

Factory-esque: Temporalities of Critique in Michael Landy's Breakdown

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In 2001, British artist Michael Landy received a Times/Artangel commission to produce the performance-installation *Breakdown*, for which he destroyed each of his 7,227 personal belongings. After inventorying all of his possessions – from family heirlooms to electrical equipment, socks and artworks – Landy constructed a complex conveyor belt setup reminiscent of a factory assembly line, at a recently vacated C&A department store in London's busy shopping district on Oxford street.¹ Working with a team of twelve uniformed volunteers, Landy destroyed all of his worldly possessions over a two-week period – weighing, dismantling, shredding and pulverizing the objects, then displaying the granules in bins circulating on conveyor belts and in sacks displayed at the front of the space. All the while, a full list of the objects was displayed in large format on the back wall.² At the end of the piece, the pulverized bits were taken to “Landyfill,” as the artist calls it – and Landy resumed his life again, slowly navigating his way back into the practices of ownership which so pervasively condition relationships to objects in capitalism.³

Aside from attracting a staggering 45,000 visitors, this work generated many written accounts, interviews, photographs, documentaries, articles and reviews; its perceived spectacular and critical extremity made it suitable fodder for both popular media and academic publication.⁴ But what exactly does “critical” mean in relation to this work and the writings it provoked? While many reviews assumed *Breakdown* to be either a “successful” or a “failed” critique of capital, very few considered or contextualized this assumption. While I believe that *Breakdown* has some critical potential, I would like to offer a different framing of that potential: that its importance is in its demonstration of a process through which perceived critical positions open onto what I call “critical

duration” – the qualitative shifting, and even eventual break down, of perceived critical positions over a long period of reflection on the work. *Breakdown*’s initial, ostensibly clear and straightforward critical position evaporates, leaving us to reflect on the continual shifts of these positions.

Critical duration cannot be construed as an intrinsic property of an artwork; it is, rather, framed as an encounter between the work and a (quasi-individual) consciousness (in this case, my own perspective on *Breakdown* – which is also an orchestration of, and a reflection on, many others’ insights). This critical-durational encounter is mobilized by the splits Landy’s work opens between artwork and interpretation, performance and identification. In *Time and Free Will* (1889), Henri Bergson describes “pure duration” as “the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states.”⁵ Contrasted with abstracted, quantified conceptions of clock time, duration is a “succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another... pure heterogeneity.”⁶ In an era of increasingly empiricist scientific methods, Bergson’s pure duration stood in stark opposition to the quantifiable, creating an ontological space for freedom. However knowable our actions might appear to be when they are the objects of scientific study, empirical analysis will never understand freedom, which is the sense in which our acts emerge as singularities, unfolding in the heterogeneous, qualitative, experiential field of duration.⁷ My term “critical duration” borrows from Bergson in order to nuance the means through which an artwork’s perceived critical stance is heterogeneous, qualitatively shifting over a period of reflection, and radically open to minute alterations in the imaginative encounter with a work – even though we might find ourselves reiterating many well-worn debates as we organize our accounts of those encounters.

This shift in focus opens possibilities for nuancing

discussions of contemporary art's perceived relationships to capitalism. Since at least the early twentieth century avant-garde, art production, art history and art criticism have reiterated, refined, contested, and debated the problems associated with the widespread assumption that "good" or "progressive" art be critical; yet rarely are notions of criticality explicitly connected to a shifting perception of critical position in relation to a single work.⁸ While as a two-week event, *Breakdown* was itself rhythmically complex, presenting a matrix of intricate performed and mechanical motions, my account of this work is predominantly concerned with the viewer's experience of the work's duration "after" an encounter with the work (whether a live one or one constructed through documentation).⁹

