



# Gustav Metzger: painter, performance artist, writer

(April 10, 1926 in Nuremberg - March 1, 2017 in London)

## The Metzger family and the Holocaust

Gustav Metzger's parents Juda and Fanny, nee Turner, came to Nuremberg from their Polish hometown of Przemysl in 1918. Here father Juda earned the living of his family of three sons and two daughters as a salesman.

Like other Jewish people of Polish origin Juda fell victim to the deportation of this minority to the German-Polish border in late October 1938 and was stranded at the transit camp of Zbaszyn. His wife Fanny followed him to Poland where the couple was murdered in a Nazi extermination camp in 1942. One year later also the oldest son Chaim was deported from France, where he lived since 1936, to a concentration camp and perished.

## Gustav Metzger's beginnings as an artist

In January 1939 along with his older brother Mendel, today a well known scholar and expert in Jewish history of art, Gustav Metzger escaped to Great Britain on a *Kindertransport* (children's transport), but he is regarding himself as stateless. After studying woodwork at *O.R.T.* Technical College in Leeds from 1941 to 1942, Metzger became a cabinet-maker, farmer and gardener. He studied at the Cambridge School of Art and in London in 1946. A year after his first exhibition of paintings in 1959 in London, he gave his first lecture demonstration of *Auto-destructive Art*. In the same year he became a founder-member of the *Committee of 100*.



**Gustav Metzger**  
(Photo: Justin Hoffmann)

## The idea of Auto-destructive Art

In her contribution to *The Dictionary of Art*, Kristine Stiles defines Auto-destructive Art as *term applied to works of art in a variety of media, with the capacity to destroy themselves after a finite existence, ranging from a few moments to 20 years. This self-destruction may result from natural processes such as collisions, decomposition and dematerialization, or from mechanisms requiring collaboration between artists, scientists and engineers, and may be either random and unpredictable or strictly controlled.*

## **Gustav Metzger as creator of *Auto-destructive Art***

Metzger who first used and explained the term in his *Manifesto Auto-destructive Art* in 1960, for instance applied the technique of *painting* with acid on nylon to create Auto-destructive Art. The premier *demonstration* of his theories *The Times* described on the occasion of a retrospective of his works at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art in 1998 as follows:

*Summoned by a green-tinted manifesto called **Auto-destructive Art**, a crowd assembled at the South Bank, London, on July 3, 1961. The time was 11.45 am. Three large nylon sheets, coloured white, black and red, stood flapping on a metal frame. They must have looked like an extreme assertion of abstract art at its most minimal, but Gustav Metzger regarded them more as sacrificial victims. Protected by a gasmask, he stepped forward, lifted up a spray gun and covered the sheets in hydrochloric acid. Seconds later they began to disintegrate and after 20 minutes the ragged remnants had dissolved.*

In 1966 Metzger organized the international Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS), which brought Viennese followers of *Aktionismus* and various artists of the *Fluxus* movement as well as poets, musicians and psychologists to London to create and discuss the social implications of Auto-destructive Art. The participants, among them John Lennon and Yoko Ono, also addressed recent political topics like the war in Vietnam. This attracted much attention in the press but also gave much momentum to the development of kinetic and performance art in Britain.

## **From auto-destruction to auto-construction**

Though not everybody may understand or identify with his concepts, there are many-fold aspects of Metzger's work which owe our respect, such as the biographical momentum trying to cope with grief, anger and aggression in an artistic expression or Metzger's approach to art as an universal phenomenon naturally connected to our society and environment and therefore obliged to intervene where wrong developments are impending.

In Gustav Metzger's art *auto-destructive* evolved inevitably *auto-constructive*: Demanding an art of *change, movement and growth* (title of a manifesto of 1961) he experimented with heating liquid crystal on thin glass slides and projecting them as large-scaled, perpetually altering images on screens. By this new technique first displayed in 1965 Metzger coined our image of the psychedelic 60s, because British Rock musicians like Pete Townshend, leader of *The Who* or the members of *Cream* adapted the idea and integrated it into their stage shows.

## **The rediscovery of Metzger's work**

After the anti-establishment avant-garde of the 1960s had become part of the establishment herself, Metzger in the late 1970s began to object profoundly to what he saw as the capitalist-based art world, and he therefore concentrated largely on organizing symposia and exhibitions relating to German Fascist art. Again, Metzger was on his own, an outsider sharply opposing icons of modern art like Joseph Beuys, whom he considered to be *irritated as a person and irritating as an artist*.

It took the public until the early 1990s to reconsider and consequently rediscover the artist Gustav Metzger, starting with Justin Hoffmann's thesis of 1992 (*Destruktionskunst. Der Zerstörungsmythos in der Kunst der frühen sechziger Jahre*, Munich 1995) in which the author outlined extensively the meaning of his ideas and work. In 1997 Hoffmann was the curator of Metzger's first solo exhibit at the *kunstraum münchen e.V.* association followed by the already mentioned retrospective at Oxford's MOMA also shown in the artist's place of birth, Nuremberg, in 1999.

The public attention coincided with a new period in Metzger's creative life, his large **Historic Photographs** where he takes a critical look at the way the photograph, especially the press photograph, is used to encapsulate pivotal and tragic moments in history. These latest works address issues as the Holocaust, pollution and the Arab-Israeli conflict confronting the spectator in an irritatingly close physical manner *to walk into, to walk onto* (subtitle of this group of works) the photos and thereby forcing to face them.

In 2016 Metzger's exhibit *Mass Media: Today and Yesterday* was presented by *Neues Museum* in Nuremberg.

### **Gerhard Jochem**

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