



You Could Be The Next Michael Mandiberg

Work: Mandiberg.com, 2001-present.

Michael Mandiberg makes art about identity and how it is defined. His work has also included an element of commerce in these definitions of identity, from selling everything he owned online, to charging for the right to use his time in any way you wanted him to use it. Recently he has created a guide to being Michael Mandiberg, in which almost every detail about his life is explained as a character study for use in an exchange program where people trade identities for a day at a time.

ES: When you started "[Shop Mandiberg](#)", which I think includes the "[Freelance Conceptual Artist](#)" piece, what did you expect would happen? I mean you might not have had a specific aim for the piece, but I can't imagine you could go into something like that with zero expectations.

MM: Actually, I went into Shop Mandiberg incredibly naively. The night I launched the site I remember distinctly hoping for three things: First, I hoped that my friends would enjoy it. Second, I hoped that someone (anyone) would buy something (anything), and if possible that this person would be a stranger to me. Lastly, I hoped that the site would help me get into graduate school, (the applications were due two weeks after the site launched.)

At midnight I sent out my announcement e-mail to about 200 friends, acquaintances, and a few net-art-people-emails I had picked up. The email was a press release, which simultaneously functioned as an artist statement. The next morning I woke up to a few emails from friends, one of whom had made the first purchase of some postal stamps and a jar of change.

Little did I know I had released what I would later understand was called a viral e-mail marketing campaign. Those 200 friends had forwarded the email to other people, who had forwarded it to other people, etc. and before I knew it I had a meme on my hands. (Though I would not learn that word until later as well.) Three weeks into it traffic spiked to 25,000 unique visitors per day, and complete strangers were making purchases. About the same time I started to get inquiries from journalists. The project was covered in places like the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Berliner Zeitung, a bunch of other newspapers/magazines and hundreds of personal blogs.

Looking back on the project, I guess this is not that surprising considering the strategic convergence of voyeurism / spectacle / dot.com.unism <--> dot.crash / press-release-as-artist-statement / etc, yet it completely caught me off-guard. While the project is about making the private public, it was still a personal project for me. It was actually a little disturbing at first when traffic was that high; I felt out of control of the project, or rather, I felt like the project was in control of me. Of course I knew consciously that this was the point, and I wanted this to happen, but I was afraid of what I wanted at the same time.

ES: So how much stuff did you end up selling? And feel totally free not to tell me, but roughly how much money did you make?

MM: My gross profit (total sales) was about \$3500-4000. This is mostly because someone bought my computer (\$1300), and a set of professional photographic studio strobe flashes (\$1000). But I sold everything pretty much at market value, so if you take into consideration the devaluation over time, I probably broke even.

I was thinking about doing an "Annual Report" at the conclusion of the project were I would do a full financial analysis, and determine whether I lost \$53 or made \$137, or whatever the final exact number was. I decided

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against this in the end, as it was a little bit to feedback-loop-ish for me, plus I really needed to move on from this project. When I closed it New Year's Eve, I drank a whole bottle of champagne and uploaded the scripts at exactly midnight, and was very very happy to be able to move on.

ES: Well what was refreshing about "Shop Mandiberg" was how there was absolutely no pretense that the things people were buying were becoming art by way of the transaction. It really did have this feel of an unabridged internet garage sale. Which was nice because you weren't "transforming" objects, it was all about transferring them. I mean I guess I have to wonder if you know how your objects are being used. Are people using them as if they got a good deal on second hand stuff, or are people putting them on their mantles? And which would you prefer?

MM: I was transferring objects, and I was not providing any kind of frame, but each individual purchaser provided their own frame. There were several people who purchased things, and made it very clear that they felt that they were getting an art object, either by indicating that they were art collectors, or other signs. There were other people who purchased things because they wanted to take part in this weird project and they chose their objects either because they needed something and they could get a good deal on it, or they happened to like a certain kind of thing, such as the woman who bought my toothbrush who has a toothbrush collection. There were also people who purchased things without knowing anything about where these objects were coming from: There is one woman who I contacted on behalf of someone writing an article about the site who had done a Google search for a certain kind of a can opener that I happened to have. She went directly to the kitchen utensils page on my site, and purchased the can opener without ever knowing about the project. I really like that without the stabilizing power of a gallery or museum or white cube to sit in, the website that I made flows back-and-forth between an actual e commerce Web site, and performance art. It is the readymade, without the context of a gallery to turn it into art (which is not to say but it cannot be turned into art, just that I am not one who is doing it.)

ES: About how many people ended up participating in "Freelance Conceptual Artist?"

MM: After the success of Shop Mandiberg In terms of sales and traffic, I had hoped for a lot of participation. I had built a large list of possible actions including everything from doing nothing, to researching, to blinking, plus I allowed people to create their own actions.

In the end only three people purchased my time, and two people traded their time for mine. One person, a college friend, bought my time in Brooklyn to judge their weekly steak grilling contest (intermittently up at steakandkitties.com). I am a vegetarian, though as I wrote to him in response to his purchase:

i don't usually eat meat other than fish, but when you said "you will be a steak judge or vegetarian judge for steaknight," did you mean either/or, or both/and...remember, you have full control over my labor...

