Ufuk Inci, 'Michael Landy', *I Love You*, No. 7, Winter 2011-2012

"Break Down", 2011 MICHAEL LANDY. Photo courtesy

56 I LOVE YOU MAGAZINE THE WRONG ISSUE

# FREEDOM IS JUST ANOTHER WORD FOR NOTHING LEFT TO LOOSE

(JANIS JOPLIN)

## "SO EVEN THOUGH OBVIOUSLY I DESTROYED ALL OF MY 7,227 PERSONAL POSSESSIONS AT THE AGE OF 37, I KNEW THAT I WOULD IMMEDIATELY HAVE TO RE-EMERGE MYSELF WITHIN THAT SYSTEM BECAUSE I WASN'T GOING TO A DESERT ISLAND SOMEWHERE. I KNEW IT WAS INESCAPABLE."

(MICHAEL LANDY)

*A FRIEND OF MINE MENTIONED THAT SHE ALMOST SET HER CLOSET ON FIRE BECAUSE SHE WAS FRUSTRATED AND COULDN'T FIND ANYTHING TO WEAR. WHAT A RELIEF TO START OVER AGAIN. I LONG FOR THIS KIND OF NEW BEGINNING EVERY TIME THE BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY GETS TOO HEAVY. MICHAEL LANDY SYSTEMATICALLY CATALOGUED AND DESTROYED EACH ONE OF HIS MORE THAN 7,227 PERSONAL POSSESSIONS IN 2001 IN HIS ARTWORK "BREAK DOWN". I CAME ACROSS HIS WORK ON TV AT "ARTE" AND I AM VERY PLEASED WE GOT THE CHANCE TO TALK TO HIM ABOUT HIS WORK, CONSUMER CULTURE AND MATERIAL MEANS OF SELF-DEFINITON.*

# MICHAEL LANDY

*(Michael Landy in conversation with Ufuk Inci)*

*What was the trigger point for you to start developing the performance/installation piece "Break Down"?*

*I guess it was when I sold a piece of work called "Scrapheap Services", which was a fictious cleaning company, to the "Tate". It probably was the first time in my life that I was kind of financially ahead in my life and then I thought about, you know, I had a car and some expensive suits. And then I thought how I will screw it up for myself, and what was this all about anyway. It popped into my head that I should destroy all my worldy belongings. So this is where it began and it ended on Oxford street about 4 years later.*

*At the old C&A building?*

*Yeah, the old C&A. You got C&As in Berlin, right?!*

*Yes, we do.*

*They moved out of Britain and that's obviously how we acquired the building because they were basically moving out in 2001.*

*Why did you give "Break Down" this industrial assembly-line appeal? Is it to be seen as direct criticism directed to the manufactores of consumer goods, and therefore materialism?*

*I guess I was playing with the idea of a materials' reclamation facility, it's like a recycling facility where basically things of value are taken out of the wastestream, so even though we weren't recycling anything it was kind of based on that really. So I guess it was taking everything back to its material parts. That's what was interesting in and obviously you can do that by basing it on a recycling techniques firm. Kind of sorting and separating. So yeah it was basically based on a materials reclamation facility. And people thought it as a new way of selling things when they looked in through the windows at the C&A building. They looked in and they kind of saw something going on but they weren't quite sure what was going on so they had to come in to take a closer look.*

*So they thought about it as a new kind of vending machine?*

*Yeah, well people would obviously actually offer me money for parts of my car and I mean people stole things as well. Most things were stolen during the private view which says a lot about the art world.*

*(Laughs)*

*Yeah, I think people like the idea of having a keepsake.*

*Doesn't everybody consume to be, to represent something? Even those who have an anti consumerism stance, and decide not to consume. Don't they use that tool of not consuming to define who they are as well, and hence are still part of that same capitalistic society?*

