GUSTAV METZGER, THE CONSCIENCE OF THE ARTWORLD

John A. Walker (Copyright 2009)

Gustav Metzger. Image may be subject to copyright.

Gustav Metzger is a survivor, an itinerant intellectual-agitator who has lived in various European countries including Britain. After residing in the Netherlands for some years - where he researched the art of Vermeer - he reappeared in London in November 1994. In March 1995 he gave a meticulously prepared and thought-provoking lecture about his beliefs and 'career' to student members of the Art History Society of Middlesex University. Here is a chronology of his life (revised in
1926. Metzger was born into a Polish-Jewish family that lived in Nuremberg, Germany - famous for its annual Nazi rallies. Metzger recalled that as a child he was impressed by the growing power and visual impact of those rallies and Nazi design/architecture; this is one of the reasons why he later became suspicious of design, architecture and forms of mass manipulation such as the press, political propaganda and commercial advertising. In 1939 Metzger was sent with his elder brother to England to escape Nazi persecution. Other members of his family were not so fortunate - they perished in the Holocaust. Naturally this loss shaped Metzger's view that humanity was brutal, dangerous and self-destructive.


1944-53. Became interested in art. In 1944 he met Henry Moore and asked to become his assistant. Moore advised him to take up life drawing. Studied full and part-time at various art schools in Cambridge, London, Oxford and Antwerp. Influenced by the ideas of Eric Gill - combining art with political activism. In 1944 he tried his hand at stone carving. Painted from 1945 to 1957. Very influential was the drawing and painting tuition he received at the Borough Polytechnic, London from the Jewish-British, former Vorticist, David Bomberg. In 1946 Metzger thought
painting should be 'fast and intense'. When, years later, he saw Pollock's action paintings he realised that they were close to his ideal. 1945-46 ‘Exhibition of Paintings by Picasso and Matisse’ at the Victoria & Albert Museum - Metzger impressed by the Picassos.


1953. With other Bomberg students, Metzger founded the Borough Bottega, a group designed to recognise Bomberg's achievements. Contributed to 'Borough Bottega' paintings and drawings show, November-December, Berkeley Gallery, London.

1953-58. Worked as a junk dealer in King's Lynn, Norfolk. 1956. Very impressed by the ‘This is Tomorrow’, show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

1959. Moved to London. Fearing a world war fought with Hydrogen bombs, Metzger sympathised with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.
Metzger with cardboard works. Image may be subject to copyright.

‘Cardboards’. Photo John Cox.
1959. His paintings were exhibited in the basement of a coffee bar, 14 Monmouth Street, London. 'Cardboards' - works recycling a cheap discarded material - also shown at 14 Monmouth Street, November 1959. Metzger wrote a manifesto: *Auto-destructive Art*. Earlier, the anarchist theorist Bakunin had stressed the reciprocal relationship between creation and destruction. Metzger experimented with a form of action painting that involved applying acid with brushes to nylon sheets laid on glass. (The slashed canvases of Lucio Fontana, the self-destroying machines of Jean Tinguely and the fire paintings of Yves Klein were comparable developments.)

Auto-destructive art was conceived 'as a desperate, last minute subversive political weapon ... an attack on the capitalist system ... It is committed to nuclear disarmament ... It is an attack also on art dealers and collectors who manipulate modern art for profit'.

1960. 'Paintings and drawings 1945-60' show, Temple Gallery, London. First lecture-demonstration of Auto-destructive art at the Temple Gallery. Metzger's last involvement with a private art gallery. Henceforth, his art would be shown in public galleries and spaces. In 1960, along with the philosopher Bertrand Russell, he supported the Committee of 100, that is, people willing to commit acts of civil disobedience in order to provoke and overwhelm the authorities. 1960 *Model for construction in mild Steel* - a public art project that was never realised.

