

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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A new exhibition in Basel presents the work of Michael Landy, who, in 2001, famously destroyed everything he owned as a piece of performance art. Alastair Sooke meets him.

By Alastair Sooke

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One day in the '90s the British artist Michael Landy came up with a radical concept for an artwork: he decided to destroy every single one of his possessions in public. The idea was simple. But executing it proved surprisingly complex. So, in order to make it happen, he teamed up with Artangel, the non-profit arts organisation, which specialises in realising extraordinary one-off projects with contemporary artists, and set to work.

Three years later, in 2001, having compiled an exhaustive inventory of his belongings that ran to 7,227 items, he found himself standing in an empty shop in Oxford Street in central London. Before him, in yellow trays placed upon a conveyor belt, were the belongings that he had amassed over his 37 years, destined for landfill.

During the course of two weeks, every single one – clothes, love letters, artworks, his Saab 900 Turbo car, even his father's sheepskin coat – was stripped, shredded, crushed, dismantled, or otherwise destroyed by Landy and his team of 12 assistants, while listening to David Bowie and Joy Division. When they had finished, the artist owned nothing at all, apart from the blue boiler suit he had been wearing throughout. He called the project Break Down.

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© Break Down, Michael Landy, 2001. An Artangel commission/Parisa Taghizadeh
In 2001, Michael Landy destroyed all of his belongings – including his Saab 900 Turbo car (Credit: Break Down, Michael Landy, 2001. An Artangel commission/Parisa Taghizadeh)

“It was the happiest two weeks of my life,” Landy told me recently, speaking shortly after the opening of **Out of Order**, his raucous mid-career retrospective at the Museum Tinguely in Basel, which features ample documentation of Break Down. “At moments, admittedly, I felt like I was witnessing my own death, because people I hadn’t seen for years would turn up, and I thought, ‘Well, they’d only turn up for my funeral.’ But often I did feel real elation. No one had ever destroyed all their worldly belongings before.”

Dying of consumption

Fifteen years on, Break Down – which remains Landy’s best-known work – is considered a provocative masterpiece of recent British art. Moreover, because consumerism in the West has only accelerated since 2001 – witness, for instance, the rise of YouTube vloggers such as [Zoella](#) who devote entire videos to rummaging through shopping bags in order to celebrate high-street ‘hauls’ – it has also come to seem remarkably prescient.

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Landy stands in front of the exhaustive catalogue of his 7,227 of his belongings – in the end all that remained was his blue boiler suit (Credit: Michael Landy/Parisa Taghizadeh)

“We see artworks through the prism of our current concerns,” explains James Lingwood, who commissioned Break Down, and has just celebrated 25 brilliant years as co-director of Artangel. “The insistent pressures on people to consume have become more and more present in our culture, and there is an increasing feeling of discomfort about how alienating these pressures can be. Michael, through Break Down, put his finger on a deeply troubling part of our contemporary condition.”

At the time, though, the reaction to Break Down was ambivalent. It was staged in a former branch of the Dutch fashion chain C&A (the same building now houses a branch of low-cost clothing retailer Primark). “That was the perfect place for it,” Landy says, “because it wasn’t set in an art gallery but a place where people go to consume.” Moreover, because it took place on Oxford Street, the “mecca of consumerism” in Britain, as Lingwood puts it, people wandered in unaware that they were about to encounter contemporary art. At first, they assumed that they had entered some kind of sale. According to Landy, one or two “little old ladies” even brought back clothes that they had bought in C&A’s closing-down sale. But as observers watched Landy’s possessions going past on mechanised rollers, and saw all the stuff being smashed up, they were, says Lingwood, “deeply unsettled – and sometimes appalled”.

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Landy's father's sheepskin coat was among the items shredded, torn, smashed and pulverised (Credit: Michael Landy/Parisa Taghizadeh)

Why appalled? “Well,” he replies, “it’s not very difficult, for many people, to witness the destruction of household objects such as crockery. But to see the destruction of personal mementoes, letters, photographs, works of art – that is deeply disturbing.”

Smashing effort

As a result, even when the venue contained thousands of visitors, the mood was often sombre, as people began to think about their own relationships with possessions and objects. On one level, Break Down was a kind of bonfire of the vanities for the 21st Century, excoriating the waste and excess of the West. “In a sense, the message was: where are we heading?” Landy explains. “The more stuff people have, the more successful we perceive them to be – but if we all end up with 7,227 things, then we won’t have a planet.”

In addition, Break Down functioned as a contemporary memento mori: all of us, to differing degrees, use possessions to construct our identities and project ourselves to others – yet here was a man wilfully obliterating his material existence to the point of total annihilation.