*Yeah, I mean part of what I was trying to explore during "Break down" was the idea that you know exactly that consumerism is the number one ideology of our time. It's inescapable basically. In a western society you can't avoid it. You end up with stuff, as we call it, no matter what really. So even though obviously I destroyed all of my 7227 personal possesions at the age of 37, I knew that I would immediately have to re-emerge myself within that system because I wasn't going to a desert island somewhere. I knew it was inescapable. That was part of the issue about the idea that I was destroying things in front of people that weren't necessarily the most up-to-date products and you felt sort of embarrased about that and that's partly how consumerism works. To make you feel slightly guilty so you have to go out and consume again. And there are also a lot of day-dreaming factors about consumerism. The idea that dreaming about is somehow much more attractive in a sense, and it is that kind of day-dreaming quality about it. You know, you bring a product home, it doesn't quite do what you imagined it would do, so then you have to consume again.*

*Do you think it is unhealthy to have strong memories attached to certain goods?*

*(Repeats the question) No not necessarily. I mean obviously I made a list. I made an invetory of everything I owned. So in a sense it was a list. I can't wear it anymore, I can't drive the list, I can't eat the list. I think they act as trigger points but no I don't think they are unhealthy.*

*What did you feel/think after you destroyed your last possession? Haven't you been scared of a psychological breakdown?*

*"Break down" is literally breaking things back down into where they came from or it's a psychological breakdown and I think I talked about it at that time as both the happiest two weeks of my life but at the same time you are witnessing your own death. No,no I found it a very joyful experience because we had my record collection playing throughout the whole two weeks, so the last things were my BMW speakers and my record collection. I found the whole experience very liberating. I wasn't anchored to anything, but only for a short while.*

*Did you use the opportunity for a fresh start? Did you do something you felt like you weren't able to do before getting rid of that emotional baggage?*

*I felt at that time that these things were somehow holding me back from fulfilling some other unknown goal, but I didn't know what that was. And I probably still don't. In some respects, the experiment was wasted on me.*

*Is there something you miss, or regret having destroyed?*

*No, because I think I treated everything with the same value. I'm interested in value in some different ways. Obviously my artwork has a different value to family photographs as to a car to a car to some clothes. So I treated everything more or less exactly the same. I mean I destroyed some weird things like holy water from the holy shrine in Knock. Knock is in the west coast of Ireland, and there was an apparition of the virgin mary. I'm not sure how we destroyed the holy water, maybe someone drank it and blessed himself repeatetly.*

*...or somebody watered the plants with it.*

*(Laughs)*

*Did you hurt someones feelings by destroying i.e. gifts, heirlooms?*

*Yeah I'm sure people were upset, but I think the people also saw me as being quite generous at the same time, I was destroying everything. I don't think people could've personalized it too much. If I just destroyed their one single thing, their one single painting then I could imagine it would be very personal but because I destroyed literally everything nobody could really blame me. A painter like Gary Hume actually gave me a painting for one of my birthdays and then when he heard I was going to destroy my worldly belongings he asked for it back and send me an interior painting instead. I couldn't notice the difference*



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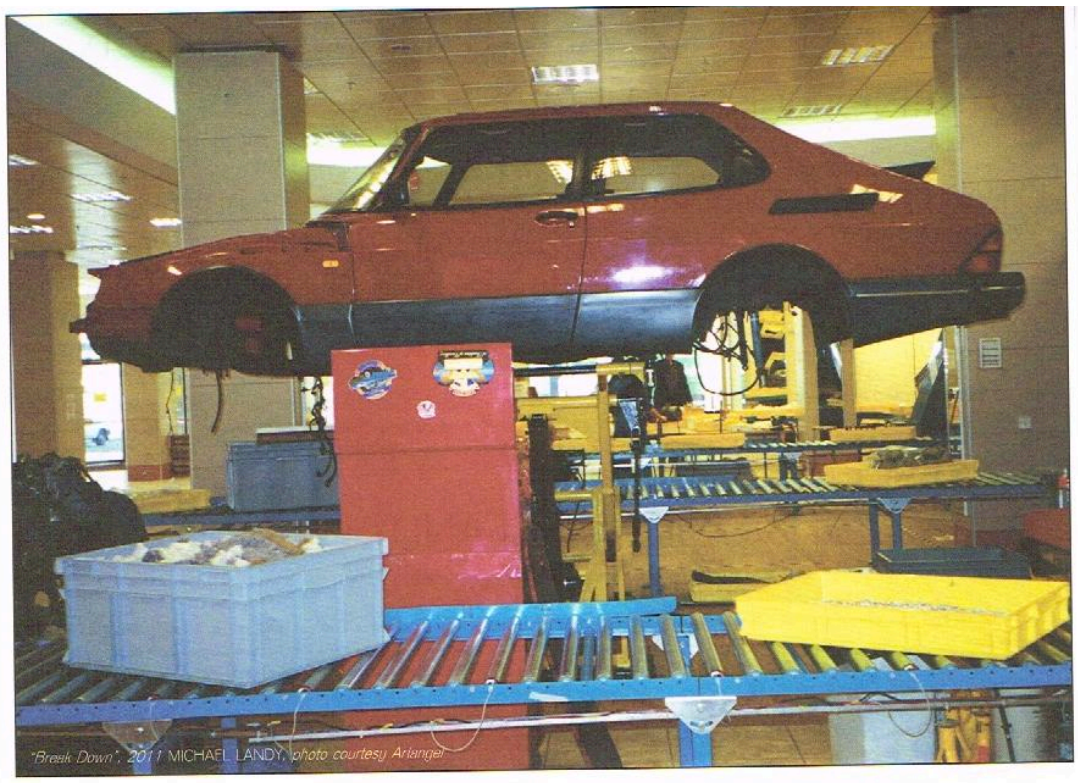