Lecture/demonstration, Heretics Society, Trinity College, University of Cambridge.
1961. Arrested and jailed for a month for his actions in support of the Committee of 100. 3 July public demonstration on the South Bank, London. Hydrochloric acid was sprayed on to three sheets of nylon (coloured white, black and red) stretched across a metal frame. As the acid hit the sheet, rents and holes appeared until the support disintegrated - the work was creative but at the same moment destructive. It also exemplified transformation over time and randomness. Another South Bank piece involved the smashing of glass sheets in a sequence. Contributes to ‘Bewogen Bewogen’, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and Moderna Museet, Stockholm and Museum Louisiana, Humlebaek, Denamark (article in catalogue).
1962. Demonstration at London's 'Festival of Misfits' at Gallery One, London organised by Fluxus. Metzger’s ‘newspaper work’ which included *The Daily Mirror*’s coverage of Soviet missiles in Cuba proved too controversial for the organisers who rejected and removed the papers. Lectured at Ealing College of Art. Pete Townshend, of the Who, then an art student, was an avid listener. Summer: published ‘Machine, Auto-Creative and Auto-Destructive art’, in RCA’s student magazine *Ark*.

1963. Acid Painting event on the South Bank repeated for a film made by Harold Liversidge. Now this event exists in memories and photographs. One photo shows St Pauls and the financial heart of the City of London behind the empty metal frame - the work ends by revealing the squalid conjunction of religion and mammon. In this way, Marianne Turner and David Lowe perceptively point out, Metzger 'achieved the reality behind the picture which so many artists have sought' (1) Lecture/demonstration, Bartlett Society, School of Architecture, University College, London.

Photo: FBM Studio Zurich, copyright the artist.

---------------------------------------------

1965-66. Lecture: ‘The Chemical Revolution in Art’, Society of Arts, Cambridge University. Experimented with liquid crystals placed between Polaroid screens which were then heated; colour and organic changes over time; also used projected light. (Examples of Auto-Creative Art.) In 1966, 'Liquid Crystals in Art' was presented at Lamda Theatre Club. He also provided light projections for the bands Cream, The Who and The Move at the Roundhouse in Camden, North London.

1965. In a lecture on ‘Auto-Destructive Art’ given at the Architectural Association, Metzger described some monumental, time-based sculpture projects: a structure made from steel that would gradually corrode as a result of exposure to the polluted atmosphere. After ten years the work would cease to exist. He proposed another huge metal structure - *Five Screens with Computer* - consisting of stainless steel walls stacked with thousands of smaller uniform parts to be placed between blocks of flats, controlled by a computer, the parts were to be ejected at different speeds,
directions and frequencies until, after a decade, only the empty site remained.

(Window display 'Auto-Destructive Art', Better Books, London.)
1966. Metzger was one of the chief organisers of a key event of the 1960s: the Destruction in Arts Symposium (DIAS), an international gathering of artists held in London whose work was about destruction and/or used destruction as an artistic technique. The killing of live animals was specifically excluded. Artists who participated included John Latham, Yoko Ono, Wolf Vostell, Al Hansen, Ivor Davies, Werner Schreib, Ralph Ortiz, and Hermann Nitsch. The pop music band The Who, whose stage act climaxed with guitar trashing, was invited but did not attend. There was much press and media coverage, most of it negative. The police charged Metzger with presenting an 'indecent exhibition'; he had to spend months preparing a defence and in 1967 the courts fined him £100. The magazine Art & Artists (August 1966) devoted a special issue to the theme of ‘Auto-Destructive’ with
statement by Metzger. Talk given at Masterclass Philip King, Sculpture
Department, St Martin’s School of Art, London.

1968. 'Extremes Touch', exhibition of new works, Filtration Laboratory, University
College, Swansea. Metzger contributed *Five Screens with Computer* project to the
'Cybernetic Serendipity' exhibition organised by Jasia Reichardt at the ICA.

1967. Lectures ‘Destruction in Art’, Festival of Art, Exeter; ‘The Aesthetic of
Revulsion’, Bristol Arts Centre, Bristol.