Breakdown draws attention to critical duration by mobilizing a split between form, function and interpretation. While appearing to be conceptually straightforward at first, over time the piece asserts an irreducible heterogeneity between materials, actions and perceived critical positions; this persistent disjuncture articulates the difference between the "work" and the interpretive desires that surround it. Even the range of responses to *Breakdown* suggests that such a split might be in operation. Many reviewers lauded the piece as a renunciation of consumerism; for instance, *Adbusters* reviewer Sarah Nardi declares that *Breakdown* is "an act of purification, both personal and philosophical, that severed Landy's physical connection to the past... a sacrifice is made to the possibility of something entirely new."¹⁰ This response bears little relation to the complexities that arise over a sustained analysis of *Breakdown*; rather, it encapsulates a fleeting, interpretive desire that the work seems to invite – a desire for the possibility of a reborn, "purified" post-capitalist subject.¹¹ Written accounts of Landy's life after *Breakdown*, emphasizing mundane acts of replacement such as applying for a new passport, buying a razor, and the like, might suggest otherwise: that the work is an exaggerated enactment of planned obsolescence, a staging of capitalism's simultaneous fetishization of, and disregard for,

materiality.

Of course, reverence and disregard are spread unevenly amongst possessions; and Landy destroys a range of objects from disposable items to irreplaceable family photographs, heirlooms, his artist's archive, and gifts of artworks he received from his friends (fellow members of the Young British Artists scene). On the other end of the critical spectrum, the homogenous treatment of such disparate items led some to conclude that *Breakdown* was a failed critique of capitalism. In *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, Jane Rendell concedes that *Breakdown* is a "critical spatial practice" because it provides "a 'space' of critical engagement in the 'place' of commodity consumption;" yet she laments the work's failure to distinguish between various kinds of objects, commodities, and exchanges – so important for a nuanced critique of capital.¹² While I agree with Rendell that *Breakdown* is imprecise in this regard, I differ with her next analytical move, which is to speculate that "the bluntness of the breakdown may well be intended to bring us to our senses and make us think about the sheer number of objects in the world as an effect of the increasingly particular knowledge we demonstrate as consumers."¹³ While this claim characterizes some of the questions to be "read into" the piece, it still falls within a language that assumes we are to conceive of *Breakdown*, first of all, as an index of the artist's intentions, and, secondly, as an extreme (and implicitly straightforward) critique of capital. However nuanced Rendell's account of the spatiality of consumerism may be, she isolates one instance of perceived criticality, links it to its authorial origin and writes as if it comprised the thrust of the work's "message."

Instead, I would claim that *Breakdown* activates an irreducible gap between artwork, interpreter and perceived critical position. The work's lack of analytical nuance is not evidence of a failed critique "within" the work; rather, it is the enactment of a *propositional*, rather than *analytical* mode of address; it refrains from making fine distinctions in order that its impetus can be simply and clearly stated in an imperative sentence, such as

“destroy all your belongings.” This propositional clarity acts as an isolable “instant” of understanding, from which critical duration diverges; the work’s easily-grasped material premise can readily be transposed into the imagination, encouraging viewers to identify non-mimetically, imagining a hypothetical state in which there are no possessions.¹⁴ *Breakdown*’s proposition anchors its critical duration by providing an imaginary starting point from which to diverge or develop. It also acts as a transpositional narrative mechanism, facilitating the work’s easy translation into news articles, YouTube videos, hearsay and the like; this in turn extends the work’s durationality by other means. Creating a space in which the split between artwork and interpretive desire can operate, *Breakdown* creates a space for criticism to unfold in duration.

This enforced distance between artwork and interpretation asks of me that I recognize my interpretations of the work as “my own;” yet it also problematizes this act of self-recognition; for what can I do but reiterate shadings of the criticism/complicity binary that so often structure contemporary art’s relation to capitalism? What can I do but perform an ongoing and ever-shifting interpretation, which unfurls in relation to a binary that is hardly my own? This problematic distance between the performance of interpretation and its identification with my “own” thought finds an echo in Landy’s tripartite identity split as artist, worker and subject in *Breakdown*. Performing as if he were a worker, Landy mobilizes a field of identificatory and representational tropes of work that both reinforce and counteract his other rhetorical roles as “artist” and “subject” of the work, leaving viewers to bear witness to the undecideability of identification. At first, Landy’s worker-persona might appear to be diametrically opposed to his artist-persona, staging a questioning of the ideological separations between “artistic” and commodity production. Yet, the strategic self-identification of artists as workers is a relatively common trope over the past century or so. As Amelia Jones points out, artists’ identities in the modern and postmodern periods have often operated through “a rejection of

