

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

“Art attack at Tate Britain: artists explain why they sabotage”, *The Guardian*, Saturday 28 September 2013

As a new exhibition tracing 500 years of physical attacks on British art opens at the Tate, artists including Douglas Gordon, Michael Landy, Jake and Dinos Chapman and Michael Wallinger explain how destruction can be a starting point for creativity



H.2.N.Y. by Michael Landy.

H.2.N.Y. (2007)

By **Michael Landy**

The idea of destruction as a creative force first came to me when I was a textile student and saw a Jean Tinguely exhibition at the Tate in 1982. There were all these anarchic, machine like-sculptures that kind of performed for you in unpredictable, unique and unrepeatable ways, and it struck me how interesting it was to work with things that didn't last. Years later – after I'd done *Break Down* in which I destroyed all of my possessions in Oxford Street in front of 50,000 people over two weeks – I saw an image of an imploding weather balloon from Tinguely's 1960 self-destroying sculpture, *Homage to New York*. It had been staged in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and, apart from a few bits of debris he signed and gave to people afterwards, it all went to the dump, which is what happened to all my belongings after *Break Down*. Tinguely had built the sculpture out of junk he had picked up in a three-week period, and

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he liked the idea of it being such an ephemeral thing among all the Moma bronze sculptures. In some respects, it was among the first performance pieces.

I liked the similarities with *Break Down* – both works of art that set out to leave nothing behind – and so I attempted to rebuild it so it could destroy itself all over again. I started to visit people he had given remnants to with a view to reconstructing it through people's memories of the event. And I did manage to track down various bits. But I came up against the problem of copyright and the project was never completed.

My artwork in the Tate exhibition came out of my preparatory drawings for attempting to reconstruct the sculpture and restage the performance. And, in some sense, my failure to reconstruct the sculpture was in tune with the original sculpture's failure to actually destroy itself. Back in 1960, Tinguely's piano caught fire 27 minutes in and even in those days that was a health and safety issue. So, in the end, it was the New York fire brigade that actually destroyed Tinguely's sculpture as they put the fire out.

Disgrace VI (2012)

By Kate Davis



Disgrace VI (2012) by Kate Davis.

Disgrace V-VIII is part of a series of works in which I traced the outline of my own body on to Modigliani's female nude drawings. It is one of several pieces in which I responded

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to "canonical" works by significant male artists. I chose art historical moments where the conversation was very male-dominated; I wanted to insert my own voice into that conversation, and to rethink those artworks or moments through a feminist lens. With *Disgrace V-VIII*, I started by tracing my hand, in pencil, on to a female nude by Modigliani, then my arm and carried on round the whole of my body. By the end, I had made this messy web – which comprised a life-size drawing of a real woman's body – over Modigliani's representation of one. And you can no longer easily discern which is his line and which is mine. It should be said, I'm not drawing on an original Modigliani, it's a reproduction from a catalogue. I couldn't afford a real one. But more importantly, there is an ambiguity in this work that underpins it. While I feel frustrated at the way Modigliani represented women – particularly in his pencil drawings in which the woman is often depicted as a vacuous, empty shell – at the same time I am seduced by the quality and character of his pencil drawing. I would never want to draw over a real Modigliani, I'd rather look at it. And while there is certainly anger in this work, there is also a great respect.

Me (2012)
By [Lucy Skaer](#)



Me (2012) by Lucy Skaer. Photograph: Courtesy the

artist and Murray Guy, New York

Iconoclasm is a way of directly addressing the past. The destroyed image can be powerful and contain both the original idea and its negation. I have been coming closer to

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directly addressing images and artefacts, not necessarily to destroy them, but to adapt them. The idea came into my practice through a visit I made to the surrealist artist Leonora Carrington in 2006. I realised I could go and talk to someone – a person who was already something of an art historical figure – as one artist to another. This opened a way of looking at the past that was different. My work comprises adaptations, or, perhaps more precisely, misappropriations of works by Brancusi, Paul Nash, Renaissance portraits, medieval woodcuts, as well as my own work. I want to acknowledge the formal strength in an artwork, and use that strength to deliver a different meaning.

