Another appealing multiple consisted of saucy pink “Vomit” tote bags that seemed to originate from some chichi boutique of the same name. Furthermore, he can’t spell, and makes no attempt to hide this. While he inventories his own defects, he also keeps track of other people he likes. I love the “I love” series, in which he expresses his admiration for other artists, e.g. “I love Palladio,” “I love Robert Venturi,” etc., in a sort of canine exertion of fanhood in which he pays homage to and somehow territorializes the names of these people by leaving his mark on them.

His installations have appeared in various high-class establishments. On April Fools’ Day, he degraded the windows of Barney’s with his presence as cameo window decorator. A model in something like a thousand-dollar sweater applied lipstick all over her face in front of a typically faux-naive and self-undercutting wall-sized Candyass Spring Poem: “Dont Be Cruel, It’s April Fools,” as if we should stop being cruel as a joke. Last October his festive Candyass carnival at the Stux gallery included a sale room packed like a hall of shame, with pieces that hadn’t sold, now offered with red tags at special reduced rates.

Baudelaire liked to use sonnets because the constrictions of the form allowed the idea to “burst forth” with that much more expressive intensity. Candyass takes as his medium the most highly effective form of communication today, that is, the commodity. He “keeps busy” by signing as many of his high-volume and cheap items as possible. By speaking through the commodity-form and associating his Candyass personality with it, he does it serious damage, and thereby proves its resilience like an ape dropping a piece of Samsonite luggage off a 40-story building. Karl Lagerfeld says institutions are whores, and want to be treated ac-

cordingly. Due to sinister and effective metonymic slippage, commodities promise to lift and separate people from feelings of inadequacy and unloveliness, but they can also betray us, give us dirty looks, and make us feel unworthy of them. By constituting the “lack” in the loser-commodity itself, he avenges its challenges to our collective glamour and ab-



Cary S. Liebowitz/Candyass, *Kick Me (Green Pants)*, 1990, polyester, 37 x 19".

solves us from its psychotic reproaches.

It’s easy to talk about the way things *should* be, that’s what the media do, that’s what dysfunctional families do; it’s much harder to do stuff about the way things *are*. With disarming simplicity, C.A. cracks through the veil of fantasy and denial with which we approach this bipolar phantasm

of winners and losers, the deep and the cheap, with simple observations like "Don't hate me because I'm mediocre" scrawled on the wall of one of his installations, and on a 1(800) LOSER Rolodex card. With these handy aphorisms, he constantly objectifies things that everyone fears, thinks, and immediately tries to suppress. His art functions like a child who blurts out "Who farted?" at a gathering of adults who don't know each other so well.

The effect of this repeated collapse between what is sordid and what is endearing is an exciting sense of acceptance. Beset by his unadmirable and morbid self-obsession, Candyass vents his need to be liked on any terms and will even sit in the gallery and give you warm cookies or autograph creepy large glossies of himself, with a dotted line across his neck where he has written "Please cut here" in exchange for a moment of nonhostility (even if he does secretly think that you hate him and/or his work). He stares out of the photo like a slightly overaged high school-yearbook zombie, looking into a bleak future, no doubt expecting the worst.

Nietzsche despised mystics because "they say they are deep, but they aren't even superficial." It's pathetic that people want to have profundity and grace packaged as such for them in the art world and then experience lack in being if their identity is not reflected back to them by pop stars, cars, or houseware. The booming self-help industry bears witness to the population's terror at not feeling cheerful, confident, and trim at all times. Abjection is big business in a culture in which you're supposed to feel lousy about feeling lousy. While art is not therapy, Candyass is constantly showing how we look to representation for personal validation, or as prosthetic appendage to supplement natural endowments of beauty, coolness, or spirituality, and often wind up with egg on our faces. The fantasy of a full-figured totally adequate representation (that you can buy into and identify with) is crazy.

