

Towards Destroying Capitalism: Michael Landy and Santiago Serra

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Towards Destroying Capitalism:

Michael Landy and
Santiago Sierra

MATEUSZ SAPIJA

Destruction may be seen as a way of releasing energy and laying a foundation for any creation. It reveals an object's fundamental structure and allows engagement with it on a metaphysical level. As an artistic tool, destruction is part of the struggle to establish a personal relationship with the object, a push to eliminate the boundary between the artist and his/her surroundings, a release of concealed emotional energy. Concurrently, destruction is a part of capitalist production. An engagement with destructive processes is simultaneously an engagement with the capitalist paradigm. In his writing about creative destruction, Joseph Schumpeter portrays capitalism as a never-stationary construct continuously being renewed through a cycle of self-mutation and decrease, accelerated by new goods, methods of transportation, production and organisation.¹ Creative destruction—that is, destroying the old paradigm while continually creating a new one—is essential to capitalism: this is what it consists of and feeds off.



Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001. Installation view.
An Artangel commission. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas
Dane Gallery. © Michael Landy. Photo: Hugo Glendinning.



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An Artangel commission. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas
Dane Gallery. © Michael Landy. Photo: Hugo Glendinning.

But can it be employed as a tool for challenging capitalism? Michael Landy and Santiago Sierra's two seminal works may offer an answer to this conundrum. Both artists used destruction as a creative force to challenge the material along with the moral and ideological boundaries of both the society and ruling paradigms, aiming for the renegotiation of economic and socio-political currents.

Michael Landy's *Break Down*, conceived of in 2001, was a two-week performance, held on Oxford Street in London, during which the artist destroyed all his material possessions. The items, 7,227 of them, including artworks, photographs and personal belongings, were divided into 10 categories and catalogued in a database before destruction. Presented at a former department store, the performance was accessible to both the art crowd and shoppers right in the centre of Europe's busiest shopping street. Landy conducted his public act of disassembling, sorting and destroying with the support of 12 assistants and used an expressly constructed 'de-production line' machine: part assembly-line, part conveyer-belt, resembling a material reclamation facility, yet not reclaiming or recycling anything. After the disassembling, Landy pulverized all the objects and buried them in the ground. The process occurred in a highly systematized way: "I wanted it to be very bureaucratic, very regular and methodical, like a kind of assembly line or production line but in reverse"² stated the artist. A highly aestheticized documentation of all the belongings and the performance, conducted by Wolfgang Tillmans, completed the project. Continuing the line of inquiry into the artist's earlier works, such as *Market* (1990) or *Scrapheap Services* (1994-1995), in which he explored the subjects of labour and the market, Landy made an ultimate consumer choice—everything he possessed became commodities. At the end, however, he was left with nothing. The work ended up being attractive for both popular media and academia, generating an extraordinary amount of discourse. Due to its spectacular nature and location, it drew 50,000 visitors, including many random passers-by, who were disturbed by the artist's act of destroying all his personal belongings. Apart from the acceleration of late-1990s global consumerism that Landy witnessed first-hand, the artist was inspired by Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York* (1960). The idea of employing destruction came to Landy after encountering Tinguely's work—unpredictable and perishable. Being one of the first 'happenings', *Homage* was a machine, constructed from accumulated junk, created to unravel itself and perform as a play, a musical piece and a narrative, while it disassembled in front of the audience, leaving nothing behind. As Tinguely did, Landy treated construction and destruction processes as indistinguishable. Like *Homage*, *Break Down* commented on relationships between society, consumerism, technology and production. What may be claimed is that if *Homage* defined 1960s destructive consumerism, *Break Down*'s intention was to repeat that in the late-1990s.

Break Down was a simultaneous engagement with and a critique of capitalist consumer culture. However, some critics claimed that the homogenous treatment of all possessions was a failed critique of capitalism.³ Landy identified certain possessions (such as the art he created or was given) by treating them as equal to the other commodities. The same applied to essential objects that were looked upon as consumer goods, rather than functional objects. Others, who

were sceptical about Landy's work, stated that the piece was an exaggerated enactment of planned obsolescence and an act of capitalism's commodity fetishism.⁴ However, the project's bluntness might be seen as an attempt to force the audience to reflect on its status as consumers. Landy did not pretend to stand outside of consumerism rather he posed it as a social issue, without taking an arbitrary stance. *Break Down* was Landy's 'ultimate consumer choice',⁵ not a sacrifice, but an examination of consumerism, which the artist saw as unavoidable. The work is located within a critical spatial practice, and created a space for critical engagement in the 'place' of commodity consumption. Within this space, it challenged the standardization of contemporary consumerism through a courageous and radical act, ultimately pushing the logic of consumer capitalism to its extreme by consuming everything that was available. During and after the performance, Landy was simultaneously vulnerable and free. Through destruction he reached the point of non-identity—free of physical traces of his past. For the artist, this performance became a euphoric experience: "it's like my own funeral but I'm alive to watch it (...) *Break Down*, although temporarily, detached 'I am' from 'I have,'" summed up Landy.⁶