The viewer's first-hand experience of an artwork, the presentness of such an encounter, is central to my thinking. Each time I show one of my sculptures, prints or films, I change titles and reconfigure works for different venues. In some cases, this might be melting down one of my metal sculptures in order to recast it in a different form. In other cases, it could simply be changing a colour from white to black.

The group of works entitled *Me* in the Tate exhibition is an extension of and intervention into one of my previous film works. Originally, my project sought to renovate an abandoned projector I found walled up behind the Lyric House cinema in Leeds. I made a 35mm film specifically for that projector and that cinema. Sometime later, I adapted the film reel by physically punching out the centre of each of the celluloid frames so that, when projected, all that remained to be seen on screen was the very edges of the image. I kept the punched-out bits of the film and cast them into clear resin lozenges; each lozenge contained one scene of the original film. As sculptural objects, these lozenges are a new record of the time and location of the original film. The image has been rerouted.

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One Day You Will No Longer Be Loved II (No 6) (2008)

By ***Jake and Dinos Chapman***



One Day You Will No Longer Be Loved II (No6)

(2008) by Jake and Dinos Chapman.

For us, the idea of drawing upon other artists' work is a way of demonstrating that the function of making art is less a creative act than a destructive one. The idea of overcoming the past is exemplified by the avant garde, in which the conventions of a rarefied past are replaced by a critically dynamic present. As dutiful avant-garde artists, we do our best to demonstrate our aversion to an institutionally stabilised version of art history, and that our purpose is to obliterate its hold on the present.

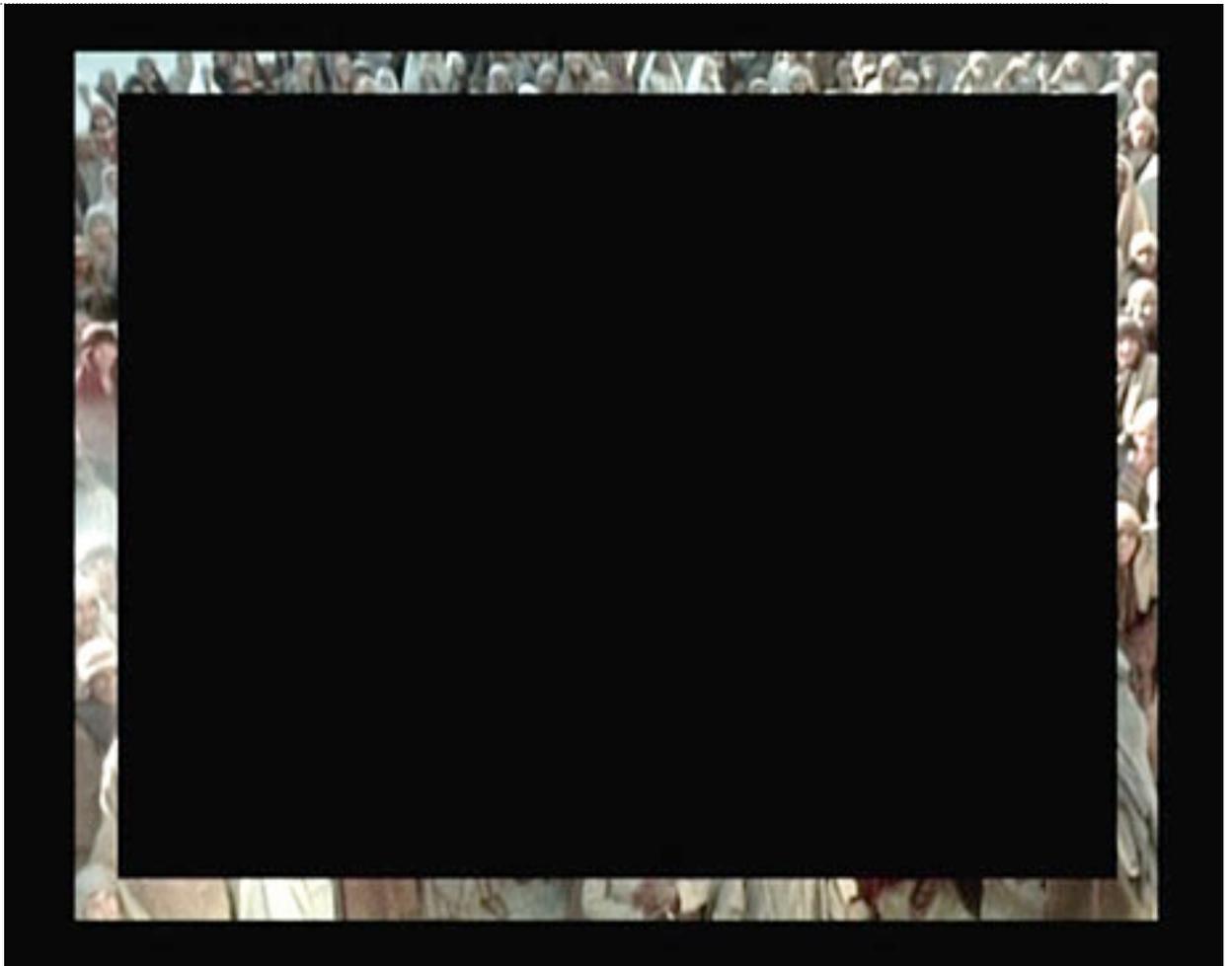
The portraits in the *One Day You Will No Longer Be Loved* series were found in second-hand and junk shops. They depict the Victorian mercantile class – those bourgeois patrons who employed artists to immortalise their likenesses. It is an unexpected act of fate that the rich and powerful become consigned to the dustbins of history, and it is a cheerful function of our spitefulness to apply the appropriate entropy to their bodies that their bid for immortality sought to evade.

