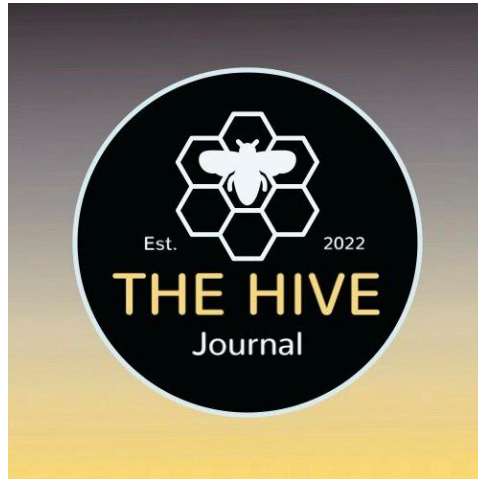




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DESTRUCTION AS A METHOD: MATERIAL REFLEXIVITY IN SCULPTURAL PRACTICE

Alana Lake, Manchester Metropolitan University

Abstract

This practice-led contribution explores destruction as a sculptural methodology rooted in material reflexivity. Through salvaged car parts, deployed airbags, broken mirrors, steering wheels, and hand-blown glass, the work confronts rupture as both a literal and conceptual process. Informed by a background of working-class, post-industrial environments and lived experience of addiction, the practice situates destruction as an affective, repetitive, and generative force. These works embody compulsion toward excess and collapse, retaining the trace of trauma while offering space for transformation.

Drawing from Paul Virilio's theory of the integral accident, 'to invent the family automobile is to produce the pile-up on the highway' (2007, p. 10), the research considers how material damage becomes a communicative gesture. The airbag emerges as a conceptual embodiment of systems designed to rupture under pressure. This research also engages with theories of vibrant matter (Jane Bennett), animated toxicity (Mel Y. Chen), and brutal aesthetics (Hal Foster), treating materials as co-agents in an intra-active choreography. As Bennett asserts, 'I want to emphasise, even overemphasise, the contributions of nonhuman forces' (2009, p. 5).

Here, destruction enacts, staging the tension between containment and release, between eros and thanatos. These sculptural processes mirror broader psychological, technological, and ecological patterns of collapse and regeneration. 'The acceleration of History is disturbing,' writes Virilio (2007, p. 52), a sentiment that reverberates through this material language of impact and strain. Destruction is not only inevitable, but also a method of making and knowing.

Keywords

Destruction; Material Reflexivity; Rupture; Transformation; Trauma

Destruction as method in practice

The process of destruction expands the relationship between object, maker, and meaning. It becomes a structured way of interacting with the world, materials, and contexts that shape experience. This approach emerges alongside my PhD, which foregrounds addiction and compulsion; here, however, destruction is positioned specifically as a methodology, materially and conceptually – as a way of thinking.

Thinking of the crash and themes of destruction as recursive acts within daily life – a car crash, a phone crash, a housing crash, a market crash, a psychological crash – my work takes up the idea that repetition is a repetitive gesture that creates meaning. As Hal Foster argues, ‘repetitions not only *reproduce* traumatic effects; they also *produce* them’ (1996, p. 132, emphasis in original). Destruction slows time, freezes the moment, and offers a kind of sensual and material lag, like Stewart’s ‘scenes of impact [that] catch the senses’ (2007, p. 68).

In re-presenting damaged objects post-impact, my work stages destruction as an ongoing performance rather than a concluded aftermath. Rupture is suspended in space and time. Works such as *Forbidden Fruit and Waxen Ephemera* (2024) embody this logic: wax sculptures of vapes, some half-melted, hold the embodied tension between consumption, compulsion, and decay. Similarly, *Pile Up* (2025) freezes the moment of collapse: salvaged airbags sewn together build a picture of a pile-up, mass in scale: a choreography of crash and entanglement; a still-life of disintegration and strain.



Lake, Alana (1981)

Forbidden Fruit and Waxen Ephemera, 2024

Wax candles and perspex 19 x 14.5 x 10.5cm. Image courtesy of the artist

This approach resonates with other contemporary practices. Cornelia Parker’s *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) captures the detonation, presenting suspended fragments of a garden shed as a suspended system of collapse. Monica Bonvicini’s installation, *She Lies* (2010), stages material instability and fragmentation to evoke political and climate tensions. Urs Fischer’s *Untitled (Bread House)* (2004–5) literalises entropy and impermanence, constructing and destroying simultaneously.