I ended up judging all meals, including the steaks. When I arrived here in L.A. an other artist bought my time to have me paint the walls of his new studio white, though he was there the whole time and I suspect it was really a ruse to spend a couple hours getting to know each other; we became good friends. One woman whom I had been dating, but was in the process of separating with, bought a quarter hour of making out. Somewhat similarly another woman used it as a pickup line, explaining that she was broke, but offering to trade "free choice of postures, functions and tones." Lastly, a family friend who was a strong influence on me when I grew up offered to trade a half hour of praying for each other at the same time. I told her that I did not quite know how to pray, but that I would meditate instead. Simultaneously she prayed in Portland, and I sat in my room in New York and thought about her and how wonderful a person she was.

ES: I was thinking now that there's probably no way I would have paid you to do anything. It seems an open invitation to the abuse of power, and I felt a resistance to the idea of participating.

MM: I had hoped for people to buy my time for very practical things (programming, assisting, cleaning), as well as for useless things (burping, misspelling, meditating) and maybe for all little bit of abuse of power (undressing, bleeding, etc.) You'll notice that every single one of these people knew me. The anonymous control aspect never drew people in to a level where they wanted to exercise what I was offering. I couldn't tell you whether it was a lack of trust, a simultaneous repulsion from the attraction to controlling me in this way, or something else.

ES: It seems a lot of your work is about liquidating the linearity of your own life. I'm combining this with what you say in "[The Essential Guide to Performing Michael Mandiberg](#)" about your tendency towards monasticism and I'm curious if you think there's a connection.

MM: I like the way you call it a "liquidation of the linearity of your own life." I hadn't thought of it in exactly the same terms (linearity), but that does describe in a certain sense. One of the ways that I thought about it was taking the de-personified structures that mediate our everyday existence, and inserting personal information into them: myself as a collection of possessions in the case of Shop Mandiberg, and myself as a collection of actions, habits, and surroundings in the case of the do-it-yourself guide [The Essential Guide to Performing Michael Mandiberg](#). My goal was to play with the ways in which our subjectivity is constructed. If we construct

ourselves through a constellation of objects sold in stores what would happen if I turn my own supposedly personal collection of these objects into a depersonalized store itself? Or, if we are only our habits, personality traits, and who we are surrounded with, if I were to perfectly articulate this for someone else, could they in turn perform it?

ES: I see a lot of nihilism in your work, but I think a lot of it seems to be about freedom, as well. I'm wondering what side you're on, if any?

MM: You are right to notice the nihilism in the work. It is definitely there. Each time I do another of these projects I slowly unravel one more layer, expose myself a little more, and push myself (personally) a little further. This sounds almost too cliché, or existential, etc, but as I push myself closer to this intellectual / personal nihilism, and accept this nothingness, it is liberating in a way. Though it kind of ends up in a pattern, repeating these kinds of gestures in order to complete the cycle and confirm both the nihilism and the freedom.

ES: What sort of questions do you get out of your own work?

MM: I think there are two questions that I would like to know about myself. The first is why I end up using myself in all of my work? The second question is why do/can I only tell stories that really happened, why can't I just make something up and pull it off interestingly? Why am I so tied to the literal and the supposedly real?

I don't know if I can answer either of these questions, they are just something that I have been wondering recently. I can't quite figure out why I have never been able to even passably tell/write a story that didn't happen all; I was an (embarrassingly in hindsight) eager poet when I was younger, but I nearly failed a short story class: I just couldn't deal with creating a fiction, and putting it into a narrative structure. I guess I am whole lot more interested in the stores that have actually happened, or creating situations in the real world which will inevitably generate participation, interaction, stories, and fictions.

I've really been wondering recently why I use myself in my work. Originally (4-5 years ago) it was a way of dealing with the Mulvey/Sontag violence of the camera. If I turned it on myself it was okay. I spent the last three months brainstorming, and coming up with project ideas and proposals, consciously trying to not use myself. All of them ended up being dry, removed, and generally not all that interesting. So now I'm turning around and thinking about some other projects in which I am involved again. They're less removed, and I think they are a whole lot more honest. But I'm still left with the questions of narcissism, desire for attention, and solipsism.

I am just thinking about this right now, but maybe using myself in my work is an extreme form of my inability to tell stories that I haven't witnessed happen. Not only can I not seem to tell a story about some imaginary people, I can't even tell a story about myself that isn't loosely based on something that has happened. So I create situations in which I can retell what has happened, or create the story on the fly in the real.

ES: Personally, in my own work, I've always been attracted to the documentary aspects of art. I think that the fictive and "re"-presentational is kind of difficult to trust. What strikes me about your work is it's taking that lack of trust in representation and turning it into a demand for total presence. Which I think is kind of one of the "liberating" aspects of your work. I mean you are the art, and your time and your life is the art. You are removing the art from a presentation and transforming it into the creation of a direct experience for yourself which others can participate in. But, uhm, that wasn't a question. I did have one more though, before we wrap this up, which is the obligatory "how does the net relate" question. I mean, do you think you could do these projects the way they were done, if Al Gore hadn't invented the internet? I am trying to see connections between our generation of net.artists and the "elders." Which is kind of no more relevant than "Which Beatle Are You" quizzes, but I kind of see you as having a connection to Heath Bunting, in that the "internet" part of his net.art was really just dissemination of what were otherwise self-contained conceptual pieces.

MM: I would say that of the "elders" RTMark has had the greatest impact on my process and the way I think about the possibilities of what I can do. Heath Bunting is a close second, for the way he uses networks for things that were not supposed to be used for. Especially ["King's Cross Call In"](#), dissemination of conceptual pieces as you say, but also very much about a real interaction off the network. Also, because both of them do not see the network as limited to the Internet, but expand that network to phone and fax grids, interpersonal relationships and friend associations, diplomatic relationships between governments, etc.

–Eryk Salvaggio
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