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Laster, Paul. "Michael Landy, An Artist Famous For Destruction, Turns His Eye To Trump."  
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# GARAGE



Seeing red: Installation view of *Michael Landy: Breaking News – New York* at Sperone Westwater, November 3–December 16, 2017. Photography by Robert Vinas Jr., 2017. Courtesy the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

*British artist Michael Landy, notorious for destroying all his own possessions in public for 2001's performance installation "Break Down," takes on the president, Brexit, and the culture of protest.*

British artist Michael Landy, who made headlines in 2001 when he publicly destroyed all of his belongings—some 7,227 items, including his car, his passport, and hundreds of artworks by himself and others—has returned to New York for a new solo show at Sperone Westwater that mines those same tabloids, as well as the internet, for signs and slogans of protest.

**GARAGE: What was your motivation for making the initial Breaking News installation, which you presented at your London studio in 2015?**

I wanted to get to know my past and present through the media. I remember a Margaret Thatcher sign that read "Let the rich get richer" from around the time I was finishing school in the late 1970s. My country was changing from a manufacturing base to become more of a service economy, and industries were being privatized or shut down. I come from a working-class background and wanted to take a look at my past and contextualize it with more recent times.

**How as the project evolved in its various manifestations in Munich, Basel, Athens, Toronto, and now New York?**

Michael Landy: That would be to say that one thing follows another and they don't really; instead, they overlap. There are no clear boundaries. I've been working on this body of work for eight or nine months,

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but I was working on different versions in Greece and Canada. I'd like to say that I was inspired to use red and white from the exit and fire signs in the gallery—because there are a lot of them—but I used red and white because they're meant to be warning signs. It unites the disparate kind of content that I use. I've got Colonel Sanders in the show, just because he's red and white!

**What types of information and imagery have gone into the making of these immersive installations?**

I've used tabloid newspaper cuttings from the past and present stuff from the Internet, as well as art-historical references, like Dubuffet. There are warning signs, people being asphyxiated, people forlorn, people falling and lots of paranoid, slightly out-on-the-edge characters. I'm a Royal Academician and when an RA dies—there are only about 70—you get a letter stating that the honorable so-and-so died, and then we have an election to choose a new member. I made a red-and-white piece of one of the letters, but I pretended that I was dead because the meetings are so tedious. This is the end of the series because the Windsor & Newton cadmium red medium that I use has been discontinued.



Installation view of *Michael Landy: Breaking News – New York* at Sperone Westwater, 2017. Photography by Robert Vinas Jr., 2017. Courtesy the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

**How are the works actually made?**

When I was a child I used to draw on scratchboards, and the first work I ever exhibited was shown on the BBC television show *Vision On*. I'd submitted one of my drawings and it was shown on air. They discarded the drawing and sent me some book tokens, which I later destroyed in *Break Down*. When I first started the series I used fragments of paper, which I covered with two layers of color before scratching out the drawing. But for this show I used larger sheets of paper and sometimes worked wet-on-wet, so that it would be more expressive, more anxious.

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**What thoughts help shape the accumulation and display of the individual works?**

I start with a plan. Whether I stick to it is another thing. Once I get stuff on the wall things get moved around. There's imagery and text so it's a matter of finding the right place to put it.

**Are you mapping the media?**

I'm mapping certain aspects of it. In the end I edit things. Sometimes it's thought through and at other times it's random. But I'm not trying to create any particular story be too literal about it.



Installation view of *Michael Landy: Breaking News – New York* at Sperone Westwater, 2017. Photography by Robert Vinas Jr., 2017. Courtesy the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

**In Athens and Toronto the public submitted imagery that was then transformed into drawings by a team of workers. Did you do the same thing here?**

No, I found all of the content myself, which is how the whole project originated in London. The events in Athens and Toronto were live events. The one in Athens went on for four months and I told the workers they had to become human copy machines while drawing exactly like me. In Toronto, the online submission process is ongoing for six months [the show is on view at the Power Plant through May 13, 2018] and then things get drawn and added to the “wall of protest,” which was inspired by Donald Trump campaigning on the slogan “Build a wall, and make Mexico pay for it.”

**Does the political nature of the work change in relationship to the city or country?**

Yes it does, because I kind of blow in and can never really have more than surface understanding of the national politics in question. I'm viewing it as an outsider. My job is to refamiliarize people with the familiar—things that you don't look at anymore. But we voted for Brexit, which has parallels to the election of Trump—the connection of not really knowing your country anymore. London is a bit of a bubble, but

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the rest of the country voted to leave the EU. It was basically a protest vote, coming forty years after shutting down the mining and manufacturing industries.

**Since the work in the New York show was made after Trump's election, is the political protest more pointed?**

Yes, I think it is. I've become much more aware of how it's brought people together—not necessarily under one umbrella, but people know who the enemy is.



Michael Landy at Sperone Westwater, November 3, 2017. Photo © Paul Laster

**Have you also mixed in cultural and humorous elements, as you have in the past?**

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Yes, there's always humor. I'm British, so it's really unavoidable! For example, there's one placard that reads, "This free market is really expensive."

**Are you taking on Brexit, as well?**

I've taken on Brexit before. I've always been interested in what value we give to things, whether it's a weed or a human being. I did a project called Acts of Kindness, which took place on the tube. I asked people to send in their everyday acts of kindness—simple little things, like a guy making an origami horse and dropping in the lap of a distressed woman as he exits the train. That's what I was trying to honor.

**The third floor of the gallery revisits your famous 2001 project Break Down, in which you and a team of workers publicly destroyed all of your belongings over a two-week period. How does this project still resonate with you?**

It was an artwork, but some people thought it was a way of life or a lifestyle option. For me it was the two-week experience that I had with the people that actually came to see it. That's the only takeaway. People arrived with their own thoughts and feelings about possessions and self and it was the dialogue that interested me. My mom and dad worked hard to acquire stuff. We live in a consumer society. My goal was to take everything apart—something that I liked to do as a child—and take it back to its material state in order to understand where we are, what motivates us to consume so much. In our society the more stuff you have the more successful you are. I did it in an old department store on Oxford Street, where people come to consume.

**The typed inventory list on the gallery walls looks almost like a memorial site with the names of the lost. Do you miss any particular things that you sacrificed for the project?**

No, I said if I could destroy my artist archive I could destroy anything. I itemized things and then forensically named and destroyed them. We played my record collection during the action and then chopped them up. It was like witnessing my own death. It was the happiest two weeks of my life. I saw people who would have only come out if I were dead, so it was a bit of a memorial.

*Michael Landy, Breaking News - New York, is on view at Sperone Westwater, New York, through December 16.*