Bonvicini, Monica (1965)

She Lies, 2010

Styrofoam, concrete pontoon, stainless steel, reflecting glass panels, glass splinters, anchoring system. Size above sea level: 1700 x 1600 x 1200cm. Permanent installation on the Bjørvika Fjord, in front of the Norwegian Opera and Ballet, Oslo. Photo by Erik Berg

In the studio, destruction manifests both as a material and conceptual process. I begin by considering the inherent qualities of these objects: their histories, their functions, their prior damage. The object becomes both a site of trauma and a repository of meaning. Whether through cutting, shattering, or bending, rupture unlocks the potential for transformation.



Fischer, Urs (1973)

Untitled (Bread House), 2004-2005

© Urs Fischer. Image courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York Photo: Stefan Altenburger

This process is heavily informed by an embodied methodology: improvisation, accident, and the embrace of the unintentional guide the material handling, in line with Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic – the pre-symbolic, bodily material of communication. I also draw from Kristeva's notion that of the abject, which she argues 'has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I' (1982, p. 1). Engaging damaged materials allows objects to speak beyond function, surfacing new, unstable interpretations.

The methodological approach also draws from Foster's idea of 'material reflexivity', where the artist approaches the medium as a ruin to be 'read and refigured' (1996, p. 15). In my practice, fragmented car parts, broken glass and collapsed forms are active agents of meaning, carrying residues of past experience and potential for new formations. Working with trauma-laden objects creates a space where

destruction becomes a tool for exploring past and present, safety and risk, the known and the unknown. In this sense, destruction is a catalyst and part of the epistemology.

Material reflexivity and process

This section outlines the material reflexivity at the heart of my process. Salvaged from scrapyards and crash sites, the components that I work with are already ruptured. Their partial destruction becomes the starting point for new configurations, extending the moment of impact into a sustained aesthetic and conceptual inquiry. Airbags, broken mirrors and scorched rubber all become active agents within this methodology.

Airbags are especially resonant materials within my practice. Engineered as safety devices, they only fulfill their function through rupture, deploying explosively at the threshold of trauma. In my work, this contradiction becomes a central metaphor. When cut, stretched, or tied into sculptural tension, airbags articulate the paradoxes of safety and threat. They fray under the knife, inflate with breath, and resist manipulation, each fold and tear carrying the somatic memory of collision. Extending these ideas, I have also produced a hand-blown glass airbag, where the seductive sheen of glass becomes a conceptual embodiment of the perilous allure of danger – a theme that recurs later in this paper.



Lake, Alana (1981)

Airbag, 2020

Glass, 20.5 x 22 x 23cm. Image courtesy of the artist

This material engagement is deeply tactile and improvisational, informed by an embodied dialogue between maker and material. Echoing Tim Ingold's notion of correspondence (2013), where materials and practitioners co-evolve, I see myself not as an autonomous agent, but part of a relational ecology. The studio becomes a space of listening and negotiation. As Ingold writes, 'making is a process of growth, not assembly' (2013, p. 21). Each fragment of metal or shard of glass carries a somatic memory; responding to its weight, resistance, and texture informs when and how a gesture of destruction should occur.

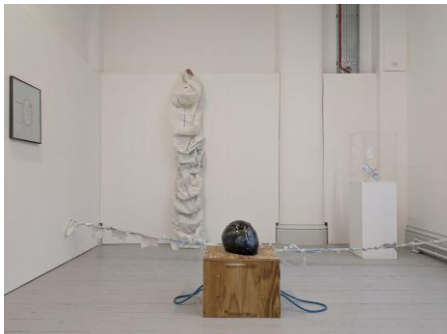


Lake, Alana (1981)

Rear View Mirror, 2024

Cast aluminum, 20 x 25 x 15cm. Image courtesy of the artist

This ethos characterises works such as *Rear View Mirror* (2024), where a shattered car mirror is cast in aluminum, preserving its cracks and distortions as fossilised traces of rupture and reflection. *Trip Hazard* (2025) stretches and knots salvaged airbags into a tense sculptural rope suspended across space, inviting viewers to navigate its obstructive presence. *Column* (2025) constructs a vertical totem from stacked, wrecked car parts, a precarious structure teetering between collapse and monumentality.



