

Serpentine Gallery

Teachers' Resources

Gustav Metzger

Decades 1959 - 2009

29 September – 8 November 2009



Gustav Metzger
Liquid Crystal Environment 2005–2009
Commissioned for *Summer of Love:
Art of the Psychedelic Era*,
Tate Liverpool, 2005
Five slide projectors, liquid crystals
Photograph © Tate, London 2009
© 2009 Gustav Metzger

Gustav Metzger

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Sir Norman Rosenthal

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Background information

The Serpentine Gallery presents a major survey of work from six decades by the influential artist and activist Gustav Metzger. Metzger's practice represents a life-long involvement in left-wing politics, ecology and the creative and destructive powers of twentieth and twenty-first century industrialised societies. This will be the first time such an extensive overview of Metzger's work has been presented in the UK.

The exhibition draws together the threads of Metzger's practice from 1959 to 2009. Exploring archives, here and abroad, the exhibition will bring the themes and methodologies that have informed the artist's practice for over sixty years to a new generation, who themselves have witnessed the effects of industrialisation, capitalism and globalisation in recent world events.

Gustav Metzger

Born in Nuremberg, Germany in 1926 to Polish-Jewish parents, Gustav Metzger came to England at the age of 12, with his elder brother as a refugee in 1939, escaping Nazi Germany. He studied at various art schools in Cambridge, London, Antwerp and Oxford and trained as a cabinet maker before founding Auto-Destructive Art in 1959.

Gustav Metzger's recent work *Flailing Trees*, commissioned by Manchester International Festival 09, has been acquired by the Whitworth Art Gallery and placed opposite the entrance to the gallery. This is Metzger's only permanent outdoor work. In its original form, 21 upended willows placed into a concrete platform stood in the Manchester Peace Garden throughout the Festival. A related work *Mirror Trees* 2009 is included in the Serpentine Gallery exhibition.



Gustav Metzger
Flailing Trees 2009
Manchester International Festival 2009
Photograph Kristian Buus
© 2009 Gustav Metzger

Themes, ideas and questions to explore

1. Destruction, creation and action

Keywords

Destruction – creation – history – memory – struggle – society – world events – change – loss – collection – scrap book – public art – protest – World War II – the Holocaust – avant-garde art

Cross-curricular links

Art and Design – Citizenship – History – Science – Media Studies – Geography – Design and Technology

In 1959 Gustav Metzger wrote a manifesto *Auto Destructive Art* in which he explored the relationship between destruction and creation in art and society. He proposed:

Auto-destructive art is primarily a form of public art for industrialised societies.

The artist may collaborate with scientists, engineers.

Self-destructive art can be machine produced and factory assembled.

Metzger began to use discarded every day materials such as cardboard packaging, newspaper, plastic bags, and discarded fabric from factories to express his ideas about politics and industrial society. He created ready-made art objects that demonstrated the wastage of consumerism and the potential of creativity and mass production.

The *Acid Paintings* of the early 1960's were the first actions in which Metzger expressed 'Auto Destructive Art'. *South Bank Demonstration* in 1961 presented an artwork being created and destroyed exactly at the same time. Wearing a gas mask and protective clothing the artist painted hydrochloric acid on to large nylon canvasses burning the surface and leaving only ragged fragments remaining. *Auto-Destructive Art- The Activities of G. Metzger* 1963 can be watched on DVD in the East Gallery Ear, along side the *Manifestos* (1959 – 1964)



Gustav Metzger
Acid Action Painting 2006
Recreation of the 1961
Southbank Demonstration
by the artist Brian
Hodgson, Hayward
Gallery, London
Photograph Kristian Buus
© 2009 Gustav Metzger



Gustav Metzger
South Bank Demonstration 1961
Black and white photograph
Courtesy Lunds konstell/Terje Ostling
© 2009 Gustav Metzger

Discussions

Discuss any connections that you might see between the works and these concepts:

1. Destruction and creativity
2. Consumerism and the mass-media

What points of view, lifestyle and values are represented in Metzger's work and how do they relate to the world today?

Describe the work *Drop on a Hot Plate?* 1968/2009 What do you think are the themes?

What is a readymade? Which other artists use readymades in their work?

What qualities do we associate with plastic bags, cardboard packaging, and materials such as fabric, wood and metal?

