Roux, Caroline. "Interview: artist Michael Landy – a reputation for destruction," *Financial Times*. June 10th, 2016

Reputation for destruction

Retrospective | He was 'Blandy' to the YBAs but embraced by the public.

Michael Landy tells *Caroline Roux* how he made a career out of carnage

Michael Landy's destructive tendencies never lie dormant for long. This is the artist who ridded himself of his possessions in a 2001 public performance called "Break Down", sending them along a conveyor belt and into a crusher in a former department store on Oxford Street, central London. In 2010 he consigned several hundred artworks – his own and others' – to landfill after accumulating them in a huge translucent "Art Bin" in the South London Gallery. That same year, he made a credit-card-shredding machine for the opening of the Louis Vuitton Maison in Bond Street. Next he filled a room at London's National Gallery with kinetic figures of saints who, with all the clunkiness of Victorian automata, attacked their own bodies with the instruments of their martyrdom.

It's no surprise, then, that when Landy was invited to stage a mid-career exhibition at the Tinguely Museum in Basel – home to the work of Swiss artist Jean Tinguely (1925-91), another creator of self-destructive machines – his initial impulse was to build a device that would rampage through its galleries knocking down walls. "They said 'no'," Landy says with a mild smile.

Left to right: Michael Landy in front of 'Breaking News' (2015) at the Tinguely Museum; 'Art Bin' at the South London Gallery in 2010, before its content was consigned to landfill — Roland Tännler/AFP

When I visit the 53-year-old artist in his east London studio, an alternative idea is taking shape. We stare into an intricate model of the exhibition. Landy, who works without assistants, has laboured over it himself. There are tiny replicas of the portraits he made of his family in 2008, and drawings of his own testicular cancer scars as well as of his father's leg bypass. There are stepped market stalls covered in AstroTurf – a 1990 work called "Market" – dotted through the gallery like little green hills. A figure of Saint Stephen (after the Carlo Crivelli painting of 1476) stands waiting to have tiny balls thrown at him. And in the middle the credit-card-crunching machine looks ready to explode.

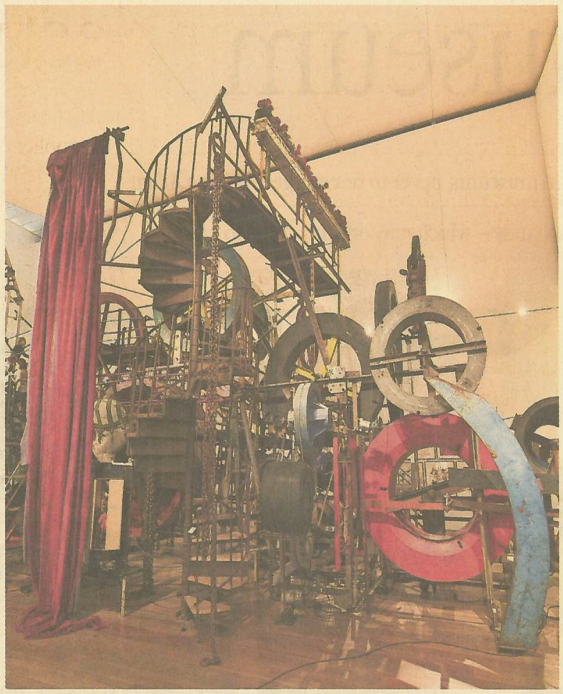
There are also remnants of one of Tinguely's own kinetic sculptures. "This is the 'Suicide Carriage'," says Landy pointing to a contraption made of wheels and other found parts. The work formed part of "Homage to New York", a major piece created for MoMA in 1960. "It was supposed to drown itself in the pond in the MoMA garden, but because he put a second-hand motor in it, it never worked, so it ended up in the collection instead."

Apart from destruction, Landy is much taken with the idea of failure. "Art Bin" was about the discarded work and ideas that make up an artist's career. "The public only sees the bits that survive," he says. Damien Hirst came along and threw in a skull painting. "I was rather touched by that," says Landy.

Landy's artistic career began at school with an E grade in Art at A-level and a place at college in Loughborough studying textiles. "I liked repetitive patterns and found objects," he says. In 1985 he transferred to study Fine Art at London's Goldsmiths College, where the group that would become known as the YBAs was beginning to form. It was there that his work gained momentum.

Not that he was an obvious contender: classmates called him Blandy. "[The artist] Anya Gallaccio came up with that name, because I really didn't speak much," he says. Damien Hirst used him as a driver. "I had a Beetle. So when Damien put on *Freeze* [the exhibition that launched the YBAs in 1988] it was me ferrying everything around." In *Freeze*, Landy showed blue tarpaulins, arranged on the walls in three-dimensional folds, like fabric in a Renaissance painting. "What I liked was that I could make them quickly and then disappear," he says.

But by the time of "Break Down" a decade later, the reticent artist had placed himself firmly at the centre of his work, dismantling of his own life. "It was like witnessing my own death. But it meant I could go on to do anything after that," he says. "I destroyed my own underpants in public. Not Blandy any more."



"Break Down" gave him a tabloid-friendly profile that amused rather than provoked, unlike some of his YBA peers. Indeed the best measure of Landy's success is the way his work engages the public. In 2009 he was invited to show at Tate Liverpool and created an exhibition called *Joyous Machines*, incorporating his own and Tinguely's work. The show resulted in his invitation to Basel.

Landy accepted a two-year residency at the National Gallery in 2010, lured by "the idea that I'd be able to wander around on my own at any time of day or night, like Lucian Freud who used to turn up pissed and park his Bentley out front whenever he fancied," says Landy. "But my reputation must have gone before me. I wasn't allowed anywhere without a guard watching me. I think they were worried I might want to spear a painting."

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His initial attraction was to Velázquez's "Rokeby Venus", the painting slashed by a suffragette in 1914.

Left to right: Jean Tinguely's 'Grosse Méta-Maxi-Maxi-Utopia' (1987) at the Tinguely Museum; Tinguely pictured with his sculpture 'Ballet des pauvres' in 1961 — Alamy, Imagno/Hulton Archive

"I wanted to see the black-and-white X-rays they'd made of the damage, but it was like talking to the police," he says. "They kept saying: 'Why do you want to see them?' They were so suspicious."

So he settled on the saints instead, creating noisy, life-size representations of those he found in the gallery's paintings. Landy, while not saintly, certainly shares some of their characteristics: a masochistic propensity to take things to extremes, coupled with a deep integrity. His work is ironic, but never cynical.

At the centre of the Basel exhibition there is a void. Landy's wish had been to recreate Tinguely's self-destructing assemblage "Homage to New York". (The piece had to be dealt with by the city's fire department when its intentional conflagration went out of control. 'Suicide Carriage' survived because it had already detached itself from the machine and was heading for the pond when its engine packed in).

Landy has researched the work so forensically he could remake it tomorrow, but Tinguley's granddaughter will not give her permission. Instead, a lovingly made drawing will hang in the show. As a failure to recreate a failure, it could well be, for Landy, the apotheosis of achievement.

'Michael Landy: Out of Order', Tinguely Museum, Basel, to September 25, tinguely.ch; drawings by Michael Landy at Thomas Dane, Art Basel, June 16-19