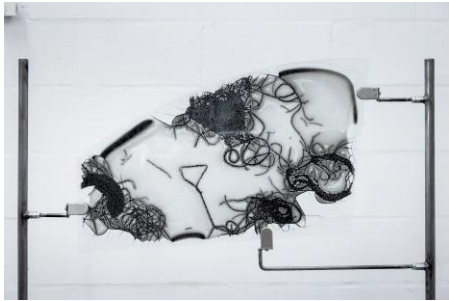
Lake, Alana (1981)

Installation View, 2025

Manchester School of Art. Image courtesy of the artist

This attention to material vitality aligns with Jane Bennett's theory of 'vibrant matter' (2010), where nonhuman forces exert affective and political agency. Bennett describes 'thing-power' as the strange ability of ordinary, manufactured items to exceed their status as objects and manifest traces of independence or aliveness (Bennett, 2010, p. xvii). Handling these damaged materials means tuning into their conditions, what Mel Y. Chen terms the 'toxicity' of matter, where the boundaries between inert and animate blur (Chen, 2012). A cracked mirror may reflect and distort simultaneously; burnt rubber carries the imprint of heat, speed and violence long after the event.

These traces are ongoing performances of matter's entanglement with affect, time and trauma, as observed in the works of contemporary practitioners Harriet Bowman and Michael Landy. Bowman focuses on the traces of compulsion and destruction, transforming discarded remnants into sculptural forms. Her documentation of joyriding's aftermath reframes ruin as both spectacle and symptom, materialising the socioeconomic tensions that underpin antisocial, destructive and compulsive behaviors.



Bowman, Harriet (1990)
Drivers Side (front), 2024
Glass, rubber, steel. Image credit: Dan Weill

Similarly, Michael Landy's *Break Down* (2001) monumentalises systematic destruction as a form of self-exposure. In this ambitious project, Landy systematically destroyed all his possessions, totaling 7,227 items, in a public performance. This process involved cataloging, classifying, and then dismantling each item in a disused department store on Oxford Street, London. After the exhibition, Landy was left with no possessions and did not return to art for a year, highlighting the project's profound impact on his life and artistic practice.



Lake, Alana (1981)
Column, 2005
Used car airbags, unwashed. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Alana Lake



Landy, Michael (1963)

Break Down, 2001

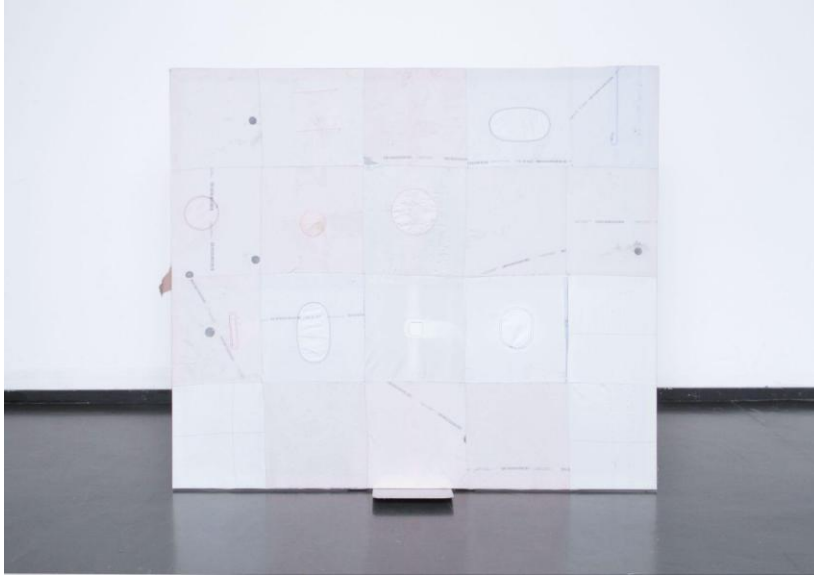
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Photo: Parisa Taghizadeh © The Artangel Trust. All rights reserved.