C.A. works in the absurd gap that we actually occupy between wanting to have things more perfect than we are and wanting to be or at least *seem* like them. "What will become of art, now that the gods and even their absence are gone?" asks Maurice Blanchot. For one thing, the artist can persist as a wannabe with a special personal business card announcing what most people go around feeling but are afraid to advertise: "Here I am please don't be mean."□

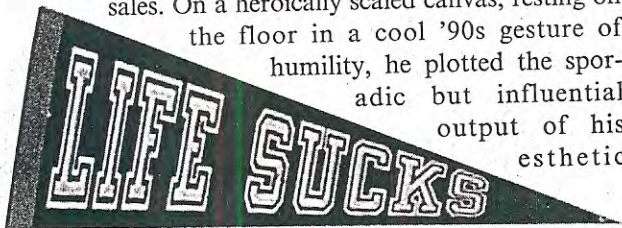
## WISSENY RULES

### *List of Abjectogenic Stimuli (Or things that make me feel insufficiently commodified. . . .):*

- 1) *Supermodels.*
- 2) *Children who make tremendous amounts of money acting in stupid sitcoms, and prodigies.*
- 2a) *Anything about Jodie Foster because I was at Yale for two of the years that she was.*
- 3) *The Chanel boutique of course.*
- 4) *Nasty photos of everyone looking fabulous at the Vogue 100-year anniversary party (to which I was not invited).*
- 4a) *Sandra Bernhard making a career out of being a cranky Jewess and getting to model for Comme des Garçons.*
- 5) *People in the art world my age having museum shows and/or making lucrative careers out of being losers. . .*

TRY AND MOST OF ALL MY CREDIT RATING . . . I LOVE LIFE MISS GONZALES, I LOVE THIS COUNTRY. I WANT TO OWN UP TO MY DEBTS. I WANT FREEDOM FROM THIS SELF IMPOSED PRISON OF POVERTY. I HAVE ONLY TO CRY OUT AND SAY: ENOUGH! I REFUSE TO BE A FAILURE AT WHAT I DO. . . . I SHANT GIVE UP MY DREAM TO PAYING A DEBT, INDEED I SHALL USE THE FIREY PAIN OF FAILURE TO FILL MY SAILS WITH WIND (OF FEAR) AND TALK TO SUCCESS, AN UNCONDITIONAL WINNER . . . AND ON MY GRAVE MISS GONZALES IF ONE DEBT IS PAY'D SO HELP ME GOD IF IT IS NOT MY DEFAULTED G.S.L. FROM M.H.E.A.C." (sic).

In his last show, David Diao deployed his hard-edged formalist style to chart the waxing, waning, and waning of his career in terms of output and sales. On a heroically scaled canvas, resting on the floor in a cool '90s gesture of humility, he plotted the sporadic but influential output of his esthetic



idol, Barnett Newman. This mixed gesture of homage and invidium was moving in its restraint, characterized by more traditional elegance than the materially shabby work of younger abject artists such as Mike Kelley, Karen Kilimnik, Landers, and Candyass.

### *Wannabeing*

In the last several decades, questions of authority, originality, and mastery have been beaten to death as the professional territory and private intellectual piles of numerous critics, thinkers, and artists. As "high-cultural" workers were busy outing cases of nonoriginality, pop culture, through the institution of the star, continued to labor inexorably to puff up and package alienated cultural labor with the

Above: Cary S. Liebowitz/Candyass, work from "Depression Pennants" series, 1990, felt, 9 x 24". Right, left to right: Sean Landers, *Improbable History*, 1992, still from color video, 60 minutes. Cary S. Liebowitz/Candyass, *Invitation*, 1989, lithograph paper, 9 x 14". Opposite, clockwise from top left: David Diao, *Sales 1*, 1991, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 42 x 36". Sean Landers, *I'm 41*, 1992, ink on paper, 8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>". Cary S. Liebowitz/Candyass, work from "Depression Pennants" series, 1990, felt, 9 x 24". Cary S. Liebowitz/Candyass, *Bamey's Windows*, 1992, mixed media in-