The *George – Dinos – Jake – Paul* series, in which we, with George Condo and Paul McCarthy took turns to work on the same image, necessarily involved defacing work that had gone before. There are many precedents for working upon another artist's work. The most relevant was the surrealist game of Exquisite Corps, more commonly known as Consequences. The surrealists thought of it as a way of provoking the unconscious into manifest form. We were more interested in the effects of aesthetic collision. What does an artist do when faced by a work of an artist they have an affection for? Do they refuse? Do they collaborate politely? Do they obliterate it in an act of creative fury? The four artists involved in our project can be typified by a tendency towards self-parody,

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pessimism and a cynical anti-personalism. The idea of defacing each other's work was, therefore, not such an injurious proposition – it may have been more testing to have invited artists who would have wept floods of tears when their handiwork was obliterated by another's malicious rectifications. Hence our work "on" and "with" Goya.

Via Dolorosa (2002)
By ***Mark Wallinger***



Via Dolorosa (2002) by Mark Wallinger

It has always been a valid practice for an artist to take something extant and find a different route through it, or to use it as a given from which to play with different interpretations, or just to exploit its power. In my early days I was apt to lean on existing imagery, but always with a sense of respect for things that I'd become fascinated with or beguiled by. In the new rehang at [Tate Britain](#) there is an early work of mine from 1985, *Where There's Muck*, which includes an exploded image of Gainsborough's portrait *Mr and Mrs Andrews*. I always thought the portrait was quite a wry depiction –

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it was interesting and useful to me in the political climate of the mid-80s – of a couple of wealthy people and their land.

When I saw Franco Zeffirelli's film *Jesus of Nazareth* on TV in the late 70s, I found it very powerful: it seemed to avoid the kitsch that infected most previous sand-and-sandal biblical epics. In my 2002 video *Via Dolorosa*, which is in the new Tate exhibition, I used part of the film – it shows Christ with Pilate before the multitude, the condemnation, the road to Golgotha and Christ's crucifixion – but with 90% of the screen blanked out, creating a black void with only the edges of the film remaining. At the time, I was making a lot of work – including *Ecce Homo*, a life-sized sculpture of Christ which was shown on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square – around the idea of a state religion and the accident of being born into a nominally Christian country. I have described myself as a Christian atheist, since, while I wasn't brought up religiously beyond having a religious instruction O-level, I was very aware of absorbing the residue and values of this Christian background as if by some sort of osmosis. And despite viewing the video through such a narrow field of vision – all you can see are bits of extras and glimpses of limbs and wood – you can still just about piece together what is happening. Because we have picked up the grammar and rhetoric of film, as well as a sense of the Christian story, through similar processes of cultural osmosis, it is somehow comprehensible. In a way this work says: "However familiar or patchy your grasp of the story the gospel, you might know more than you think."

