

On Losing Everything

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My office – the London Children’s Rights Commissioner – has just finished consulting nearly 5,000 children on what they like, and hate, about living in London. A lot of them – oddly, some of the poorest kids – have told us that they love all the shops.

Oxford Street is probably the most famous shopping street in the whole of Britain, and over Christmas it was lit up like a blizzard of stars, with a horde of us buying, comparing and acquiring, but for the last month it has hosted an extraordinary, disturbing art event. Michael Landy, a youngish artist (to someone in her 50s, anyway), is – showing? – an event called Breakdown in what was once a department store in the middle of the City. You go into this pared-back retail space to be confronted by a very long, undulating conveyor belt in primary, child-like colours bearing upon it, like a never-ending airport luggage receptacle, an endlessly circling succession of plastic trays bearing the whole of Michael Landy’s possessions, in various states of, well, ‘break-down’. A couple of years ago Landy decided to destroy – not give away – everything he owned, as an experiment in consumer identity: to see what it felt like, how much his life depended on what he owned and used. Now he and a handful of helpers in blue overalls are going to take more than seven thousand possessions, from his clothes and art collection to his red Saab; break each into their component parts; log those parts on a data base and tear, smash, shred and, finally, reduce every single one of them to fine granules.

Is the man mad? Not according to the Tate Gallery, which bought one of his earlier – experiences, I suppose is the right word – called ‘Scrap heap services’, which had him feeding thousands of cut-out tin figures into a shredding machine, as a powerful comment on worker/consumers in an aggressively expansionist capitalist economy.

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Breakdown is much more personal. Landy is there, making it so; selecting which item is to go where, and watching it become something else, then nothing identifiable; watching the customers come in and watch and feel acquisitive themselves, and even pinch stuff off the conveyor belt.

It's unnerving, being in this vast space, this home of quiet destruction: it's like being complicit in a sort of ant procession, choosing, naming, deconstructing and destroying – as the stream of trays rock along, like an airport carousel. You find yourself choosing things you'd like to have – nothing is for sale - but it will all be gone by 24th February.

Nearly 30 years ago, when I made my very first visit to London I bought a very old, possibly moth-eaten, hugely enveloping and luxuriously over-the-top fur coat in Portobello Road. I adored it, and I wore it everywhere I could justify the affectation. One morning I woke and realised I had left my treasure in the car, went to fetch it, and found it gone. First I wept with rage and frustration, then I was overwhelmed with a feeling of great peace: the thing I had loved was gone, and I was no longer its captive. The remains later turned up on the street – it had been abducted by a hungry dog.

Since that time I have twice had all my luggage disappear on international travel, and learned how little you actually need to travel with. Three times I have just walked out and left all my personal belongings and a household in the care of other people, and learned that you don't really need much, particularly ornaments and clothes. I was surprised at how quickly we continue to acquire: even here in London, I've managed to buy books, kitchen things and things that will make it an exercise to leave again, with no more than a couple of suitcases. I have lost many small, precious things – expensive pens, family jewelry, gifts, photographs and antique objets d'art.

Is this some kind of religious nihilism? Landy told a journalist from the Observer that it would really hurt to 'kill' his dead father's coat – bought in the 70s when he was the age his son is now, so expensive it had to be paid for in
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installments, and then – after an accident – too heavy for him to wear, but passed on to his son as a treasure, and he loves it, and has asked his helpers to ‘try and do it as lovingly as they possibly can’. He says it is, in fact, a fresh start: ‘This is a celebration of life, but I’m alive..... It’s like my own funeral, but I’m alive to watch it.’

Life is a conveyor belt with a shredder at the end. Time for me to move on.