bourgeois culture and of the femininity associated with bourgeois domesticity.” This rejection has typically involved taking on “a populist position, in which the artist would align himself with the exploited worker and expunge from his purview the feminizing domestic allure of bourgeois commodity culture.”¹⁵ While Landy participates in this history of self-identification with the working class, directly presenting himself as a performative image of factory labour, he (accidentally) aligns himself with a masculinist stance which negates domesticity. We might also read Landy’s strategic “underclassing”¹⁶ in relation to Elizabeth Legge’s argument that many Young British Artists position themselves as lower-class to reflect Britain’s loss of empire, and a gradual reversal in its national identity, according to which it becomes associated with the “colonized,” via the marketplace. (Afterall, Legge points out, Britain’s “empire is now within.”)¹⁷ In relation to this crisis of national identity, the yBa’s adoption of a “losing” position becomes a safe and reliable stance, which succeeds in the art world because it can be read as both critical *and* populist, sensational, sympathetic.

Landy’s performance as a worker remains heterogeneous with his rhetorical roles as both artist and as the subject of the work implied by the sum total of the objects being destroyed. *Breakdown’s* authorial voice, its “author-function,” as Michel Foucault would put it,¹⁸ is Landy’s imagined invention of *Breakdown’s* proposition (or at least his reiteration of it – since John Lennon’s lyric “Imagine no possessions” is an important precursor).¹⁹ As video and newspaper interviews ask the artist to continually re-introduce his rationale for destroying his worldly possessions, bolstering the all-important image of the artist-genius “behind” the work, Landy’s worker persona is rendered passive to the work’s proposition, merely carrying it out in the most effective way possible, while sneaking the odd smoke break. By destroying his domestic, implicitly feminized, consumer self, Landy affirms the sense in which selfhood extends into the material realm;²⁰ yet he also dramatically re-enacts the oft-repeated

aggressive renunciation of the bourgeois/feminine/domestic – even as he creates an emotional atmosphere of mourning for its disappearance.²¹

Landy's destructive act closely intertwines its examination of consumerism with its examination of fractured selfhood, and the uneven distribution of agency between the various co-existent self-identifications of his artistic self, private self, and performing body/worker self. The "self-audit" that he performs by dismantling his consumer habits echoes the quasi-sociological case study trope: Landy-the-artist explores the importance of objects for Landy-the-domestic-"test-subject." The qualitative pseudo-findings of the case study – Landy's interviews about his feelings during and after the piece – are then disseminated through various media, playing on an undercurrent in reality television and other mediated gaming-events which both loosely reiterate the logic of the sociological experiment and publicize it, submitting it to the pleasures of voyeurism. Yet *Breakdown's* easy, and necessary, translation into mediated events and identificatory musings (how must Landy have felt after destroying his father's sheepskin jacket?²²) also capitalize on a long-standing curiosity about the artist "veiled" behind the artwork, a manifestation of the author-function that, as Amelia Jones has argued, has prevailed in both modern and postmodern art history. In her study of Jackson Pollock as a transitional figure between modern and postmodern paradigms of the artist, Jones argues that the artist's body occupied a highly ambivalent position:

The artist must be embodied as male in order to be considered an artist – placed within a (patri)lineage as originary and divinely inspired – but his embodiment (his particularity as a gendered and otherwise vulnerable, immanent subject) must be hidden to ensure his transcendence as disembodied and divinely inspired.... Paradoxically, modernist criticism and art history rely on the (male) body of the artist to confirm their claims of transcendent meaning.²³