1969. Contributes to 'Event 1: Computer Arts Society', Royal College of Art and to
*PAGE*, the bulletin of the Computer Arts Society. March: published article on
‘Automata in History’ in *Studio International*. Lectures: ‘On the possible,’
Portsmouth College of Education; ‘The social relevance of art’, Slade School of Fine
Art, London.

Retrospective’, National Film Theatre 2, London. Contributes to ‘Happening and
Fluxus’, exhibition Kolnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (article in catalogue). London
organiser of the International Coalition for the Liquidation of Art - Tate Gallery
demonstration. Early ecological work about air pollution: 'MOBBILE', South Bank and town centre. Metzger: it ‘comprised a small car. Its exhaust went into a plastic box, and in the box there were bits of meat hanging and flowers and green stuff. The car was driven around near the Hayward Gallery, where there was a show of kinetic art.’

In 1972 a larger version with four cars was proposed for Documenta 5. Contributed to 'Tendencije 4' Galerie Suvremene, Umjetnosti, Zagreb. Article on Kinetics published in *Art & Artists*. Contributes to ‘Computer graphics ‘70’, Brunel University, Uxbridge.


Lecture/Demonstration at National Film Theatre, London.

1972. Contributes to ‘British thing’, Henie-Onstad Kunstsenter, Hovikaddon,
Norway. Elected vice-Chairman of the Artists Union - an attempt to organise artists in a collective fashion. 'Unrealizable Disintegrative Architecture', Architectural Association, London. 'Executive Profile' exhibit at the ICA as part of 'The Body as a Medium of Expression': images of business executives culled from newspapers with typed comments added were displayed in order to reveal 'retarded attitudes'. Took part in 'Three Life Situations', Gallery House, London and British Council Heinie/Onstadt Show, 'Professional Massage' project realised. Published an attack on John Latham and the Artist Placement Group. Invited to contribute to ‘Documenta 5’ exhibition at Kassel: ‘I sketched out a proposal for documenta titled KARBA. This only involved four cars positioned around a three-metre plastic cube. Harold Szeemann said that the technicians could execute it and that I didn’t need to come to Kassel to oversee the work. Anyhow, it wasn’t made, and so I was never in Documenta, except in the catalogue … I had an exhibition in this magnificent art gallery in Lund two years ago [in 2005]. The curator, Pontus Kyander, was determined to realize KARBA within the courtyard of the gallery. Every hour a motor started, and the exhaust went in and the water ran down the inside of the three-metre cube.’ At the Tate Gallery in 1972 Joseph Beuys appeared in public and Metzger debated art and politics with him. Lecture: ‘Ethics of the Art/Science/Technology link’, Leicester Polytechnic and Kingston Polytechnic.

1974. Although Metzger had decided to withdraw from the artworld he did agree to contribute to the catalogue of the ICA show 'Art into Society/Society into Art: Seven German Artists'. He provided a bibliography on 'The Art Dealer' and a series of
questions about political art. Metzger proposed an art strike. There was no response. He concluded that most artists were 'disgusting bastards'.


1977. Featured in the show ‘Towards another Picture,’ Midland Group Gallery, Nottingham. 1977-80 Three year period in which all artists were supposed to strike, to cease all artistic production and to stop exhibiting. Metzger himself did not make any art during this period.


1981. Metzger collaborated with Klaus Staeck and others (so-called Kollektiv Group) and contributed to the 'Passiv-Explosiv' exhibition held in Cologne and 'Vor dem Abbruch', Kunstmuseum, Bern. Also, 'Faschismus Deutschland: Darstellung Analyse Bekampfen', University of Bern. Living in Frankfurt, Germany Metzger becomes very conscious of historical anti-Semitism and the rise of Neo-Nazism and produced text works concerning Hitler’s laws against the Jews. Lecture: ‘Auto-Destructive Art’, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Frankfurt.

1983. ‘Gustav Metzger on his work’, Visual Arts Society, University of Sussex,
Brighton.

