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How we made: Michael Landy and James Lingwood on Break Down

'I don't have 7,227 possessions, as I did then. I am much tidier'

Interviews by **Dale Berning**
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Michael Landy on the Break Down production line, in a former C&A on Oxford Street, London, 2001. Photograph: Steve Forrest/Troika

Michael Landy, artist

I had just sold a piece of work to Tate – an [installation](#) called [Scrapheap Services](#), which was about a fictitious cleaning company that got rid of people who no longer played a useful role in life. For the first time in my life, I was ahead. So I was wondering how I was going to mess it up for myself. Then I thought: "Oh yeah. I'll destroy all my worldly belongings." My original plan had been to create a kind of static tableau. But James [Lingwood, co-director of art producers [Artangel](#)] came up with the idea of doing it as a live event. I'd never really done anything like it before. I just remembered quite bad performance art [at college](#): one person used to walk around in circles for hours in a balaclava with pigs' trotters and plastic dolls hanging off him.

Break Down was the best two weeks of my life; it was exhilarating. We played my records – [Joy Division](#) and [David Bowie](#) – and systematically took things apart. There was general chitchat, as on any assembly line. I'd have loved to carry on, but obviously I ran out of possessions. The last thing to go was [my dad's sheepskin coat](#). People clapped, and then it was over. I don't know what I did. I had a BBC film crew following me around, which was a pain in the bum because I just wanted to disappear.

The first new thing I got, literally five minutes later, was a [Paul Weller](#) CD from some chap in the audience. Later on, I bought an electric shaver to get rid of my ginger beard. Going back into a shop was peculiar, but I wasn't about to become a hermit. I just had to get on with it.

I became much more aware of everything around me. I had been a happy consumer for the first 37 years of my life. But now I don't have 7,227 possessions, as I did then. I am much tidier. I don't like scratches or blemishes. And I know exactly where everything is.

James Lingwood, co-director of Artangel

When Break Down opened in 2001, there was a huge sense of relief that this assembly line we'd conceived was up and running. For obvious reasons, neither Michael nor Artangel had any experience of commissioning a light industrial facility, let alone installing one in a department store on Oxford Street. It was desperately close to the wire; it only started working properly three minutes before the opening.

We structured the duration by estimating how long it would take the team to deconstruct everything, in particular the Saab 900. This wasn't a savage destruction but a contemplative, methodical process. For the car, we needed someone with a real karma about them. Dave Nutt was the only Buddhist Saab expert we could find, and he thought it was a brilliant idea.

People weren't horrified by what Michael was doing, but they were troubled by the destruction of the most personal things and art works. But Michael was very, very serious. He progressively reduced his possessions to zero. It became very emotional.

Gary Hume was so moved by the idea that he felt the small painting of his that Michael had among his things wasn't good enough: he swapped it for a much bigger, better painting. He realised Michael was giving everything to make an art work that, although it would last for fewer than two weeks, would endure.

- Michael Landy's Acts of Kindness is on display at Central line stations, London, throughout 2012.

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