"Break Down", 2011 MICHAEL LANDY, photo courtesy Arlangel

but when he actually came to see "Break Down", he felt guilty that he'd been so mean and gave the original painting back.

"Break Down" and "Art Bin" seem to have a similar character. What are the different intentions?

When I decided to destroy all my belongings in "Break Down", there were obviously artworks of mine and of my friends that were part of these very belongings. Also, there were artworks I couldn't even remember acquiring. So when I did "Break Down" and the art world picked up on the whole destruction of the artworks, it kind of annoyed me a bit, so I think at some point I was going to come back to explore that theme of destruction in art which has been going for years. So when I decided to do "Art Bin" it was more about being a creator of artworks and the idea of celebrating failure. And the idea that you can destroy an artwork in the UK, not being an illegal act. If you deface it or put a smiley face in it or draw a moustache in it or change its color, then that's against the law. But if you are a legal owner of an artwork in this country you have the right to destroy it.

I was going to ask you if it's even legal to destroy artworks...

I think in France, maybe in Germany as well, artists have more moral rights than they do in this country. That was partly the idea, but it was also just celebrating failure really. So I was asking people to bring in failures whether they were known artists or completely unknown artists. And we would all celebrate failure.

There are many people who condemn the thought of the art trade and artists doing more than well with their artwork, and cherish the romantic thought of the starving artist. I feel like "Art Bin" somewhat represents that same mindset. So do you find it wrong to make money out of art that hasn't been commissioned by a client?

Most people get paid for their labor and I see it as my labor, so I got no issue of artists making money out of what they do. People expect other people to be recompensed for what they do.

How is it possible for artists to be treated like superstars in the art scene, and being payed incredible amounts for their works?

That's just due to the market. The market is the market, isn't it? I mean you can say it's obscence but then you can also say it's just the market. My friend Helen says people in the end decide how much you are worth.

But do you think it's fair that there are people who have the power to say "Ok, you are going to be the next big thing in the art world!" and there are other artists who are doing incredible stuff but don't get the recognition they deserve?

Well yeah, it does seem to be unjust, but that's literally just the market. And I actually don't know who decides things like that, probably the same person who made that holy water. (Laughs)

Were there pieces of art or certain artists you decisively wanted for your "Art Bin"?

Yeah, I asked Damien Hirst because someone like Damien is seen as someone with a certain value. People talk about how much it's worth and don't actually talk at all about the value of work as an aspolic thing. They talk about the monetary value of it. So yeah I asked people like Damien, because I liked the idea of people thinking, "If I had that painting that could have changed my life," and instead we threw it in the bin and destroyed it. He was very generous, I don't see him that often anymore. I emailed him and he responded straight-away and liked the idea and gave me a couple of paintings. But you see all the young people kind of salivate during "Art Bin" what they could've done with the painting.