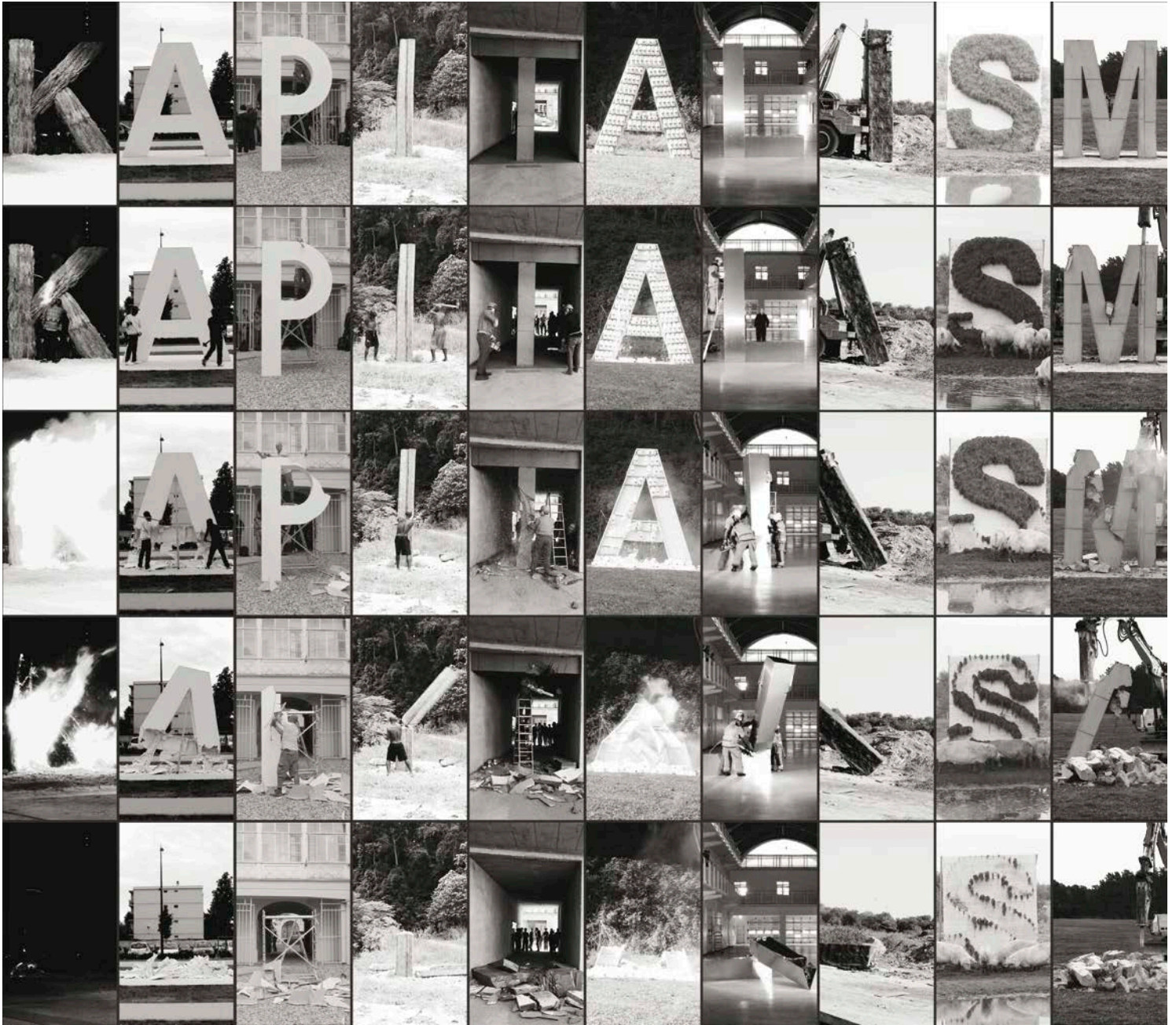
Santiago Sierra's *Destroyed Word* (2012-2013) was a monumental series of performances produced in 10 countries around the world, in which the artist constructed one letter from the word 'kapitalism,' using a material representing specific economic and political power relations in each country, and subsequently destroyed it. These temporal sculptures were part of Sierra's series of works featuring giant singular words, constructed or positioned in specific contexts, created in relation to the 2007-2008 global financial crisis. Each partnering institution constructed *Destroyed Word* in Arial Narrow Bold font, as per Sierra's instructions. The word choice likely encompassed Sierra's long-term interest in investigating capitalism's exploitation methods in his practice.

