

# Dispossessed

‘Consumerism has permeated all kinds of different areas, especially in the last twenty years, from politics to religion, sport, all areas of culture’, British artist Michael Landy said in the run-up to his two-week project, *Break Down* 2001. Staged in a recently-closed department store in Oxford Street, London’s busiest shopping area, his installation, he said, aimed to ask, ‘what is it that makes consumerism the strongest ideology of our time?’

Landy spent three years developing and planning *Break Down*. At its core, the work – a systematic disintegration and disposal of everything he owned – reversed the usual processes of making things, drawing attention to the often overlooked business of producing components for consumer items. In *Break Down* complex items were dismantled, and everything he owned was sorted and then shredded or granulated.

Loss is typically associated with sadness, but Landy willingly embraced the destruction of his ‘self-defining belongings’ in the making of this project. At the end, he was left with little more than the clothes he was wearing – and some debts. (Initially, he had planned to sell granulated items as new artworks to help finance the project, but he came to feel that the logic of the project, and his own feelings about consumerism, dictated that there should be no surviving products or reminders of his past.) During the fortnight of its staging, *Break Down* attracted over 50,000 curious visitors from among the shoppers on Oxford Street and is now known only through photographs and some documentary footage.

Landy became famous through, but it was not his first work to focus on the mechanisms of consumerism and capitalism. In 1992, during a recession in the UK economy, he staged a mock closing down sale in his art dealer’s gallery. Shopping trolleys, filled with junk found on the streets, crowded the floor; signs advertised a ‘meltdown madness sale’ at ‘rock bottom prices’; and a continuous voice-over by Landy promised ‘bargains, bargains, bargains!’ At a time when many shops were closing and had similar signs in their windows, Landy’s *Closing Down Sale* drew attention to the obvious, but rarely discussed, parallels between an art gallery and other commercial enterprises. The garish signs pointedly suggested that art, despite its traditional claims to represent a disinterested and autonomous sphere of creativity and thought, was similar to any other type of saleable product within the current economic system. Signs made for this project that Landy had kept were later destroyed in *Break Down*.

In planning his project, Landy researched the literature on anti-consumerism, material reclamation, recycling and sustainability. Initially, he was going to call the work ‘Michael Landy’s Lifestyle’, seeing it as an attack on the idea of ‘lifestyle’ – which,

he believed, was purveyed by corporate enterprises as a marketing ploy and accepted with little question by most consumers, who uncritically identified with the particular brands and items they bought. Over time, however, the project came to focus also on the wastefulness involved in the making of consumer goods and the fact that they were not being designed in ways that made it easy to recycle their constituent parts. In 1999 Landy created *The Consuming Paradox*, a collage over two metres wide made with books and articles that had influenced him and related images. Recognising parallels with the work of Gustav Metzger, the pioneer of auto-destructive art, Landy included the latter's 1996 book *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* at the left of the collage.

Landy conceived of *Break Down* as a project that would mimic the processes involved in factory production. His approach was highly organised, dispassionate and even bureaucratic. With a friend he began to create a catalogue of all his belongings, with short descriptions and identifying numbers and letter coding. A stood for artworks, C for clothing, E for electrical, L for leisure, and so forth. Everything – down to his cold medication and individual photographs – was itemised. Landy thought about including only the consumer goods that he owned, but finally felt that everything, including the most personal mementos and even artworks by other artists in his possession, had to go for the project to be successful. He wanted to reject – and be seen to reject – consumerism and an attendant attachment to objects, even though this would leave him needing to purchase certain items again after the project's end. When *Break Down* was finished, the list of 7,227 items was published as a public record.

Landy secured the empty premises of a recently closed major department store on Oxford Street for the duration of *Break Down*. Curiously, the site had the same sort of signs advertising 'Everything Must Go', as he had used in *Closing Down Sale* a decade before. He wanted a central location in the heart of a shopping area to heighten the impact of the orderly destruction of his worldly possessions upon any casual shoppers and passers-by drawn into the store to see what was happening. Under the gaze of shoppers, his possessions, circulating on the project's conveyor belts, became similar to impersonal goods found in shop displays. Four bays focused on different types of work: general dismantling; shredding and granulating; motor vehicle dismantling; and electrical and reading material dismantling. Landy chose all the equipment used in the project, and also designed the uniforms worn by the team. He and twelve assistants worked for two weeks, methodically sorting and dismantling his possessions into their constituents. Landy stood on a raised platform from which he could oversee the whole process.

Landy destroyed not only consumer goods but also items that many would find hard to live without, including his credit cards, passport and birth certificate. He said he never had doubts about destroying such objects: harder, and more significant to him, was his archive of his own art and personal mementos. Everything, though, was included in the project. The destruction of such personal items in the name of making art struck a chord with the public. Landy commented:

*Most people could just about give up the flat screen television and the DVD and the digital camera, but when it came to the love letters and the photographs, that was more difficult ... that's what drew people in really, that really hit people in the bottom of their stomach.*

The last object to be destroyed was a sheepskin coat that had belonged to Landy's father.

*I think the sheepskin coat was there on the conveyor belt from the first day and it just kept travelling round and round. A few of the things I had more attachment to I destroyed last ... The sheepskin coat was something that my Mum had bought for my Dad, but then he had a mining accident and couldn't wear it any more, so it was stored away in a cupboard. Over those two weeks the coat became my Dad in a way. My Dad is still alive but somehow it became him. It was the last object that we destroyed from all the 7,227. Just before that we'd destroyed my BMW speakers, my record collection – so for the first time it was quiet, sombre – though there were thousands of people in the store that last day. All that was left was my Dad's sheepskin coat ... One the operatives, Barry, shredded it and then there was nothing left.*

Landy's project aroused great interest among the public, who were intrigued, or appalled, but not, as he had imagined, angered, by his destruction of his possessions. For his part, he learned to change his ways and acquire and retain less, but because it had been such an extreme project he found it difficult to move forward artistically. It took him a year or so before he went back to making art, and when he did, he began with a series of simple drawings of weeds, plants that can survive on almost nothing.

Nearly a decade later, Landy returned to the theme of getting rid of things – this time focusing specifically on art – with *Art Bin*. In January 2010 he constructed a huge container inside the South London Gallery and for six weeks people could climb to the platform at the edge of the bin and throw in their own artworks that they considered failures. Many pieces broke with the impact of their fall. Fellow artists, including Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst and Gillian Wearing, contributed works, as did art students (some disposed of their entire degree show) and members of the public. As the container filled up, it became, in Landy's words, a 'monument to creative failure', though critics questioned whether some used the opportunity to promote their own works through the attendant publicity rather than as a cathartic letting-go of failed works. Positioned within a gallery, the project was also intended to point to the capacity of art institutions to make and break artists' careers, and to ask who has the power to apportion value to art. As with *Break Down*, the items in the bin were subsequently sent to landfill, the wishes of the creator taking precedence over any considerations of the marketability or potential use of the discarded artworks.

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