Did you enforce any criteria for the works that got destructed? As i.e.: no unfinished works, they had to be on display somewhere etc.?

No, they could be unfinished. I just talked about it as somehow a failure. It's a hard to set a criteria. But it is just the idea of failure, really, and then to embrace and celebrate failure. So I left it up to them to decide of the art work or the owner of the art work, we didn't have that many owners to throw in art work, but I left it open to them. But somehow they perceived for it to fail on a intellectual level or technical or formal level. I left it up to them to decide. So they were the final arbitrators of what went in the bin.

Thank you for answering all my questions and your time!

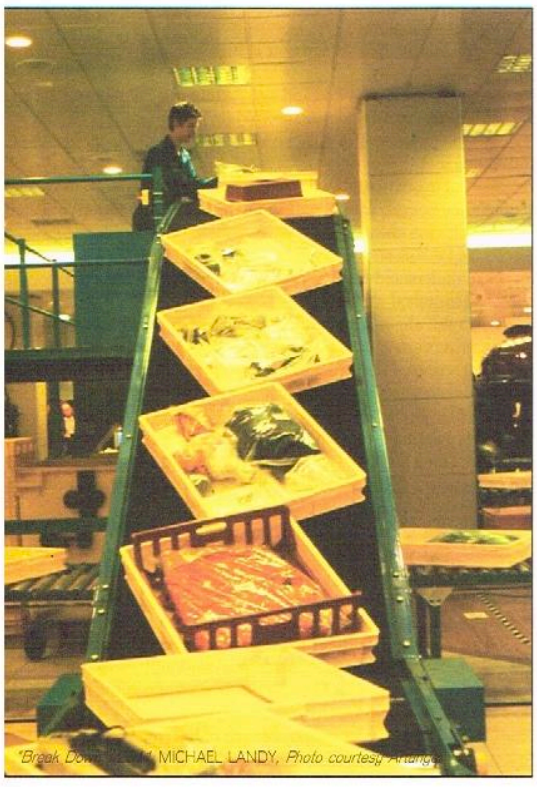
Thanks. I'm doing a new project right now called "Acts of kindness." It's about people submitting their experienced acts of kindness in the london underground, which will also be displayed there on posters.

Sounds very touching, good luck with that!

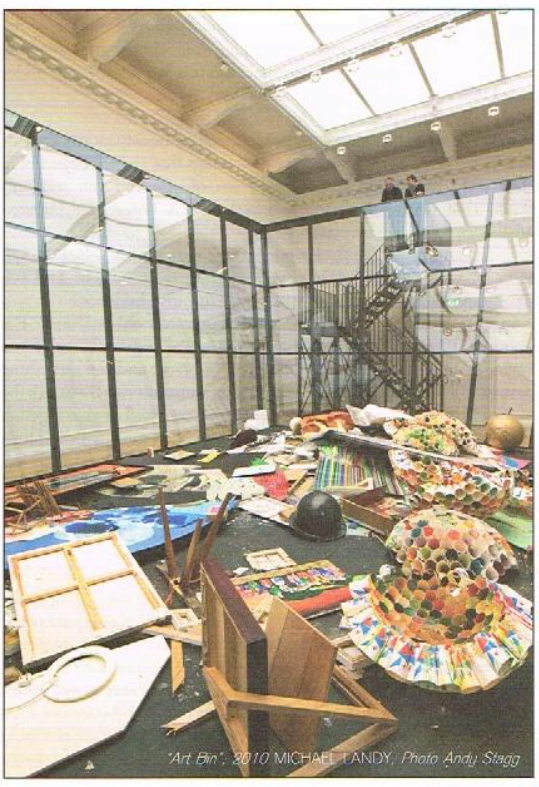
Yes, I think I needed do to something more positive after all that destruction. (Laughs)

You can never do enough for good karma! Have a great day, it was my pleasure!

*'Break Down', 2011* MICHAEL LANDY, *Photo courtesy Artangel*



*'Break Down', 2011* MICHAEL LANDY, *Photo courtesy Artangel*



*'Art Bin', 2010* MICHAEL LANDY, *Photo Andy Stagg*



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