Activities

Using the themes of destruction and creation, make your own *Auto Destructive Art*. Consider scientific processes, different materials and symbolism in your work. This could be an action, performance or time-based sculpture.

Create a manifesto for issues that you feel passionately about such as climate change, renewable energy, current world events or war and conflict. Using everyday objects and recycle materials to make an artwork to express your idea.

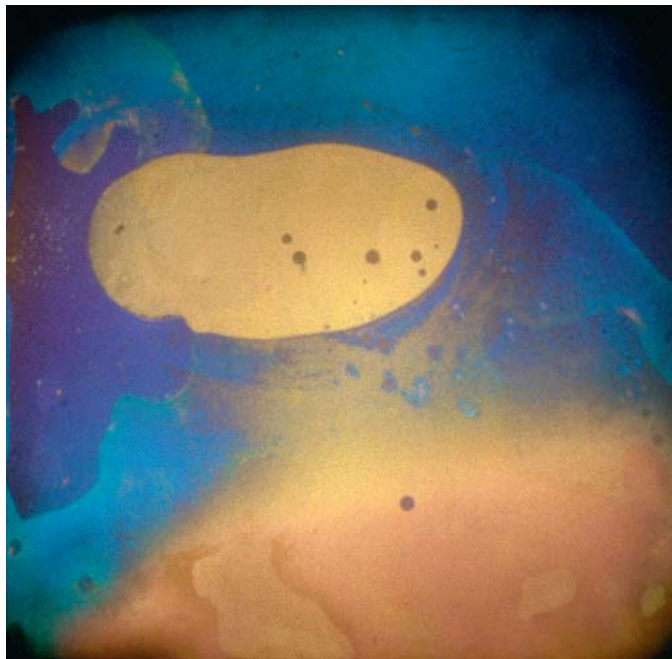
2. Science, technology and the environment

Keywords

Natural – transformation – technological – extinction – evolution – science – cycle – reinvention – globalisation – consumerism - survival – computer – media – engineering - machine – computer – chemical – television – experiment – progress – environment

Cross-curricular links

Art and Design – Citizenship – History – Science – Media Studies – Geography – Design and Technology



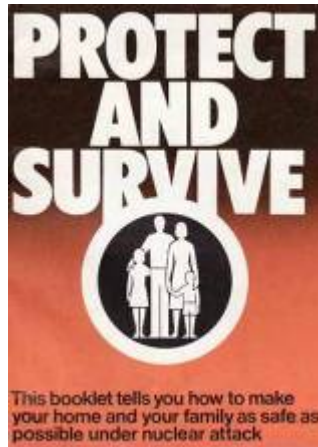
Gustav Metzger
Liquid Crystal Environment 2005–2009 (Detail)
Commissioned for *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*,
Tate Liverpool, 2005
Five slide projectors, liquid crystals
Photograph © Tate, London 2009
© 2009 Gustav Metzger

Investigating the opposite forces of destruction and creation in his artwork Metzger became increasingly interested in science and technology. Chemicals, computers, machinery and mass production were aspects he explored in his art work during the 1960's. In 1965 he made *Liquid Crystals*, as **Auto Creative Art**. These were liquid crystal light projections and provided a counterpart to his 'Auto Destructive Art'. Instead of destruction and extinction they represent transformation, change and endless possibilities.

Metzger also developed, like many people at the time an awareness of the dangers presented by science and new technology. The optimism of 'progress' also proposed a world threatened by nuclear war, chemical warfare and the destruction of nature, wastage and the impact of our actions upon the environment.

Mirror Trees 2009, Protect and Survive 1980, Protest and Survive 1980, Historic Photographs: Kill the Cars, Camden Town, London 1996 1996/ 2009 and Project

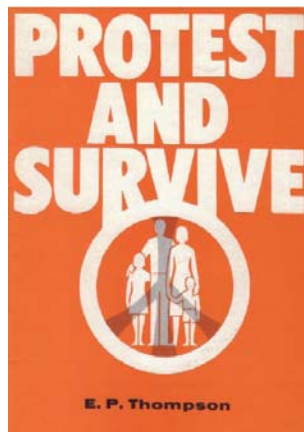
Stockholm June (Phase 1) 2007 amongst other works in the East Gallery all focus on these themes.



