

**‘A Production Line of Destruction’: Parts of a Discussion between Michael Landy and Julian Stallabrass**



JS: Michael, just start by telling us something about this extraordinary project, *Breakdown*.

ML: The basic idea is to destroy every possession I own in a two-week performance. The work is based on a material reclamation facility, in which materials that have value are reclaimed from the waste chain. Conveyor belts carry the material and people sort them. For instance, they sort through clothing that Oxfam don't want—and it's a skilled job—identifying and sifting out the various fabrics. Other facilities use different filtering systems, such as X-rays to sort plastics automatically.

*Breakdown* is a bit like a Scalextric version with all my possessions circulating on conveyor belts awaiting destruction. I'm building an audit of my life. Things that have been classified into different categories—for instance, leisure, clothing, reading—are numbered, weighed and detailed on an inventory. As the disassembly and destruction process begins, each object will be logged in. *Breakdown* draws on reclamation techniques (identifying, sorting and separating) but I'm not reclaiming or recycling anything.

JS: What will go on the conveyor belt?

ML: Through the fourteen days of the event, there will be things displayed on the conveyor belt which are readily identifiable but also things that have been broken down into parts or pieces, and then granulated material which is just fine powder. The conveyor belt is like a plinth in a way, it—er—conveys what's going on.

JS: So it's not functional, like one on a production line?

ML: Not exactly but I like the idea that the production process is being reversed here as consumer items are stripped back to their component parts, and the conveyor says something about that.

It's not unlike surgery, finding out what goes on inside. Even as a child, I liked to dismantle things. I remember my uncle used to buy me really expensive toys, though I had no idea that they were expensive, and I used to take them apart, quite often without being able to put them back together again. I was inquisitive about the mechanism, being able to see what was inside.

JS: You sound like my brother. He was infuriating in that way, taking my toys apart or breaking them just to see how they worked or how much strain they would bear.

ML: What did he go on to do?

JS: Agricultural engineering.

ML: Ah right, well my uncle was in the motor trade, and my family always thought I going to become a mechanic or something like that. It wasn't on really: I'm good at taking things apart but not good at constructing them.

JS: Why are you looking for a shop front in which to show this work?

ML: I'm part of that generation that was entrepreneurial and didn't look to the established art institutions for opportunities. Damien was great at organising spaces and sponsorship and we just learned to do things for ourselves. We made a show called *Freeze...*

JS: It's become quite well known...

ML: We showed in 'underground' spaces such as Building One which gave the work a different edge, and a lot of people came to see those shows. This is something I continue to do: last year I had a show in Fashion Street, just opened the doors and people came along. Being able to do things like that for yourself, without having a commercial gallery acting as an arbiter between you and the public, is something I find quite liberating in itself.

JS: Those warehouse shows, and the Fashion Street show, attracted a particular group of people, though, most of whom knew quite a bit about art, or just knew the artists...

ML: Yes, word of mouth was important to the success of those shows.

JS: And the shop front will be quite different because you'll have a big crowd of passing consumers who will happen to see what you are doing.

ML: Yes, I am hoping for a big plate-glass window so that the process of the sorting, disassembling and destruction of the objects will be on show. I want the venue to be as central as possible and in a shopping street, close to the big chain stores, so that all sorts of people can drop in. It's great that as people are out shopping, they will get the chance to look at this work which is about the act of consumption. I also like the idea that they will see objects they recognise, maybe something they've just bought, that they have in their carrier bags.

JS: Do you think people will nick things?

ML: Maybe, yes. It'll be interesting to see what they nick—will it be my Nintendo or my art? I can see how they'll justify it to themselves, too: 'he doesn't want it any longer!'

JS: We can see here on your kitchen wall the component units of a cassette radio player you've taken to bits, bagged up and classified. How many pieces are there?

ML: 243. I decided to sit down and take this thing apart, which took about ten days. For *Breakdown*, there'll be lots of people doing this. It's a production line of destruction which ends in the granulation of all the components. You'll be left with powdered television sets, sofas and clothing.

JS: You're also left with the database. That process of classification is interesting because of the way databases are increasingly used by marketers to group and characterise people, with techniques of data-mining gathering information about people browsing the Web, making calls or paying for things with credit cards. You're doing that for yourself.

ML: Yeah, I'm doing that work for them. At the end of it all, I'll be left with nothing. For a moment perhaps escaping consumerism, but also at the same moment being the perfect person to sell to!

JS: Data-mining is an attempt to classify you, given your buying and other habits. It is effective because most people (I'd include myself in this, of course) do construct their identities through buying and owning, at least to a degree. Is the disposal of your possessions a way of taking apart your identity?

ML: In a sense. The inventory is a material history of my life. All that's left at the end of the process will be my memory. The audit will be a record of a mechanical kind, though there will be a field to record sentimental attachments.

JS: Will it be only consumer objects that you destroy, or will there be more personal items, like letters, photographs...

ML: I started out thinking about consumer objects but in the end found it very hard to draw the line between those objects and my other possessions, so in the end I decided to destroy everything, including art works, diaries, all kinds of things that I didn't exactly buy.

