

The Art of Destruction

It looked like a giant fish tank, a Plexiglas receptacle holding some 2,000 pieces of unwanted art.

Michael Landy created the *Art Bin* at a London gallery as “a monument to creative failure,” and he invited fellow artists to come fill it. His friend **Damien Hirst** sent over two prints of a bejeweled skull. **Gary Hume** threw in a sculpture made of paper cups. **Tracey Emin** “gave me



Work destined for a landfill in Michael Landy's *Art Bin*.

lots of different things,” says Landy. “She told me she would have had a lot more if I had started a few weeks earlier. She had just moved and wanted to get rid of some stuff.”

By the end, in mid-March, works by more than 400 artists, including big-name Young British Artists such as **Julian Opie** and **Gavin Turk**, lay mangled and smashed at the bottom of the 800-cubic-yard tub. Collectors could fill the *Art Bin* too, but only with written permission from the living artist whose work they wanted to junk. All would later be dumped into a landfill.

Landy conceives of the bin as a collapsing of celebrity and obscu-

rity, creation and demolition. “There is no hierarchy in the *Art Bin*. Everybody’s work lies together, the unknown and the famous,” says the British artist. “The bin becomes one piece that is made up of hundreds of different artworks.”

Though he has taken flak from visitors distressed by the violent destruction of art, Landy says he has grown a thick skin after his 2001 *Break Down* was derided as a stunt. In that work, the artist publicly destroyed all of his possessions, a total of 7,227 objects—including his car, his passport, and his own and friends’ art—at a vacant department store. One critic for the *Guardian* recently called *Break Down* “one of the most intriguing British artworks of the past decade.”

Landy points to a tradition of demolition in art, including **Robert Rauschenberg**’s erasure of a **de Kooning** drawing with the latter’s permission, as well as **Jasper Johns**’s and **John Baldessari**’s eradication of their own work. South London Gallery, home of the bin, held a conference at which veteran conceptualist **Gustav Metzger** pronounced that “destructive art isn’t destruction but art, and the most complex form of it.”

Coincidentally a group of New York artists performed their own large-scale art demolition just as Landy’s bin was filling up. Artists were invited to pass works on paper through a shredder as part of the “#class” event series at Winkelman Gallery in Chelsea.

“The idea was to empower artists, give them back the power to control their work,” says conceptualist **El Celso**, organizer of “Art Shred.” “I don’t think art should last forever.” Many contributors were street artists, so “they’re not used to their art lasting very long anyway,” says El Celso, who, after asking participants to assess the value of their destroyed work, calculated its total worth to be \$19,850. Donating artists received a portion of the shreds. The rest will be dumped into the ocean. —Roger Atwood



Damien Hirst “New Religion” blanket (top) on sale through his label, Other Criteria: \$1,462.50.

Marina Abramovic “Energy Blanket” available at MoMA Store: \$460. Chance to warm up with hot artist: Priceless.