The selection of materials was the result of extensive research and a site-specific approach. In Gotland, the letter 'M' was constructed of concrete, the production of which is one of Sweden's main industries, causing major environmental destruction. An aluminum 'L' was made in relation to global corporations exploiting Iceland's vast energy resources to source this valuable material. In New Zealand, letter 'A' was created from the country's main export—milk, sold to local citizens for twice the price it sells for abroad. Dissimilarities were also employed when it came to the tools and methods for destroying the letters, ranging from the use of saws, to being eaten by pigs and firing of guns. Those distinctions were both part of each letter's context and related to Sierra's long-standing strategy of delegating his artistic labour worldwide—like international companies in a post-Fordist age, though in a more precarious and collaborative manner. What is exhibited is not the artwork *per se*, but the documentation of its enactment. It is an attempt to stimulate the audience's imagination about an action that could actually take place: people globally dismantling 'capitalism', while being employed to do so. *Destroyed Word* is a captivating video, aestheticizing the destruction and connecting the audience to the performed labour, often resulting in celebration and applauding at the final destruction of 'capitalism.'





Santiago Sierra, *Destroyed Word*
(details), October 2010-2012.
Photos: Courtesy of Studio
Santiago Sierra.



Santiago Sierra, *Destroyed Word*,
October 2010-2012. Photo: Courtesy
of Studio Santiago Sierra.

Sierra's artistic practice draws from a range of socio-economic and political aspects: democracy and modes of representation, concepts of inequality, freedom and dignity, laws and types of capital, and finally, the relations between the individual and society. Distinctive to Sierra is his long-term investigation into systems of socio-political and economic power sustained through exploitation and marginalisation. His practice is best known for paying people to undertake mundane or humiliating tasks in delegated performances, and what follows: constant re-enactment of the logic of exploitive systems within the art context. Sierra's mode of producing work that reflects systems of exploitation as a critical mirror of the socio-political *status quo*, often provokes the audience, and frequently leads to intense reactions. From the public, he requires a decided statement, going much further than presenting a rhetorical gesture or having the common ambition of 'activating' or 'emancipating' the viewer. Utilising this antagonist approach, Sierra often breaks the limitations of discussions and debates.

As part of a series of projects expressing the failures of neoliberal democracy and its connection to the economy, *Destroyed Word's* message goes much deeper than a blind criticism of the neoliberal economic context. The chosen materials serve Sierra as complex symbols of capitalism, revealing his interest in relations between industrialism and coloniality and also their environmental and socio-political costs. The artist seems to signal a progressive contemporary turn towards post-democracy. In this political and economic system, a central role is played by the paradox that modern democracy exists without its essential element: the people (*demos*) whose dissent has been eliminated by systematic de-legitimation that reduced the *demos* to 'public opinion,' seen to (mis)represent the body of the public.⁷ *Destroyed Word* is a climax of Sierra's criticism of capitalistic ideology, a statement on capitalism very often becoming an evil form of organising the economy—based on the total commodification of nature and society, reaching towards every possible place and aspect of life, all of them becoming part of destructive economical reproduction. It stands for a desire to end this cycle of exploitation. Sierra does not demonise the labour of people who commit to specific industries rather he explores the frustration of capitalist exploitation. Consequently, he would like this work to be as useful to the public as possible, serving as an icon and empowering resistance to capitalism and its crises.

Relationships between production and destruction were fundamental to both Landy and Sierra's work. Landy decided to take on many roles—that of 'an artist,' 'a worker' and the subject, at the same time. His decision to show the work outside the institution and gallery circle, using a defunct store to do so, suggested an entrepreneurial approach and open engagement with capitalism. At the same time, his work, involving performed labour, may be seen as an exemplary Marxist performance, highlighting and drawing attention to the process of work, production and commodity fetishism. However, it is important to note that after destroying all his belongings, Landy instantly began to accumulate possessions, which was inevitable in our contemporary capitalist reality. Santiago Sierra's *Destroyed Word* combined his intelligence, art historical training, and instinctive ability to capture the symbolic values of his intuitions regarding capitalism with the intensity of modern minimalism and an alert attitude. Through this

elaborated performance, Sierra presented capitalism as devastating, yet successful for its designers and beneficiaries. For the rest of the planet—according to Sierra—the hegemony of capitalism is robbery, executed through fraudulent contemporary post-democracy.

Both works can be seen as provocative, and the impact they had on their audiences was outstanding. Their strategies of approaching the critique of capitalism are radically different—naturally reliant on the specificity of their practices, although simultaneously, possibly dependent on how the 2008 financial crisis changed our attitude towards the economy in the field of socially engaged art. Both Landy and Sierra, however, made an important step in raising awareness regarding the significance of a critical approach to the various structures, which caused the 2008 crisis and the disturbances that remain with us until today.

1. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 82.
2. Julian Stallabrass and Michael Landy, "Michael Landy in Conversation With Julian Stallabrass," in Michael Landy, *Michael Landy/Break Down* (London: Artangel, 2001), 107.
3. Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), 71.
4. Emily Rosamond, "Factory-esque: Temporalities of Critique in Michael Landy's Breakdown" in: Ahlia Moussa and Simon Bentley (eds.), *Revisiting Ephemera* (London, Ontario: MacIntosh Gallery/Blue Medium Press, 2011), 37-52.
5. Stallabrass and Landy, op. cit.
6. Judith Nesbitt, "Everything must go" in Judith Nesbitt and John Slice, *Michael Landy. Semi-detached* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004).
7. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

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