While the outcomes of these processes are sculptural, the practice leans heavily on intuitive, almost ritualistic gestures. Cutting, knotting, welding, and wrapping become modes of inscription - ways of marking transformation without erasure. This connects to Amelia Jones' writing on material traces in contemporary performance-influenced practices, where the labouring body and its marks remain active in the work. Jones argues that certain artworks "continue to have significance and to produce effects and affects after the moment of their initial manipulation" (Jones 2015, 23). Each cut or weld carries the emotional and intellectual currents of lived experience, memory, and loss.

This work contributes to a critical interest in practices of 'undoing'. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed reminds us that emotions are not a private, interior state but an active force in the making and unmaking of bodies and collectivities. For Ahmed, "emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities - or bodily space with social space - through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed 2004, 119). To be affected, then, is not to submit, but to enter into a relational field in which form, boundary, and identity are in motion. Destruction, then, is not merely an event but a condition: a threshold through which something else might emerge, less stable, less known, but perhaps more honest to the fractured realities that we inhabit.

Pile Up (2025) is made from deployed car airbags, salvaged from crashed vehicles. Rectangles are cut from their oval form; the finished patchwork stands on a metal stack truck. While flattened like a painting, the truck restores the piece to its intended sculptural form, allowing viewers to move around it, engage with both the front and back, and observe what lies beyond the immediate visual surface, behind the mechanisms of a dashboard. The stack truck deepens the work's industrial connotations, pointing to systems of production, waste management, and crash-control economies. It draws attention to the hidden infrastructures that underpin our high-speed, high-risk lives: extractive cycles that mirror the rise and collapse of systems, personal stability, and even the body's own limits.



Lake, Alana (1981)

Pile Up, 2025

Used car airbags and trolley, 160 x 185 x 50cm. Image courtesy of the artist



Lake, Alana (1981)

Pile Up (Reverse), 2025

Used car airbags and trolley. 160 x 185 x 50cm. Image courtesy of the artist

Affect and atmosphere: the aesthetic of the crash

The allure of collapse, of the fragmented, is imbued with a strange sensuality that both repels and attracts us. This section explores the seductive potential of destruction, drawing on the aesthetics of ruin and collapse as both generative and destructive forces within contemporary art. Through the manipulation of damaged materials, my work engages with the expansive nature of destruction – its capacity to repel and attract, to destabilise while opening up new possibilities for transformation.

J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) remains a central reference for understanding this tension between attraction and repulsion in the encounter with destruction. In Ballard's words, "After the commonplaces of everyday life, with their muffled dramas, all my organic expertise for dealing with physical injury had long been blunted or forgotten. The crash was the only real experience I had been through for years." (1973, p. 39), capturing the intense entanglement of violence, death and eroticism. The novel's characters fetishise car crashes, transforming traumatic events into sites of desire, where violence becomes animated with libidinal energy. In my work, destruction similarly operates as an eroticised force. Airbags, once symbols of protection, now trigger a different kind of engagement: one that is intimate, invasive and sometimes violent, evident in the smeared traces of bodily fluids left on surfaces like punctured airbags or polished metal.



Lake, Alana (1981)

Blood Drop, 2021

Hand blown glass, 34 x 32 x 39cm. Image courtesy of the artist

This dynamic is particularly palpable in works such as *Blood Drop* (2022), a hand-blown glass sculpture evoking a single bead of blood, fragile yet hyper-lustrous. Its seductive surface invites touch yet hints at the body's vulnerability to rupture. *Black and Blue* (2019), a cast-glass motorbike helmet, carries this tension further. The helmet, often associated with protection and mental resilience, here appears bruised, battered, 'black and blue', exposing the fragility beneath surfaces that we associate with safety and strength. The title's allusion to both physical injury and emotional trauma underscores the helmet's uneasy role as both shield and container for psychic harm. Similarly, *Warning Signs* (2022), a hand-blown glass rendering of an orange and white traffic cone, plays with the iconography of caution and hazard. The cone's slick surface contrasts sharply with its role as an instrument of warning, containment and spatial control, pointing to the subtle ways that danger is aestheticised in everyday life.