Protect and Survive 1980

Front cover of booklet prepared for the Home Office by the Central Office of Information, London
Image courtesy of the British Library, London

© The National Archives



Protest and Survive 1980

Front cover of booklet by E P Thompson for Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation

Image courtesy of the British Library, London

© Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament



Historic Photographs: Kill the Cars, Camden Town, London 1996 1996 / 2009

Photograph, car and audio

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Testa

Discussions

What are the qualities of *Liquid Crystal Environment* 2005–2009 and how does the work make you feel?

What does the work *Mirror Trees* 2009 symbolize and in what ways does it connect the surrounding environment at the Serpentine Gallery?

Consider *Historic Photographs: Kill the Cars, Camden Town, London* 1996 1996/2009 and the links between art and protest? What are your personal experiences of protest?

Activities

What is the impact of science and technology on everyday life, our society and the environment? Describe at least two inventions, what they do, how they work, and how they have improved the world.

Describe two threats or dangers that scientific advances and new technologies have on society and the environment e.g. nuclear power, travel & forms of transport.

Describe how legends, stories, and scientific explanations are different ways in which people attempt to explain the world and the future?

3. History, archives and collecting

Keywords

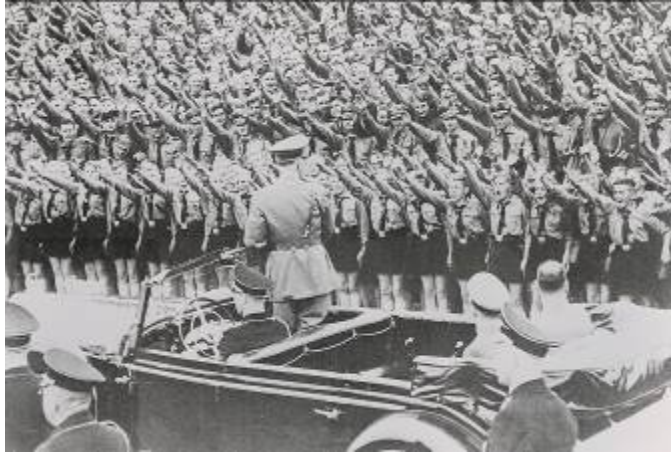
History – society – memory – loss – archive – collection – newspaper – mass media – world news – reporting – horror – investigation – television – documentation – reality – truth – trivial – sympathy – voyeurism – representation

Cross-curricular links

Art and Design – Citizenship – History – Science – Media Studies – Geography – Design and Technology

Metzger's commitment to personal protest and political ideals led him to *Years Without Art* in response to art becoming increasingly commercial in a capitalist society. Between 1977 and 1980 he made no art work at all. Instead he embarked on undertaking research. In 1981, making new artwork he exhibited an installation of photocopies of German, National Socialist publications listing all the laws passed against Jews between 1933 and 1943. **Laws on Jews from Reichsgesetzblatt 1929 – 1943** are displayed in the West Gallery Ear. Metzger makes a deeply personal connection between his early life and the catastrophic events of the last century in this piece. The yellow painted walls make reference to the yellow coloured Star of David badge that Jewish people were forced to wear by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

After this, Metzger began a new series of work called **Historic Photographs** beginning with using archival images from Nazi Germany including *Historic Photographs: No 1: Liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, April 19 – 28 days 1943* 1995/2009, *Historic Photographs: Hitler Youth, Eigenschweiß* 1997/2009 and *Historic Photographs: To Crawl Into – Anschluss, Vienna, March 1938* 1996.



Historic Photographs: Hitler-Youth, Eigenschweiß 1997/ 2009
Black and white photograph welded between two steel sheets
121 x 177.5 x 0.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

These works were followed by mass media images capturing the horror of further historical world events and include violence inflicted on the Palestinian people by Israel in *Historic Photographs: To Walk Into – Massacre on the Mount, Jerusalem, 8 November 1990* 1996, and the Vietnam War in *Historic Photographs: Trang Bang, Children Fleeing South Vietnam, April 1972* 1998. The photographs are all presented large scale and are hidden, obscured, covered, or framed by everyday materials and objects that relate to the images. This means that the viewer is close in scale to the people depicted in the images and also suggests that we instinctively hide things that are too painful or shocking to see.