Landy dramatizes the ambivalent position of the male artist's body. He radically exposes himself through his personal effects, thereby rhetorically staging his private life as public curiosity. Then he re-mystifies this private self by destroying its material traces. Whereas in Jones' account of Pollock, it is the male artist's body which must remain hidden for the mechanisms of transcendence to operate, here it is the artist's *possessions* – those objects which speak to his domestic/consumer self, which remains veiled even as his performing worker's body is *in full view* – which must be destroyed in order for something of the artist to remain transcendent. In a milieu of ever-increasing, late-capitalist reification, it is consumption, rather than rarefied artistic production, which carries the torch of transcendence; it is the objects *possessed* by an artist, which must act as the veil for the transcendent consumer-persona. (Even his artist-persona, the rhetorical locus of the “genius” of the work, is thoroughly identified with consumption; Landy describes his decision to destroy all of his objects as “the ultimate consumer choice”).²⁴ Landy's insistent, embodied presence as artist/worker, which remains heterogeneous with these discourses on transcendence, does not dismantle them; rather, it provides an identificatory locus in relation to which ambivalence about this transcendence can play itself out over time.

This performative/identificatory enacts a durational shift from a position of clarity (the straightforward contrast between artistic and factory labour) through several complex, and perhaps unresolvable points of ambivalence – ambivalence that ultimately leads us to the fundamental undecidability of any identification of a voice within an artwork. Roland Barthes gives a vivid sense of this failure of identification in the opening passage of his famous essay “The Death of the Author” (1968):

In his story *Sarrasine* Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: ‘This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her

instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.’ Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing ‘literary’ ideas of femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.²⁵

Barthes’ essay attacks the vastly overdetermined, over-importance of the personal identity of the author in the modern period, a positivist bent that he describes as “the culmination of capitalist ideology.”²⁶ Landy, along with many other modern and postmodern artists who have worked performatively, insistently places his body within the work, both refusing the transcendental authorial position (appearing instead as a gendered, raced, and classed person), and evoking late capitalism’s penchant for authorship and author-functions. Yet his presence nonetheless fails to guarantee the stability of the identity of the work’s (is it the authorial voice, the personal voice of the author, the voice of another character framed by the work, or, indeed, that of the work itself, of discourse itself?). Landy’s piece at first seems to critique the special place reserved for the ideological figure of the artist and then to oscillate into a reiteration of its very specialness. The complexity of identificatory mechanisms lead us to the ultimate undecidability of identity, authorship, and thus, even the value of art’s institutional framing as authored. The work provokes an oscillation of ever-shifting shades of critical and complicit positions on identification.

In my reading, *Breakdown* is most interesting precisely where critics such as Jane Rendell imply that it fails: in its

sundry imprecisions, it opens notions of criticality onto a duration of qualitatively shifting perceived positions. Housing a simple premise in a complex performative installation, the work initially appears as a staunchly anti-capitalist “factory of destruction”; yet under sustained analysis that anti-capitalist stance is revealed to be more a reflection of a (re)viewer’s desire to fix the work’s critical position than a reflection of its “actual” rhetorical positioning, which shifts over time as one discovers more and more heterogeneities between the work and the ostensible critical positions it appears to support. Such complex, durational criticality merits further attention in relation to a number of recent performative installations which make use of the “factory scenario” as a premise, including Geoffrey Farmer’s *Pale Fire Freedom Machine* (2004), William Pope.L’s *The Black Factory* (2005-) and Wim Delvoye’s *Cloaca* (2000-2007). Like *Breakdown*, these works’ “factory-esque” qualities allow them to “read” instantly as counterpositional to expectations of rarefied, artistic labour (either within the white cube, or within the documentary frameworks for performance), even as they call to mind an entrenched history of artists’ mimicry of factories (most notably, perhaps, Warhol’s Factory scene). Given the ubiquity of critiques of capitalism, and the extreme difficulty of enacting those critiques to any appreciable extent, it is pressing to consider the complexities of how tropes such as the performative factory-image expand critical positions into durations of shifts, inconsistencies, indeterminate swells and unstable identifications.

Facing such identificatory instability, Barthes wrote of the need for a stronger emphasis on the reader in literary criticism: “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.”²⁷ We might question Barthes’ optimistic claim that a single reader can hold together all of a text’s traces; and we might equally question his simultaneous upholding of the reader

and erasure of his/her specific identity – a sublimation tactic that allows Barthes not to acknowledge the reader’s cultural specificity and inevitable partiality. By working through my adapted Bergsonian trope of critical duration, I have attempted to think of *Breakdown* as just such a field of traces, while neither completely erasing nor dwelling upon the specificities of my own identity as a bearer of its critical duration.

