

# The Mad Messiah

The idea of destruction in art is not new. But Gustav Metzger recognised the impulse to destroy as a paradoxically positive form of creative expression. By Adrian Glew.

*This page: Invitation to Metzger's first lecture/demonstration at the Temple Gallery, London, 1960. Next page, clockwise from left to right: Metzger's Manifesto: Metzger by Gallery One, 1962 (Photo: Bruce Fleming, Tate Gallery); Metzger (left) and Joseph Beuys during Beuys' Action, Tate Gallery, 1972 (Photo: Simon Wilson, Tate Gallery); Metzger (left), Wolf Vostell, Al Hansen, DIAS, 1966; Metzger's acid on nylon works, Architectural Association, 1965.*

As a child, I used to spend hours making model aeroplanes. Once finished, they were suspended from the bedroom ceiling in combative pose, where they would have stayed—gathering dust—had I not hit upon the idea of making the whole scene much more exciting. And so one day, with lighter fluid in hand, I ritually set fire to each and every one, throwing them out of the window and into the garden; narrowly missing the washing line, our fox terrier and assorted flora and fauna.

Beyond childhood, one soon realises that the subject of destruction in art, as in life, is a perennial one. The most common Western icon—Christ bloodied on the Cross—is designed to stimulate revulsion and ultimately, compassion. Later, artists such as Bosch, Goya and John Martin depicted death and destruction to great effect. However, it is only in the 20th century that destruction has moved beyond the canvas and become an integral part of the work.

The greatest exponent and progenitor of destruction in art, or more correctly auto-destructive art, is Gustav Metzger, an artist who fled from Nazi Germany to Britain in 1939. He has recently re-surfaced in London to prepare for a book (to be published by 'workfortheeyetodo') comprising an essay about his work by Andrew Wilson, an important piece about Nature by Metzger himself and a bio/bibliography compiled by Clive Philpott. It was back in 1961, on the newly built South Bank, that Metzger gave the first outdoor demonstration of auto-destructive art. Wearing a gas mask, protective clothing and heavy gloves, he proceeded to spray acid onto nylon, creating abstract patterns as it dissolved and decayed. Before a large audience, Metzger made manifest the beauty and creativity of destruction. Through his writings (his first manifesto is dated 4 November 1959) Metzger became one of the few artists this century to give birth to an art movement; Andy Goldsworthy's auto-destructive works in nature and Cornelia Parker's explosive sheds and squashed silver are works bearing recent witness to his ideas.



Metzger, however, has always paid tribute to those artists who preceded him. It was the Dadaists who first made a virtue out of an anti-art/anti-performance stance. The manner in which the audience experienced Dada (either with intense embarrassment or violent rage), and Dada's wish to leave behind as few completed works as possible, have certain parallels in Metzger's manifestos and demonstrations. Similarly, the mad, bad Futurists achieved such aims through their scandalous performances and in Marinetti's manifestos of 'incendiary violence', calling for the burning of libraries and the flooding of museums. At a more tranquil level, Mondrian's work was directed at breaking down form, based on his theosophical beliefs that all life and art is directed toward evolution. In Mondrian's thinking, evolution was closely bound up with

destruction, not as a negative concept but as a positive force, to create new and higher forms. The destruction of form in Mondrian's paintings served as a metaphor for what was happening elsewhere in the arts, in society and in life itself. Auto-destructive art is also concerned with form in art, as Metzger stated in his celebrated lecture given to the Architectural Association in 1965:

"Attempts were made to break up the solidity of sculpture through motion by Gabo, and through light by Moholy-Nagy...Tachism, Abstract Expressionism distorted, pulverised and extended previous conceptions of form in painting...Kinetic art is still trying for infinity and this is where auto-destructive art comes in...auto-destructive art was an imperative step in the enlargement of forms at the disposal of kinetic art," he argued.

These, then, were some of the precursors that Metzger had studied and assimilated. Unbeknownst to him, on the other side of the world, a merry band of Japanese artists called the Gutai Group were investigating other possibilities of destruction in art. Central to the Gutai was the use of unusual materials—water, mud, air, smoke, fabric, chemicals—and a view of time as another sort of matter to be manipulated. At their first indoor exhibition, Saburo

Murakami smashed his upper body through three frames holding stretched layers of packing paper—before startled reporters at the Group's press conference—to create his 'Making Six Holes in One Moment'. At subsequent exhibitions, works using air rifles, cannons and remote controlled devices were also demonstrated.