At the same time, says Lingwood, “There was something exhilarating about seeing somebody liberating themselves from the tyranny of ownership. The work pointed in two directions – and perhaps that’s where its genius lay.”

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A team of 12 assistants helped Landy destroy his possessions in the old C&A store in London's Oxford Street (Credit: Michael Landy/Parisa Taghizadeh)

Indeed, Lingwood believes that *Break Down* wasn't "simply a frontal attack on consumerism, but something a bit more complex – about the relationship between who we are and what we possess and desire. Of course, *Break Down* was about Western society's obsession with stuff and ownership. But it was also about a more existential question, which was: who am I?"

Landy, himself, says that *Break Down* was partly a self-portrait: the title even played on the idea of the artist experiencing a midlife crisis. The inventory that he prepared for it, which assigned catalogue numbers to each of his possessions, and took more than a year to compile, is currently on display in the form of a gigantic list on a wall in the Museum Tinguely. Landy was adamant that he had to include "everything I owned – even bits of mouldy plastic that had fallen off the VCR". Accordingly, his index includes tedious tallies of mundane objects including matchboxes, wire wool, toilet roll, and plastic bags.

But, here and there, intimate, and sometimes tongue-in-cheek, allusions to Landy's relationships with lovers and friends can be found. Item R3356, for instance, was a "handwritten note" to his partner, the artist Gillian Wearing, "asking her not to leave towels on [the] bathroom floor". R3409, meanwhile, was his fine-art degree thesis that the artist Abigail Lane, an ex-girlfriend, and fellow student at Goldsmiths art school in east London, "was paid £100.00 to write on his behalf".

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Items circulated on a conveyor belt in yellow trays before each was removed and destroyed (Credit: Michael Landy/Parisa Taghizadeh)

There are also references to earlier artworks by Landy such as *Market* (1990), one of three major installations preceding *Break Down* that asked similarly searching questions about value and society. (The other two were *Closing Down Sale* (1992) and *Scrapheap Services* (1995).) Landy created *Market* after graduating from Goldsmiths, where he belonged to the generation, alongside Damien Hirst, that would become known as the Young British Artists. The installation took the form of temporary market stalls, cobbled together out of plastic bread crates and artificial grass, arranged in a vast, disused building in east London. Ordinarily, humdrum stalls like these would be used to sell fruit and vegetables, but Landy's "market" was eerily empty.

In Basel, recreated stalls from *Market* have been placed throughout the retrospective, which follows no chronological order, but instead mixes up Landy's artworks anarchically. The *Market* stalls "gel the disparate elements together," Landy explains, "like the rolling hills of the English countryside."

Personal effects

While planning *Break Down*, Landy spent a long time considering how he should destroy his possessions: "I didn't want someone just to set about it all with a baseball bat," he says, "or set the whole thing on fire, like a funeral pyre." In the end, he decided to mock up a materials reclamation facility, with "dismantling bays" and 100m of conveyor belt arranged in a figure of eight, "like a Scalextric set". That way, he says, "People could actually see what was in these little yellow trays for about 10 minutes as they travelled around the belt."

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Landy's correspondence – from the banal to the intimate – was run through a shredder (Credit: Michael Landy/Parisa Taghizadeh)

When it was all over, Landy quickly discovered that consumerism was unavoidable: “Within about five minutes,” he says, “someone had given me a Paul Weller CD.” He laughs. “Obviously, I didn’t have a CD player to play it on.”

But, he continues, he never promised to remove himself from society altogether, in the manner of Christian saints, such as Francis of Assisi, who renounced worldly goods. “It is a very human characteristic to possess things,” Landy says. “Having things, creating things – that’s partly what makes us human. Besides, Break Down was a work of art, not a way of life.”

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Landy’s studio, on the ground floor of the townhouse that he shares with Wearing in Shoreditch in east London, is a minimalist space with bare whitewashed walls and a polished concrete floor. Even so, this empty room still contains a desk with speakers and a computer, a tasteful grey sofa, and a large bookshelf filled with publications about art. There is also, currently, a scale model that Landy used to plan his exhibition in Basel. “Someone looked at this,” he tells me, “and said, ‘For someone who destroyed everything, you’ve got a lot of stuff.’” He chuckles. “The truth is, it’s very difficult to escape consumerism in Western society. In fact, it’s almost like breathing: you can’t.”

Alastair Sooke is Art Critic of the Daily Telegraph.

<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160713-michael-landy-the-man-who-destroyed-all-his-belongings>