JS: I remember a technophile theorist—who was it? maybe Ray Kurzweil—debating a technophobe, and saying 'will you allow me to remove every vestige of technology from your body?' The technophobe agreed, so they start with his wristwatch—fine, you'd expect that. But then moved on to his clothes, threatened his fillings and so on. It wasn't long before the technophobe decided to draw a halt to the proceedings. Will you end this performance naked?

ML: No. There's a clause in my contract which says I don't do naked! I'll be left with the bare essentials.

JS: This project reminds me of some of the writing about potlatch and economies in which gifts play an important part. The disposal of goods, sometimes very valuable goods, can be central to a society: in Chichén-Itzá, the great Mayan city, there is a vast, very steep-sided pit, with deep water, into which valuables, and sometimes children, were thrown as sacrifices (archaeologists have fished the treasures out). That disposal can also be a form of conspicuous consumption: does that have a resonance for you?

ML: Yeah, this is a kind of luxury in one respect. I don't want the work to be seen as purely negative. In a sense, it's the ultimate consumer choice.

JS: Is *Breakdown* about the transience of consumer goods?

ML: Yes, a compulsory obsolescence hangs about consumer objects. Companies don't want their goods to last long and that determines what materials they use. People are also generally less able to understand how things work, because of computerisation, let alone repair them themselves.

JS: There's a parallel between that continuing acceleration of objects going out of use—and 'compulsory obsolescence' is a very good term for it—as companies keep on renewing an ever greater proportion of their products each year, and something else that your work has looked at before: the obsolescence of people. Workers' skills date as fast as the objects they use, and if they become unable or unwilling to keep running on the treadmill, swift obsolescence awaits them.

In a book that isn't as well known as it should be, Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory*, he looks at the way in which the value of objects falls throughout their usual lifespan until it approaches nothing. Then, for the few that survive that stage, value may rise again as they become seen as antiques. The cycles, both for the ageing of consumer objects and for their rehabilitation as curios seem to be accelerating. Your work takes that acceleration as its theme by making the process very fast and very visible.

ML: Yeah, it's a fast track from purchase to disposal. And along the way I'm reversing the process of these objects' construction, stripping them down to their component parts. That, I hope, is an interesting thing for shoppers to see.

JS: When I was writing a book called *Gargantua* a few years back, I got interested in the way objects changed over the time people owned them. They start out slick and pristine with the labour that went into them well concealed but, as time goes on, the articulation of their parts becomes more evident, and the way in which they are used begins to mark their surfaces...

ML: And their insides! I've got a Saab enthusiast taking my car apart. When I was driving him around, he kept criticising my driving habits. He reckons he'll be able to tell how much I've been abusing the car from the state of the dismantled gearbox.

JS: Objects can take on personalities as they are used. What you are planning is a very extreme and courageous work: you are destroying letters, mementos, photographs, very personal things...

ML: As with an earlier work I did, *Closing Down Sale*, where there was this mantra—'Everything Must Go'—here, everything really will go, it will be granulated. Some of the

process will be quite violent—the taking apart of my car, for instance, or of things made from just one material that won't need dismantling but smashing.

There are things that have strong personal associations for me, and it's hard to say what I will feel about parting with them until I do it. There is a brown sheepskin coat of my Dad's, for instance, which I've had for a long time. My Mum bought it for him, and it took a long time for her to finish paying for it in instalments. Shortly after they got it, though, he was badly injured in an accident at work, and after that the coat was too heavy for him to wear. As a boy of ten or eleven, I was allowed to wear it sometimes, and it swamped me, legs sticking out of the bottom like a couple of twigs. Even as a teenager, it felt much too large. I fill it now though. Destroying that will feel a bit like disposing of my Dad.

JS: Have you talked much to your friends or your parents about this work?

ML: I talked to my Dad about it. He said, 'Why do you want to do that?' It's a really basic question but it totally flummoxed me at the time.

JS: Parents are good at asking questions like that.

ML: I found this old letter from the BBC. Do you remember *Take Hart*?

JS: The art programme for kids with Tony Hart.

ML: It was a letter from the 70s. I had one of my scraper-boards sent off from school to *Take Hart*, and they would show their gallery of kids' contributions as they played the theme tune. I remember watching it one time when they did a close-up of mine! So there are lots of things like that letter which will go. It's hard to part with some of those things.

JS: The work is brave in another way, because not only will you be destroying your possessions but also for a time putting them on display.

ML: Well, the public won't get to handle these things, just see them from a distance. They won't be able to read letters or books or anything like that.

JS: So there's a limit to your personal exposure.

ML: Yeah, and I'm quite relieved about that. This work isn't about personal revelation, and it's not autobiographical. In a way, I'm just an example of a consumer. Even so, I guess I do feel embarrassed about some of the things I own, that they are pretty old or worn out, very far from the latest model. And that feeling is part of what the work is about, since it is about what other people might think of me, given their values.

JS: Something that people may find surprising is that you are counting your art works among your possessions, so they will be ground to dust too. Are there many of them?