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Self Portrait of Me and You (2008)

By Douglas Gordon



Self Portrait Of Me And You (2008) by Douglas

Gordon.

I have two pieces in the Tate show: one is of Roger Daltrey who was a big hero of mine as a kid and remains so today, and one is a fairly huge work that is a kind of riff on Andy Warhol's portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. But although the images have been burned away, I'm not sure if I see them as being around the idea of destruction.

When I was an art student, the main references for me were artists such as John Latham, who later became a friend, Gustav Metzger and Stuart Brisley. While these people didn't destroy anything, they did – sometimes literally – chew things up, spit them out and make something new. After art school, I worked at the Transmission Gallery. They had an amazing show called the *Festival of Plagiarism*, at which Jamie Reid, who did the Sex Pistols artwork, gave a masterclass – although he would hate that term – in collage. I grew up with punk imagery and so I love it that my Warhol looks more like a Reid Sex Pistols piece than a standard Warhol.

I first set something on fire, accidentally, when I was at art school in Glasgow. Luckily not the Mackintosh building, which is all wood. But long before then, having been brought up as a Jehovah's Witness, for me the most enthralling pages in all the literature were images of the destruction of the world: earthquakes, tempests, typhoons. When I was five years old these were the most exciting things I could imagine. For Jehovah's Witnesses, destruction brings salvation. I don't share this belief, but I do still cling on to the idea that images of destruction contain an emphatic belief in life and in living.

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Behind where Her Majesty has been burned away, there are mirrors in which the viewers see themselves. This is nothing to do with the destruction of the monarchy; it is more that, as time goes on, our idols become not quite as whole as when we first saw them. And less than attacking the Queen, this work is about adoring the Warhol portrait. But as we know, when you get so close to something that you love, you inevitably destroy it.

Duncan Terrace Piano Deconstruction Concert (1966) ***By Raphael Montañez Ortiz***



Duncan Terrace Piano Destruction Concert (1966) by

Raphael Montañez Ortiz.

My idea to destroy a piano for the 1966 artwork that became known as the *Duncan Terrace Piano Destruction Concert* can be traced back to a decade or so earlier when many people were searching for a non-European aesthetic framework and many Native American and African American people were searching for an identity outside of the existing colonial ones. As part of my studies, I began to understand that the roots of modernism are Aboriginal and grew out of that colonial period when it was reaching into "primitive" cultures. I began to develop ideas about bridging the gap between my Catholic background – I was an altar boy – and my Yaqui ancestry that took in a shamanic sense of redemption and reconciliation through sacrificial processes: the destruction, or deconstruction or releasing of an object from the imposition of the ordering, authoritarian universe became a valuable aesthetic. You can see this elsewhere in art, in the deconstruction of cubism or expressionism that ultimately destroys the way we normally perceive things.

I started by destroying and reassembling film stock. Then I started to destroy objects. My thinking culminated at the 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium in London, and shortly afterwards I performed the Duncan Terrace Concert. I had already done one

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piano destruction concert for the ABC television network, who gave me four minutes instead of the usual 40, and at the BBC, where halfway through destroying a rather beautiful baby-grand, someone came running out of the offices shouting, "It's the wrong piano." It was a good example of the tensions between the ideas I was dealing with and the notion that this was a valuable and important instrument. In all, there have now been close to 100 piano concerts, while my work has also developed into more personal, introspective regressions into my past. When I was nine, I lived in Rutgers Place in New York (I am now a Professor at Rutgers University), and when me and my little buddies weren't playing stickball, we would climb into this deserted building and shatter as many windows as we could. Inside, there was some furniture which I would tear apart, and there was even a piano which I would bang with an old lead pipe. So there I was, running around, doing all this ritual stuff like something out of *Lord of the Flies*, and in retrospect, it all weaves together pretty well. Talk about destiny!