Over this same time-scale, Metzger studied cabinet making at Leeds, where he saw Henry Moore's sculpture for the first time, switching to art in Cambridge, London and Antwerp. Fellow students at the Borough Polytechnic, where Bomberg taught, included Leon Kossof, Anthony Hatwell and Frank Auerbach. Bomberg was an inspirational teacher for Metzger and his brother Mendel and it was the teacher who labelled the students, 'The Mad Messiahs' because of their enthusiasm and missionary zeal. From this point on, after seeing Pollock's paintings in the Tate Gallery in 1956, Metzger realised that sculpture, rather than painting, was the key to his future. By the 4th of November 1959, he had published and exhibited six found cardboard boxes at Brian Robins' Coffee House at 14 Monmouth Street, London. These cardboard forms were shown without any artistic interference. Metzger had moved towards a theory of auto-destructive art partially as a result of listening, earlier in the summer, to two young men in Robins' space talking about holding an exhibition and then simply burning the exhibits. By thinking about this and the cardboard forms, Metzger was able to resolve the question of what auto-destructive art should look like. The boxes were perfectly finished, organised, smooth forms, and became the machine-made basis of auto-destructive art.

By 1960, Metzger had completed the first model for an auto-destructive monument, published his second manifesto, and on 22 June he gave his first indoor lecture-demonstration of auto-destructive art at the Temple Gallery in London. Also on display were found objects—machine made metal forms, cardboard forms, a filled polythene bag and walls covered with that day's newspapers. This second manifesto encompassed more of Metzger's other interests, particularly his concerns about the nuclear arms race. Metzger had always been active in the Peace Movement and took part in marches, notably to Aldermarston. Metzger's manifesto (see illustrated text) took the issue of destruction as subject matter, but used it as an artistic technique to illustrate exactly what was happening in the '(un)real' world.

In 1961, Metzger published his third manifesto 'Auto-destructive art, Machine art, Auto-creative art' in leaflet form with the two previous manifestos on his first outdoor demonstration at the South Bank on 3rd July. Here, he demonstrated acid painting on three large screens of nylon in white, black and red, which disintegrated in 20 minutes, and an auto-destructive mobile made from sheets of glass. For the first time, the manifesto turned the concept of auto-destructive art into a critique of capitalism.

In October 1962, Metzger distributed 'Manifesto World' ('everything everything everything everything. A world on the edge of destruction') at the Festival of Misfits, Gallery One and at the ICA in London. It was here, with members of the embryonic Fluxus group, that Metzger demonstrated his acid-nylon technique, erected a temporary screen made with luminous paint on paper and ultraviolet lamps, and displayed magnets and steel. Spoerri and Filliou had earlier rejected Metzger's proposal to put up copies of the Daily Express, for Gallery One, sellotaped down a wall leading to the basement. Metzger had wanted the real world (this was the week of

the Cuban missile crisis) to enter the gallery in a bold way (using the newspapers' typography). In a sense Metzger was closer to George Maciunas than many others in Fluxus because of his radical outlook and left-wing ideals. The video artist Nam June Paik once said to Wolf Vostell that 'if there was a Nobel Prize for Fluxus,

similarly if there had been a would have been in the run-  
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audience at Metzger's  
School of Art in December. In  
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dimensional moving slides  
concerts by The Cream, The

Who and The Move). By October 1965, Metzger was the first artist to use liquid crystals in projected form. The critic Mario Amaya invited Metzger round to demonstrate this new technique and recounted that 'As the crystal cools, little crosses like stars appear in vivid colours—green, yellow, purple, red, blue, the most beautiful purest colours one can imagine. And the form is constantly changing...there is endless variety; one simply reheats the crystal.'

In September of 1966, Metzger organised the seminal 'Destruction in Art' symposium (DIAS), bringing to London all the major artists using destruction. DIAS was one of the highlights of the sixties scene, with the appearance of groups like Zaj from Spain and the Institute of Direct Art from Vienna (Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus and Otto Mühl). One of Nitsch's performances, 'Abreaktionsspiel no. 3', was the cause of the prosecution of Metzger and John Sharkey for outraging public decency. Tame by today's standards, the piece consisted of a film, showing male genitalia being manipulated by strings and immersed in liquids, projected onto a lamb's carcass—Damien Hirst eat your heart out! John Latham was another powerful participant in DIAS. He had regularly used burnt or singed books (representing the painfulness of experience) as part of his assemblages and demonstrated some of his 'skooob' (books spelt backwards) towers in front of the British Museum to give expression to the 'end of era.' Other notable artists included: Mark Boyle, Ralph Ortiz, Barry Flanagan, Wolf Vostell, Robin Page, Al Hansen and Yoko Ono, who performed her now famous 'Cut Piece' (members of the audience came up to the stage to cut off a piece of her clothing). Most of the DIAS artists believed human aggression could be reduced and eventually totally eliminated through destructive art.

Metzger, artist, theoretician and prophet is, in some senses, comparable to Joseph Beuys or Yves Klein yet, until recently, he has been largely ignored or misinterpreted by the English-speaking art world. Nearing 70, Metzger shows no signs of letting up. Indeed, he has a number of cherished projects, including a new series of obscured photographs, the creation of his sealed auto-destructive sculpture and the erection of the first auto-destructive monument, not yet built. The sculptural pieces would serve as a tangible memento mori and as fitting tribute to a remarkable life devoted to art in society and to a world that is beginning to listen to his resounding voice.

For details of Metzger's forthcoming activities contact 'work-fortheeyetodo', 51 Hanbury Street, London E1 (0171 426 0379).