The newspaper as an everyday object and a record of historical events is an important element of Metzger's work. A central feature of the exhibition is a participative installation using a large archive of newspapers ***MASS MEDIA: Today and Today 2009***, which Metzger has been collecting since 1995. Members of the public are invited to have a hands-on experience of the collection, by participating in the making of a new work at the Serpentine Gallery.



Gustav Metzger

Eichmann and the Angel 2005

Industrial conveyor belt, wall of *Guardian* newspapers and reproduction of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* 1920

Commissioned by Cubitt, Installation at Lunds Konsthall, Sweden

Photograph Lunds Konsthall/Terje Östling

© 2009 Gustav Metzger

Courtesy the artist and Emanuel von Baeyer – London

Discussions:

How are the specific qualities of Metzger's *Historic Photographs* artworks similar and different to the imagery of the media conveyed in the news today?

Why has the artist hidden the images? How do the *Historic Photographs* make you feel?

Who does the boy in *Historic Photographs: No 1: Liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, April 19 – 28 days 1943* 1995/2009 represent to the artist?

In what ways do the materials concealing the images relate to the actual images? E.g. what does steel and rubble symbolize?

What different meanings would the work have if the photographic images had been visible to the viewer?

What different meanings would the work have if the photographic images presented in different ways such as if they were transformed in to paintings or drawings?

What does the colour yellow on the wall represent?

Activities

Discuss why human rights are so important in society today by considering: *The Human Rights Act 1998 includes 16 basic rights: the right to life; protection from torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom from slavery; the right to liberty; the right to a fair and public hearing by an independent court; the right to respect for privacy and family life; the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the right to freedom of expression; the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of association; the right to education; the right to enjoy one's*

possessions; the right to elect a government by secret ballot; the absence of the death penalty; the right to enjoy the above rights without discrimination.

What happens when these rights are taken away?

Why does the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasise the importance of children and young people participating in decisions that affect them?

Collect imagery of world events in recent newspapers and chose one you feel passionately about. Using found objects or recyclable materials to frame, hide, or veil the image to recreate a *Historic Photograph*. Explain your choices and ideas to the rest of your group.

Further information and related links

www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk

See the UK Youth Parliament Manifesto for young people here

www.dcfs.gov.uk/citizenship

A source of information about Citizenship in the curriculum, for young people in schools and colleges in England

www.minorityrights.org

Minority Rights Group International campaigns worldwide with around 130 partners in over 60 countries to ensure that minority groups and communities can make their voices heard.

www.carbonfootprint.com

This website shows ways to minimise your environmental impact and show you how to make product choices.

www.recycling-guide.org.uk

A website detailing everything you need to know about recycling including local information and how to recycle different types of materials.

www.greenpeace.org.uk

This website is the UK branch of international environmental activist network.

www.cnduk.org/

CND campaigns non-violently to rid the world of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and to create genuine security for future generations.

www.fairtrade.org.uk

The website of the Fairtrade Foundation.

www.makepovertyhistory.org

The biggest ever anti-poverty came about under the banner MAKE POVERTY HISTORY in 2005. On this page you will find actions that you can take to pressure politicians and decision makers to help make poverty history.

www.cehr.org.uk

Commission for Equality and Human Rights. All the information you need with regards to sex and race discrimination for young people

An Inconvenient Truth (2005) DVD

A documentary film, directed by Davis Guggenheim about former United States Vice President Al Gore's campaign to educate people about global warming and inspire them to take action.

Koyaanisqatsi (1982) DVD

An abstract film directed by Godfrey Reggio. The word *Koyaanisqatsi* means 'crazy life, life in turmoil, life out of balance, life disintegrating, and a state of life

that calls for another way of living. The film implies that modern humanity is living in such a way.

Pioneers in Art and Science: Metzger (2004) DVD
A documentary film directed by Ken McMullen

Damaged nature, auto-destructive art, Gustav Metzger, Coracle (illustrated edition) © workfortheeyetodo, London 1996

Life/Live exhibition catalogue, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris,
© Paris- Musée 1996

Manifeste, Schriften, Konzepte, Justin Hoffman (editor). Gustav Metzger. Silke Schreiber, Munchen 1997