ML: [pauses] There's a number. I'd better be careful what I say here. I don't want to own up to being too much of a commercial failure... They mean something different for me than for others, perhaps. Art works are given a value but not by the artist, it comes from outside.

Should I keep them for posterity? There's a range of work from student things done at Goldsmiths and through ten or eleven years of being an artist. That I can do this

says something about the character of my work, though: I tend to get involved in very long projects—I've been working on *Breakdown* for two years—at the end of which there is no necessary destination for the stuff which they generated. It just becomes stuff you move from A to B. After a while, you lose sense of what that stuff meant.

JS: Damien says in one of his interviews that he's worried about adding more stuff to the world...

ML: Well, he should be! He's just had a show at Gagosian which took up a whole city block.

JS: Yeah, it doesn't seem to worry him that much, in the end. But it was an interesting thing to say, and it's interesting to think about art as just stuff. I like the way you are going to treat your art as another set of consumer objects, art being the most useless of consumer objects.

There's a way in which this project of taking consumer objects apart could be read, especially since it's a performative work requiring a great deal of labour, as an exemplary piece of Marxism. You are using labour to highlight the production process, bringing back to attention the work that went into making the item, and so stripping away the veneer of commodity fetishism. Is that a reading you find sympathetic?

ML: Well, I'm not too sure. Less and less labour goes into commodities these days. I've looked into lifespan analysis of commodities. The materials and energy required to make something, say a washing machine, are analysed, including transport, the use, repair and disposal of it.

JS: Looking at your disassembled cassette player, it speaks to me of the labour that went into making it, labour which is hidden from us in a number of ways, often by being distanced geographically—it was probably assembled for a multinational company by poorly paid workers in an East Asian country.

ML: *Breakdown* is critical of consumerism but at the same time it does not stand outside it. You can't stand outside it.

JS: You cannot but be implicated in consumerism just by living in this society. Perhaps there are alternatives, though. For a long time there have been people interested in 'intermediate technology', particularly as a way of offering products to people living in developing countries. A celebrated recent example is the clockwork radio, which is obviously good for those who can't continually spend money on batteries, or don't have access to a reliable power supply.

ML: At the same time, though, Western consumers bought those radios. It's a way of consumerism bringing into itself things that seem to stand outside it. Consumerism with green-tinted sunglasses—it's so adaptable. The only way around it is not to buy anything at all, and that's as difficult as not breathing. Consumerism has permeated all kinds of different areas, especially in the last twenty years, from politics to religion, sport, all areas of culture.

JS: Some people will read this work as an attack on consumerism, though.

ML: People will read it like that, and—well—it is an attack. But it's an inverted attack because it's an assault on me. It's trying to ask: what is it that makes consumerism the strongest ideology of our time?

JS: Artists sometimes set out to produce works that resist being commodities. You've done that in the past, and you are certainly doing it here. It's hard to think of a work more resistant, the act of disintegration being reminiscent of some of Gustav Metzger's 'auto-destructive' works.

ML: Well, there may be anomalies in *Breakdown* and people may be able to find holes for commodification. As far as possible, though, it will be a live event and nothing will be left at the end of it all. With most of my other projects, because of finances, there has had to be a saleable end-result.

JS: At the end you will have powdered consumer goods. What will you do with the powder?

ML: I'd like to see it buried within or beneath a shopping precinct somewhere. It'll go in the ground in a container, maybe with a plaque saying what it is, like a time-capsule.

JS: 'The property of Michael Landy lies here'? What about the database, have you got any plans for that?

ML: I'd like it to go on the Web, and to be as accessible as possible. I've got 4,500 objects, ranging from a television to things you can't give a name to, things you find at the bottom of a drawer that have fallen off something else and you can't remember what.

JS: It's strange to hear you say I own 4,500 objects. It's absolutely not the way we normally think about our possessions. The evening out process you are engaging in has curious implications.

ML: Consumerism divides people. Obviously you are often judged by what and how much you consume. Even for the very rich, there never seems to be an end-point. Acquiring one thing leads only to the desire to acquire something else. It promises fulfilment but never grants it. In a world that appears unstable and uncertain, consumerism offers people, at the point of consumption, a stability.

JS: It does offer people a secure social role for as long as you are actually buying. Consumerism is, of course, a very powerful force. I think you're right that there's no pure position from which you can stand back and look at this. There does though seem to be a fundamental opposition of interest between accelerated consumerism and environmental sustainability. Throughout the 1990s, but coming to prominence in the media over the last couple of years, new political movements have emerged that are anti-consumption, anti-corporate or even anti-capitalist. There were the demonstrations in Seattle, obviously, but also movements like Adbusters, who subvert or destroy adverts, and a global 'Buy Nothing' day is coming up soon. Are these movements you feel sympathetic with?

ML: I do have some sympathy with them, yes. Products should last longer and we should repair things more often than we do. Part of what this work is about is sustainability. As consumerism grows and accelerates, it does come up against the material limits of what

this planet can sustain. That will force people to confront their habits and the reasons for them, if it's not already too late.

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