

## Artangel: Frontline warriors

In 1991, two young men decided it was time art broke out of the gallery – and become an event in its own right. John O'Mahony meets the Artangel revolutionaries who changed Britain

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Unseen hands ... Break Down, 2001, by Michael Landy. Photograph: Artangel

'Here,' said Robert Wilson, making his way through an underground labyrinth of caverns, arches and alcoves, 'I want a pile of yellow sulphur.' In the darkness, people around him took careful note. 'And here,' continued the American guru of the avant garde nonchalantly, 'I want hundreds of golden arrows flying through the air, suspended in mid-flight . . .'

The year was 1995, and the setting was the cavernous Clink Street Vaults on London's Bankside. I had gone behind the scenes, and was getting my first glimpse into the shadowy workings of an art production outfit known as Artangel. Although the company had been in existence for a few years, its ambitious new commission – HG, a vast installation by the legendarily demanding Wilson, based extremely loosely on *The Time Machine* by HG Wells – was on an altogether more monumental scale.

Following Wilson, the Artangel crew (producers Michael Morris and James Lingwood, plus an army of support staff) were unblinkingly jotting down even the most outlandish request. They then spent the ensuing months transforming this subterranean expanse into an immersive dreamscape of dripping lightbulbs, glittering sphinxes, mummified corpses and ruined temples.

'At one point, he requested an amphibian,' remembers Morris, with a chuckle. 'So we found this guy from a place called Animal Ark, who would show up every day with strange animals. Finally, he brought this weird thing called an axolotl: a dark, almost prehistoric creature with feathery gills. Bob gave a nod, and so the axolotl took up residence, a lurking presence at the bottom of a glowing tank of water.'

For the past 20 years, Artangel has been playing a crucial, if backroom, role – as curator, facilitator, fundraiser, administrator, babysitter and celestial guardian – to some of Britain and the world's most radical, daring and provocative artists. Even before HG, the company had already made a splash in 1993, as the unseen hand behind [Rachel Whiteread's](#) *House*, a concrete cast of the insides of an entire terraced house in London.

The work proved as controversial as Carl Andre's infamous pile of bricks and Damien Hirst's formaldehyde shark: it was praised as 'testimony to the human spirit' and denigrated as 'a joke' and 'a monstrosity'. On the day it won the Turner prize, Whiteread was named 'worst artist of the year' by a subversive rival award.

Other comparably bold and confrontational Artangel projects include Jeremy Deller's 2001 *The Battle of Orgreave*, a spectacular real-time re-enactment of one of the most divisive conflicts of the

miner's strike in 1984; and, also in 2001, Michael Landy's Break Down, in which Landy set about obliterating all his worldly possessions, in the archly ironic consumer setting of a former C&A store in London. Few other organisations would have had the courage to take on such uncompromising, barrier-breaking projects. "No commercial gallery would touch me," says Landy. "So they were a godsend."

As well as supporting 55 or so artists over their two-decade span, Artangel pioneered the use of unconventional venues and refined the notion of spectacular one-off art events. "They've had a huge effect on the cultural landscape," says Deller. "Something like the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern – that's really just a kind of ongoing Artangel project. The Turbine Hall would never even have been thought about if it hadn't been for Artangel."

Low-key and reserved, the two men behind Artangel seem blithely unconcerned by the fact that, while they toil in the background, the artists are out there getting all the attention, glory and Turner prizes. "One of the main skills of a producer is the ability to step back," says Lingwood. "It's our job to keep perspective, to keep calm," adds Morris.

Two middle-class boys from not terribly artistic households, they met at Oundle school in Peterborough and became colleagues at the ICA in the 1980s, during its experimental golden years: Morris as director of performing arts, Lingwood overseeing the gallery. It was during this period that many of the ideas that fuelled the Artangel credo were conceived. "We were frustrated at the limitations of what we were doing," says Morris. "I wanted to do things of a different scale. We wanted to go beyond the white walls of the gallery and the black box of the theatre, to explore uncharted territory."

Ultimately, the duo wanted to completely change the way audiences experience art: "We wanted everything to seem like an event," says Lingwood, "with art so immersive and absorbing, you simply can't get away from it."

In 1991, they got the chance – when offered joint directorship of Artangel, which had existed in other incarnations since the mid-80s. Their breakthrough came when Lingwood paid a visit, shortly afterwards, to the studio of a little-known artist named Rachel Whiteread. "He just sat in the chair and I gave him a cup of tea," she recalls. "He asked if there was anything I wanted to make. And I said I'd like to cast a whole house in concrete. He just said, 'Great, OK, let's do it.'"

As soon as the concrete had set on 193 Grove Road in Bow, the outrage and campaigning began. Just hours before it received the Turner prize, the council voted to have House demolished. "It was one of the worst days of my life," says Lingwood. "The first part of the evening was spent attending a meeting of Bow neighbourhood council. And I had to go from there to Millbank to convey the news to Rachel, before she learned that she had won the Turner prize." House was demolished in 1994.

### **Shredders and soldiers**

But the notoriety and scandal put Artangel on the map, allowing them to move on to larger-scale projects such as HG. The two projects that really confirmed Artangel as a major force, however, came not from their trademark "conversations" with carefully selected artists, but from an open call for submissions via a national newspaper.

The first was Michael Landy's anticapitalist statement. "Michael was going to catalogue everything he owned and then just destroy it," says Lingwood. "The challenge was how to present this dismantling and deconstruction to the public in an interesting way." Artangel injected a sense of theatre with an "anti-production-line" of conveyor belts and chutes that fed Landy's clothes, cooker and even his Saab into gigantic mechanical shredders. Appropriately, when it was all over, all Landy had left was a boiler suit he borrowed from Artangel.

The second was Deller's pitch for The Battle of Orgreave, which was scrawled on one side of A4. "It was a haiku of a proposal," says Lingwood. "But its implications were enormous." Deller's plan to re-enact the clash in the fields around a South Yorkshire coking plant in 1984 proved a gargantuan logistical undertaking. It marshalled over 800 participants – some of them former miners and policemen who had faced each other in the original battle, others drawn from re-enactment societies all over the country. "On the night before, everyone gathered together in the fields of Orgreave, in a kind of makeshift military camp," says Lingwood. "It really felt like the night before a real battle."

Since those successes, Artangel has continued to take on only the most towering, unwieldy projects, including 2003's Imber, a three-day promenade event about the Salisbury Plain village evacuated in 1943 to make way for US soldiers training for the Normandy landings; and 2005's Küba, an video installation by Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman that took place in a gigantic postal sorting office in

central London.

To mark their 20th year, in a nod to posterity, the Artangel duo are donating part of their video archive to the Tate. They insist there is no grand plan for the future, simply the hope that new associations with new artists will take them on new journeys as huge in scale and ambition as House, Orgreave and Break Down. "I can't say what our strategy is because it involves things we don't know about yet," says Morris. "Expect more of what we've done," adds Lingwood. "And some of what we can't imagine."