1988. A chapter was devoted to Metzger by Stewart Home in his book *The Assault on Culture*. Home called him 'a one person art movement'.

1990s. Metzger engaged in art-historical research in the Netherlands.


Metzger began his lecture by explaining that his primary concern was not with art as such but with art's context: the history of the 20th century; the destructive aspects of the capitalist (and communist) mode of over-production, science, industry, weaponry and technology. Via a series of telling slides of recent media images, he reminded the audience of the latest threats to human life - environmental pollution and genetic engineering. At the same time, Metzger's own history revealed that he is not a luddite opposed to all scientific research and new technology; the purposes to which they are put are crucial. (However, he refuses to own a telephone.) As his interest in chemicals, automata, machines, the factory-assembly of
art, and computers during the 1960s demonstrated, Metzger himself has been willing to use industry and technology for critical ends. He has also been an active supporter of the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science.

Violence and destruction in art are sources of disquiet. Given the predominant orientation of the arts towards aesthetic pleasure, Metzger's 'aesthetic of revulsion' clearly worked against the grain. Journalists covering the DIAS events of the 1960s complained about the dubious morality of using destruction to protest about destruction. But was not the Nietzschian tactic comparable to a vaccine - using a small dose of a disease in order to immunise the body - against it? The Press ignored the cathartic and therapeutic effects of witnessing violent, destructive art. (Is this not the social function of horror and crime movies?) It also ignored the positive aspect of destructive violence during revolutions. Metzger insisted that DIAS was an opportunity for an inquiry into the sources of violence in human behaviour; destruction in art did not mean the destruction of art.

Metzger's distaste for the artworld - a microcosm of capitalism - and the role of art as a commodity benefiting the wealthy soon became evident. His history revealed repeated attempts to create work that resisted commodification, that was public in character, that avoided permanence and artworld venues, that attempted to organise artists and to change the economy the artworld, and that was a critique of the dealer/gallery/collector/museum system. Clearly, Metzger has had an ambivalent relationship, a love-hatred towards art and the artworld. Contradictions abounded: to remain inside the artworld was to be compromised, but to go outside it was to
abandon visual means of expression and to vacate a site of some cultural influence.

His progressive disenchantment led to gradual withdrawal; hence, his present virtual invisibility. (This is no longer the case.) It is true that most art has exchange-value but it also has use-value. To my mind, Metzger exhibited a lack of faith in the power of radical art and media to move, educate, politicise and motivate people. The mixture of aesthetics and politics can be extremely potent.

In the debate that followed the lecture, I expressed scepticism regarding his art strike proposal; most artists have no employer against whom to strike, they are not employees in the industrial sense and consequently unions of fine artists are lost causes; artists are more like small entrepreneurs/producers, in competition with one another, selling their handmade wares on the open market. In any case, successful artists are generally extreme individualists; they are most unlikely to risk their lucrative income. Metzger explained that the strike was intended to be temporary and to serve as a period of reflection and self-education in which artists could reconsider their social role and refresh themselves by doing something different. Whatever the internal contradictions and paradoxes of Metzger's history and practice and despite its many unrealised projects, Metzger's artistic 'career' - or should it be anti-art 'career' - is, to me, far more interesting and intellectually challenging than that of most conventional artists.

(1) Student essay, 1995.

Update.
Since the mid 1990s Metzger has been extremely active and his work has been increasingly appreciated by art students, artists, art critics, art magazines, museums, publishers, arts organisations and arts funding foundations. Increasingly he has been able to create new work and to reconstruct or recreate old projects.


60s: This was Tomorrow’, Tate Britain, London & Birmingham Museums and Art
P.S.1, New York.

*Reconstruction of First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art.* (London: Tate
Britain, 2004). Photo courtesy of Tate Britain. A cleaner removed the bag of waste
paper on right by mistake!