Notes

1. The C&A department store, specializing in economical, sensible clothing, pulled out of the UK in 2001 after nearly 80 years, due to dramatic shifts in the retail industry. “C&A Shuts Up Shop,” BBC News, January 27, 2001 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1140083.stm].
2. The inventory can also be viewed at “Michael Landy’s Inventory,” *Artangel*, [http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2001/break_down].
3. Illuminations Media, “The Eye: Michael Landy,” YouTube [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hYUnkW4sNA>].
4. Tim Cumming, “Stuff and Nonsense: Life for Michael Landy More Complicated than Ever,” *The Guardian*, 13 February, 2002 [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2002/feb/13/artsfeatures.arts>]. Breakdown received a broad mix of visitors, from art world insiders to curious shoppers.
5. Henri Bergson, *Time & Free Will* (London: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005): 100.
6. *Ibid.*, 104. Whereas, for instance, we might isolate and count out the motions of a clock’s pendulum in order to determine how many seconds had passed, the rhythmic, qualitative shifts that occur as we listen remain entirely outside this abstracted notion of counted time. When we refrain “from representing duration symbolically,” we experience pure duration, a heterogeneous field of qualitative changes in the whole. *Ibid.*, 105.
7. Bergson writes, “We should see that, if our action was pronounced by us to be free, it is because the relation of this action to the state from which it issued could not be expressed by law, this psychic state being unique of its kind and unable ever to occur again. We should see, finally, that the very idea of necessary determination here loses every shred of meaning, that there cannot be any question either of foreseeing the act before it is performed or of reasoning about the possibility of the contrary action once the deed is done, for to have all the conditions given is, in concrete duration, to place oneself at the very moment of the act and not to foresee it.” *Ibid.*, 239.
8. Sources on this point are, of course, too numerous to list; as Hal Foster wrote in 1996, “By now the problems of the avant-garde are familiar: the ideology

of progress, the presumption of originality, the appropriation by the culture industry, and so on.” Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 5. Foster seeks to reconsider the notion of the avant-garde by improving upon Peter Bürger’s influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. In contrast, Johanna Drucker argues that expectations of avant-gardist, oppositional criticality do a great disservice to contemporary artists, who are fully engaged in mainstream ideologies. Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

9. Here I should clarify that I did not see this work in person; my understanding of *Breakdown* has been constructed from studying several documentations and accounts of the work. Yet I do not make a rigid distinction between “live” and “mediated” encounters, especially for a work such as *Breakdown* which is so clearly meant to translate into secondary source material. On the issue of “live” vs. “documentary” encounters with art, see Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56.4 (Winter, 1997): 11-18.

10. Sarah Nardi, “Michael Landy: Break Down Your Possessions,” *Adbusters* 88 (March/April 2010) [<http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/88/michael-landy.html>]. Nardi’s anti-capitalist, quasi-spiritualist rhetoric seems relatively restrained in comparison with Judith E. Stein’s review, in which she declares, “*Break Down*, Landy’s strongest work to date, embodied more than a social commentary on shopping. His gesture of publicly stripping himself of his worldly goods had a spiritual dimension. He behaved as a shaman might, enacting a purge for communal ends. Contradictorily theatrical and meditative, emotional and orderly, *Break Down* seemed a tacit homage to Shiva the paradoxical Hindu god who was an ascetic and sensualist, a destroyer and restorer.” Judith E. Stein, “Michael Landy at C&A Store on Oxford Street,” *Art in America* (June 2001), quoted in *Artangel*.

11. It is worth noting that alongside *Breakdown*’s ostensible “purification” narrative, its title strongly alludes to notions of madness and what I might term a late-capitalist narrative of “leaving it all behind.” We might think of Ilya Kabakov’s installations, such as *He Lost His Mind, Undressed, Ran Away Naked* (1990), as an important precursor to *Breakdown* in this sense.

12. Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006): 60. Indeed, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai is among those who advocate for a more precise conception of the changes in status an object passes through as it is bought/sold, owned and given away/received. Yet ironically, Appadurai advocates for this by arguing for a broader, yet more specific understanding of the commodity, as it refers not merely to a thing produced according to an industrialist regime of production, but rather, as it refers to a specific point in the social life of *any* object, in which its exchangeability is “*its socially relevant feature*.” Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13. One could argue that this broadened understanding of the commodity disproves Rendell’s critique of *Breakdown*, as Landy’s piece

effects a massive leveling that places all of his possessions at the same point in their *social* life, thereby drawing attention to the temporalities of exchange and physical transformation which might in fact help to clarify certain aspects of a critique of capitalism. Nevertheless, ultimately I agree with Rendell on this point, in part since Landy's own classification system in his inventory – “artworks,” “clothing,” “electrical,” “furniture,” “kitchen,” “leisure,” “perishables,” “reading,” “studio,” and “vehicle” – emphasizes simplistic categorical distinctions, rather than more complex allusions to the social life of things.

13. Rendell, 60.

14. I am adapting John Lennon's lyric from *Imagine* here: “imagine no possessions”; this lyric features prominently in the *Artangel* website detailing the playlist of songs Landy and his volunteer workers listened to while operating their “factory.” *Artangel*.

15. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 65. Jones is referring to Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989): 53; 65.

16. While I am calling Landy's underclassing “strategic” to emphasize the way this work enunciates itself in relation to the viewer as bearer of critical duration, and to the larger context of the British art scene, it is important to note that this “underclass” position is not merely strategic in Landy's work, but also biographical; indeed, Landy's next major project after *Breakdown*, a commission for the Tate Britain entitled *Semi-Detached*, highlights the life of his father, John Landy, who suffered a mining accident that stripped him of his ability to work. *Semi-Detached* explores the tenacity of John Landy's desire to identify himself as a worker, despite being unable to work for the past several decades. See Judith Nesbitt and John Slyce, *Michael Landy: Semi-Detached* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004).

17. Legge, Elizabeth, “Reinventing Derivation: Roles, Stereotypes, and ‘Young British Art’,” *Representations* 71 (Summer 2000):16. We might consider Britain's new state of holding its “empire within” both in relation to increased immigration into Britain, and to the rise of globalized capitalism, in which consumption becomes inseparably associated with empire.

18. In “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault describes the author-function as an “ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function”... whereas the author has typically been viewed as “genius, as a perpetual surging of invention,” the author-function in fact imposes limits on how a text may be read; thus the author is “the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.” Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 927.

19. Indeed, Lennon's song “Imagine” was played during *Breakdown*, and is featured on *Breakdown*'s playlist on the *Artangel* website. “Imagine No Possessions: A selection of the records, CDs and cassette tapes destroyed by

Michael Landy and his team,” *Artangel*.

20. According to William James’ radical empiricist view of selfhood, possessions literally constitute part of the self. James writes, “In its widest possible sense... a man’s Me is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account.” William James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2001): 44. In James’ account, selfhood echoes into the relational, into the prosthetic avenues of everyday contact, the proximal material onto which identity maps; *Breakdown* certainly echoes this Jamesian sense of selfhood, framing its objects as predominantly extensions of Landy.

21. Several accounts of *Breakdown* highlight the extreme emotional responses the work provoked. For instance, quoting Landy, the Guardian’s Tim Cumming reports: “‘Some of [the visitors to Breakdown] were really perturbed by the whole thing,’ he says. Including his mother, who broke down in tears when she saw the exhibition. ‘I had to throw my mum out. She started crying and I couldn’t handle those emotions. She had to go. It was my responsibility to finish it in the most appropriate way possible.’”

22. The story of Landy’s destruction of the sheepskin jacket – an item passed on from his father who suffered a debilitating mining accident – was an oft-repeated trope in media coverage of *Breakdown*. For instance, Tim Cumming remarks that “The coat assumed a kind of totemic significance during the show, and it’s one loss that seems to weigh heavily on Landy. ‘I really felt I was jinxing my dad by destroying it.’”

23. Jones, 62.

24. “Michael Landy: *Breakdown*,” *Artangel*.

25. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142.

26. *Ibid.*, 143.

27. *Ibid.*, 148.