Lake, Alana (1981)
Black and Blue, 2020

Cast glass, hand polished, 22 x 35.5 x 24cm. From the series *Pleasure Drive*. Image courtesy of the artist



Lake, Alana (1981)
Warning Signs, 2020

Hand blown glass, 36 x 33.5 x 28cm. Image courtesy of the artist

The aesthetics of collapse in my practice invoke broader cultural fantasies of speed, excess, and self-destruction. As Paul Virilio suggests, “From incidents to accidents, from catastrophes to cataclysms, everyday life has become a kaleidoscope where we endlessly bang into or run up against what crops up” (2005, p. 3). Destruction is therefore not an accident of technological progress, but integral to its meaning. The car - a potent symbol of modernity, mobility, and individual freedom - simultaneously embodies fantasies of catastrophe. In my work, fragmented car parts and blown-glass objects become remnants of dreams undone, icons of aspiration crumpled by the very forces that once propelled them.

This space between the seduction of escape and the inevitability of collapse reflects broader societal anxieties around technology, consumerism and ecological precarity. In my ongoing project, *Pleasure Drive*, I explore how the car becomes a vessel for Freud's concept of the life and death drives introduced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), the yearning for freedom, speed, and mastery looping into compulsions for danger, collision and self-destruction. The car signifies a libidinal machine, as J.G. Ballard foresaw: an object through which trauma, desire and death intertwine in a choreography of acceleration and impact. *Pleasure Drive* stages these tensions, materialising the fantasy of control even as it collapses into ruin. Within this context, destruction becomes a sensual experience, something that speaks to the body's desire for rupture and release – a form of *jouissance*, perhaps, where the pleasure of undoing masks itself inside pain. Rupture becomes a threshold moment through which displeasure mutates into new possibilities of sensation and meaning. As Alain Badiou suggests, the moment of rupture is the moment when a new truth might emerge (2005).

The aesthetics of destruction, then, carry within them the promise of reconfiguration: finding meaning in the broken, the abandoned, and the disfigured. The work draws on a lineage of destruction in art history — from the Dadaists' radical ruptures, which opposed the violence of war through acts of aesthetic sabotage, to more recent practitioners. In this expanded field, destruction also operates politically. The environmental and economic crises of the contemporary moment, climate change, the exhaustion of natural resources, and financial instability, form the backdrop against which my practice unfolds. The crash is systemic. Perhaps the beauty of destruction lies in its capacity to make visible the hidden forces shaping the ruins of contemporary life.

Conclusion: a practice of collapse

Destruction, in my practice, is neither an end nor an absence. It is an opening, a crack through which transformation leaks into being. It is a method that reveals the hidden vitality of matter, and a condition through which the familiar fractures into unfamiliar possibilities. In the studio, this energy is channelled through experimental and embodied techniques that allow the materials to speak beyond their original functions. The cracks, fissures and ruptures that scar metal, glass and rubber are not failures; they are inscriptions of life under pressure, testimonies of speed, impact, trauma and survival.

Throughout this inquiry, I return to the tension between destruction and regeneration. As seen in *Pleasure Drive*, the aesthetics of collapse invite both fascination and revulsion, threading Freud's death drive into the steel frames and airbag membranes of the wrecked automobile. Destruction becomes a strange kind of nourishment, an act that feeds new desires and new aesthetic forms.

The generative potential of destruction extends beyond the psychological and into the material and ecological. Salvaged car parts, burnt rubber, cracked mirrors - these fragments, once symbols of speed, freedom, and consumer power - now stand as monuments to exhaustion, environmental depletion, and systemic collapse. Yet in their reworking - stretched, shattered, cast anew in aluminium or hand-blown glass - they become transformative. Works such as *Rear View Mirror* (2024), *Blood Drop* (2022), and *Black and Blue* (2019) reflect this tension between fragility and endurance: the seductive gleam of glass holds within it the constant threat of shatter, mirroring the precarious beauty of the world we inhabit.

The crash, the tear, the explosion, each renders visible what is usually suppressed: the forces of desire, exhaustion, and transformation that contour contemporary life. Through acts of cutting, welding, knotting, and casting damaged materials, I work not against collapse but within it, finding in its instability the raw matter of new articulations.

Destruction, then, becomes a method of both critique and hope. It refuses smooth surfaces and stable narratives, insisting instead on reckoning with brokenness so that something else - less predictable, more honest - might take root. Collapse, in this practice, is a jagged, trembling space from which a different kind of meaning, and perhaps a different kind of world, may emerge. As Maurice Blanchot reminds us, *"the disaster takes care of everything."* (Blanchot, 1995. p. 3)

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