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Metzger, Installation, Vienna 2005. 'To Crawl Into' a very large photograph of Viennese Jews scrubbing the pavement, laid out on the floor and entirely covered by a cloth. In order to view the image the viewer has to get down onto the floor and crawl under the cloth.


Installation ‘Eichmann and the Angel’ (Industrial conveyer belt, wall of Guardian newspapers, reproduction of Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus [1920] plus a wood and glass cage recalling that in which the Nazi prisoner Adolf Eichmann was held during his 1961 trial.) Commissioned by Cubitt Artists Gallery, London, September-October, also shown at Lund’s Konsthall, Sweden. Contributes to ‘Zur Tektonik der Geschichte,’ Forum Stadtpark, Graz; and ‘II Bienal de Valencia - Agua sin ti no
soy,’ Bienal de Valencia, Spain; and ‘Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era’, Tate Liverpool. Mounts ‘an art exhibition without art’, that is, a real time multi-media, interactive communication via internet and other electronic media for a period of seven weeks at ‘East International’ at Norwich Art Gallery, Norwich.

Publication *Water Found on Mars*, by Eva Weinmayr and Gustav Metzger

Contributes to ‘MERZ - Magazin 4’, Bregenzer Kunstverein, Bregenz.

Metzger, *Recreation of 1961 Auto-Destructive art event*. 14 October 2006. South Bank near Hayward Gallery. Photo Jack Goffe. (Man executing the work was actually the artist Brian Hodgson.)

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------


‘a man will drive a forklift to the Westfälischer Kunstverein, step off the vehicle, go inside the building, and use a password to activate a computer program that will inform him, by means of a random generator, how many stones he has to take to a certain location in the city. The man will find his payload in the courtyard of the LWL-Landesmuseum, use the forklift to take it to the allotted place, and then make a photograph of the pile of stones. When he returns to the Kunstverein, he will post the image online for all to see.’

Metzger: ‘the Allied bombardment of Münster destroyed 80 to 90 percent of the city, and it was done in retaliation for the German attack in 1940 on Coventry and Coventry Cathedral. So for 109 days in Münster there will be a series of stones laid, in 109 different places in the city, in commemoration of the bombardment.’
Contributes to ‘Performa 07 - The Second Biennial of New Visual Art Performance’, Performa, New York City, and ‘SAMMLUNG’, Generali Foundation, Vienna; and ‘bit international – [Nove] Tendencije’, Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz; and ‘8th Sharjah Biennial - Sharjah International Art Biennial, United Arab Emirates: ‘Project Stockholm, June (Phase 1),’ originally conceived in 1972 for the first UN Conference on the Human Environment. 120 cars were parked around the perimeter of a square frame sealed in plastic. Engines switched on, the cars exhaust fumes filled the structure in what was envisaged as the first phase of the project. Phase 2, which was not realised in
Sharjah, prescribes that the cars are then to be encased in the structure, engines still running, until they inevitably overheated and burst into flames.


Contributed to ‘Yokohama Triennale 2008 - Time Crevasse’, Central and Waterfront Sites in Yokohama, Japan; and ‘Moralische Fantasien - Künstlerische Strategien in Zusammenhang mit der Klimaerwärmung,’ Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, Warth; and ‘Experiment Marathon Reykjavik - Listasafn Reykjavikur,’ Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik; and ‘Old News 4’, Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis, MN; and ‘Biennale Cuvée’, O.K Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz; and ‘bit international. [Nove] tendencije | Computer und visuelle Forschung | Zagreb 1961–1973’, ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe; and


Participates in The Nuclear Forum (28 November 2008) debating the future of nuclear energy at the Royal Society of Arts, London. Project: ‘Reduce Art Flights’ (RAF, 2008) - leaflets appealing to the arts community to reduce flying to art fairs, etc.

replaced by dying roots, the sculpture is both a plea for reflection and a plaintive cry for change. The artwork will be installed at Victory Peace Garden for the duration of the festival, and then be moved to the grounds of the Whitworth Art Gallery.'