Hans Ulrich Obrist & Gustav Metzger: The Conversation Series, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Gustav Metzger, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln © Hans Ulrich Obrist, Gustav Metzger and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König 2008

www.serpentinegallery.org

www.royalsociety.org

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2004/aug/27/arts.artsnews1>

<http://www.luftgangster.de/gmetzger.html>

Planning a Visit to the Serpentine Gallery

Contact Details

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www.serpentinegallery.org

Transport

The nearest tube stations are South Kensington (1.25 km walk), Knightsbridge (1.25 km walk) or Lancaster Gate (1 km walk)

Bus routes 9, 10, 52, 452, 94 and 148 stop near the Gallery

Group Visit Guidelines

To make your visit as enjoyable as possible, please read the following:

Before your Visit:

- Adult supervision of students under 16 is required at all times, including in the shop. An adult student ratio of 1:5 for under 5's, 1:10 for 5 - 11 year olds, 1:15 for 11 - 16 year olds and 1:20 for 16 - 18 year olds is required.
- We recommend a preliminary planning visit, as for some exhibitions there may be works that you consider unsuitable for your group.

During your Visit:

- The artworks in the *Gustav Metzger Decades 1959 – 2009* exhibition are extremely fragile. Please take extra care to follow the Gallery Guidelines at all times:
 - No running
 - No touching
 - No leaning against walls or plinths
 - No shouting
 - No photography
- Teachers/group leaders and accompanying adults are responsible for their group's behaviour whilst at the Serpentine Gallery.
- Many contemporary artworks are fragile and damage easily. Please make sure that your group understands that this is why they are not allowed to touch the art.
- Lecturing: If your group is larger than 30 please split them into smaller groups in the exhibition space and do not lecture in rooms where talks are already in progress.
- Drawing: If you would like to do some drawing please check with the gallery what materials you will be able to use in the exhibition

Education and Family Events

Education is at the core of the Serpentine Gallery's activities. Through practical, artist led workshops and discussion, talks, events and projects the Education Programme offers a diverse range of innovative ways to engage with modern and contemporary art and architecture for all ages.

Please refer to the Serpentine Gallery Bulletin or www.serpentinegallery.org for information on events and activities taking place as part of the Education Programme during the *Gustav Metzger Decades 1959 – 2009* exhibition.

The *Gustav Metzger Decades 1959 – 2009* Teachers' Notes are also available to download free at www.serpentinegallery.org along with Teachers' Notes for the previous exhibitions:

Jeff Koons: Popeye Series, 2 July – 13 September 2009

Luke Fowler, 7 May – 14 June 2009

Rebecca Warren, 10 March – 19 April 2009

Indian Highway, 10 December 2008 – 22 February 2009

Gerhard Richter, 23 September – 23 November 2008

Richard Prince, 26 June – 7 September 2008

Maria Lassnig, 25 April – 8 June 2008

Derek Jarman, 23 February – 13 April 2008

Anthony McCall, 30 November 2007 – 3 February 2008

Matthew Barney, 20 September – 11 November 2007

Hreinn Fridfinnsson, 17 July – 2 September 2007

Paul Chan, 15 May – 1 July 2007

Allora & Calzadilla, 17 – 29 April 2007

Karen Kilimnik, 20 February 9 April 2007

In the darkest hour there may be light, works from Damien Hirst's murderme collection, 25 November 2006 – 28 January 2007

Runa Islam, 25 October – 5 November 2006

China Power Station: Part 1, 8 October – 5 November 2006

Uncertain States of America, 9 September – 15 October 2006
Thomas Demand, 6 June – 20 August 2006
Ellsworth Kelly, 18 March – 21 May 2006
Elmgreen & Dragset, 26 January – 26 February 2006
Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, 19 October 2005 – 8 January 2006
Oliver Payne & Nick Relph, 6 September – 2 October 2005
Rirkrit Tiravanija, 5 July – 21 August 2005
Andreas Slominski, 26 April – 12 June 2005
Tomoko Takahashi, 22 February – 10 April 2005
Monika Sosnowska, 5 December 2004 – 16 January 2005
Glenn Brown, 14 September – 7 November 2004
Gabriel Orozco, 1 July - 30 August 2004
Cy Twombly, 17 April – 13 June 2004
State of Play, 3 February – 28 March 2004
Hiroshi Sugimoto, 18 November 2003 – 18 January 2004
John Currin, 9 September – 2 November 2003
Cindy Sherman, 3 June – 25 August 2003
Takahashi Murakami, 12 November 2002 – 26 January 2003
Kutlug Ataman, 11 February – 9 March 2003