

Press Release

Gustav Metzger. And Then Came the Environment

13 September 2024 – 5 January 2025
Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles
North B Gallery



Los Angeles...Opening 13 September in conjunction with the Getty's PST ART initiative, 'Art & Science Collide,' Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles will present 'Gustav Metzger. And Then Came the Environment,' the pathbreaking late artist's first solo exhibition in LA and his second major presentation in the United States.

'And Then Came the Environment' presents a range of Metzger's scientific works merging art and science from 1961 onward, highlighting his advocacy for environmental awareness and the possibilities for the transformation of society, as well as his latest experimental works, created in 2014. The exhibition title comes from Metzger's groundbreaking 1992 essay 'Nature Demised' wherein he proclaims an urgent need to redefine our understanding of nature in relation to the environment. Metzger explains that the politicized term 'environment' creates a disconnect from the natural world, manipulating public perception to obscure pollution and exploitation caused by wars and industrialization, and that it should be renamed 'Damaged Nature.'

An early proponent of the ecology movement and an ardent activist, Gustav Metzger (1926 – 2017) was born in Nuremberg to Polish-Jewish parents, and fled Nazi Germany to England when he was 12 with his brother via the Kindertransport. While working as a gardener, he began his art studies in 1945 in war-embroiled Cambridge, a nexus for scientific experimentation and debate as the Atomic Age was dawning. By the late 1950s, Metzger was deeply involved in anti-nuclear protests and developed his manifestos on 'auto-destructive' and 'auto-creative' art. These powerful statements were aimed at 'the integration of art with the advances of science and technology,' a synthesis that gained wide recognition in Europe in the 1960s through his exhibitions, lecture-demonstrations and writing.

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Metzger's quenchless curiosity about new materials and gadgets—from projectors and electronics to cholesteric liquid crystals and silicate minerals such as 'mica'—led him to conduct experiments in and out of laboratories in collaboration with leading scientists in an effort to amplify the unpredictable beauty and uncertainty of materials in transformation: 'the art of change, of movement, of growth.' By the 1970s, increasingly concerned with ethical ramifications, Metzger became closely involved with the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science, raising awareness of 'grotesque' environmental degradation and social alienation and arguing for 'old attitudes and new skills' to bring science, technology, society and nature into harmony. He initiated itinerant projects to draw attention to the immense pollution caused by car emissions, a pursuit that gained momentum with his proposal for the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 and was later partially realized in 2007 at the Sharjah Biennial.

The artworks on view in 'And Then Came the Environment' reveal Metzger's lifelong interest in drawing and gesture, presenting works on paper from the mid-1950s alongside models, installations and later, Light Drawings that underpin the artist's desire for human interaction amidst the reliance on technology that continues to this day. Following his death, The Gustav Metzger Foundation was established to further Metzger's work and carry on his legacy.

Exhibited for the first time in Los Angeles, works here include the earliest film documentation of Metzger's bold chemical experiments on the South Bank in London ('Auto-Destructive Art: The Activities of G. Metzger,' directed by H. Liversidge, 1963); his first mechanized sculpture with Liquid Crystals—'Earth from Space' (1966)—and the stunning, large-scale projection, 'Liquid Crystal Environment' (1966), one of the earliest public demonstrations of the material that makes Liquid Crystal Displays (LCDs), now omnipresent in our computer, telephone and watch screens.

'And Then Came the Environment' also presents 'Dancing Tubes' (1968), an early kinetic project Metzger developed in the Filtration Laboratory of the University College of Swansea; various iterations of his projects against car pollution including the model 'Earth Minus Environment' (1992); and the Light Drawing series (2014), using a plotter machine, a technology he first used in 1970, with fiber-optic light directed by air or hand.

The exhibition will be complemented by a new short film created by artist Justin Richburg, who animated Childish Gambino's 2018 hit 'Feels like Summer,' which references climate change. Richburg's piece was inspired by and responds to Metzger's 1992 essay 'Damaged Nature.' The film represents the first time Metzger's ideas have been directly expressed through a new medium, thus reflecting his interests in ongoing transformation and his

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conviction that younger generations were the most essential, urgent audiences for his work. In 2012, five years before his death at the age of 90, Metzger wrote:

'The future of the world is what we are after. We start with the young and then when the young are twelve, fifteen, and then twenty-one, they can enter politics, and if they have got this initiation/introduction to key issues ... it will make an enormous difference to the future of the world.'

'And Then Came the Environment' coincides with two major European institutional exhibitions devoted to Metzger's oeuvre and contributions: 'Gustav Metzger. All of Us Together,' curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Vassilis Oikonomopoulos and Arthur Fouray, at LUMA, Arles, France (30 June 2024 – onwards) and 'Gustav Metzger,' curated by Susanne Pfeffer and Julia Eichler, at Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK), Frankfurt, Germany (27 July 2024 – 5 January 2025).



Publication

On the occasion of the exhibition, Hauser & Wirth Publishers will release 'Gustav Metzger: Interviews with Hans Ulrich Obrist,' edited by Karen Marta. Drawing from more than two decades of conversations with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, artistic director of the Serpentine, this richly illustrated volume will offer a comprehensive overview of Metzger's life, approach to art, and political activism. With a candor that comes from speaking to someone who knows him well, Metzger discusses his childhood in pre-Second World War Nuremberg, his participation in and co-organization of the 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) after his move to London, and his visionary thinking about environmental destruction, among many other topics. This panoramic book, which is complemented with a new, rigorously researched chronology, is a vital resource for Metzger scholars and newcomers alike.

A book launch and talk with Hans Ulrich Obrist will be held at Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles on 15 September at 11 am. A New York launch event will take place at Hauser & Wirth, 18th Street on 21 September.

Learning

A comprehensive learning program, interactive events and additional resources will be developed in conjunction with the exhibition, inspired by the life and work of Gustav Metzger. Further details to be announced in September.

About PST ART

Hauser & Wirth is part of PST ART as a Gallery Program Participant. Returning in September 2024 with its latest edition, 'PST ART: Art & Science Collide,' this landmark regional event explores the intersections of art and science, both past and present. PST ART is presented by Getty. For more information about 'PST ART: Art & Science Collide,' please visit pst.art.

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Press contacts:

Ben Thornborough
benthornborough@hauserwirth.com
+1 914 456 9302

Andrea Schwan
andrea@andreaschwan.com
+1 917 371 5023

Samara Davis
samaradavis@hauserwirth.com
+1 347 668 1768

Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles

901 East 3rd Street
Los Angeles CA 90013

Gallery hours:
Tuesday – Sunday, 11 am – 6 pm

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Liquid Crystal Environment
1966/2021
7 Kodak SAV 2050 slide projectors, control units, rotating polarized filters,
liquid crystals
Dimension variable
Installation view, 'Gustav Metzger,' Hauser & Wirth Somerset, Bruton, UK,
2021
Photo: Ken Adlard

Light Drawing
2014
Photographic print on aluminum, 4 parts
Each: 51 x 40.5 x 3 cm / 20 1/8 x 16 x 1 1/8 in
Overall: 102 x 81 x 3 cm / 40 1/8 x 31 7/8 x 1 1/8 in
Photo: Damian Griffiths

Earth Minus Environment (Model) (detail)
1992
Wood, perspex, model cars
122 x 122 cm
Plinth 130 x 130 x 45 cm

Gustav Metzger giving the Lecture/Demonstration 'The Chemical Revolution
in Art' at the Society of Arts, Cambridge University, 11 October 1965, with
projections of ink in glycerin
Photo: Richard Gloucester