

GUSTAV METZGER

CHRONOLOGY

- 1926** Born on April 10 in Nuremberg, Germany, to Orthodox Jewish Polish parents.
- 1939** After witnessing his father's arrest by Nazi soldiers, travels to the UK as a Polish citizen with his elder brother Mendel, under the auspices of the Refugee Children's Movement.
- 1941** Begins a course in cabinetry at the ORT Technical Engineering School in Leeds.
- 1942** Following the technical college's closure, takes a job in a furniture factory in Leeds and starts reading communist literature.
- 1943** Begins working at the Harewood Estate in the joinery department.
- 1944** Relocates to Bristol, working on nearby farms and living for a period in an anarcho-Trotskyist commune in Clifton.
- Decides to pursue a career as a sculptor rather than as a full-time revolutionary.
- Begins working as a gardener at Champneys nature-cure clinic near Tring, Hertfordshire, where he takes an interest in organic food, becomes a vegetarian, and starts to make his first sculptures.
- Meets Henry Moore at the National Gallery, London, and asks to be his assistant, but instead takes Moore's advice to study life drawing.
- 1945** Attends life-drawing classes twice a week with his brother, at the Cambridge School of Art.
- Moves with his brother to London (where Mendel is known as Max) to study sculpture and drawing at the Sir John Cass Technical Institute in Aldgate. Attends classes until summer 1948.
- Begins evening life-drawing classes under the tutelage of David Bomberg at Borough Polytechnic.

1946 Joins Bomberg's daytime composition class in addition to the life-drawing class, and moves to Camden.

Awarded a Haendler Trust grant alongside his brother to fund full-time study at art school. The grant is renewed the following year.

1947 Uses a studio shack off Commercial Road for his paintings.

1948 Shows a large triptych as part of *Spring Exhibition: Paintings, Sculpture, and Drawings by Contemporary Jewish Artists* at Ben Uri Gallery, and includes it in the London Group exhibition at Academy Hall, on Bomberg's suggestion.

Travels to the Netherlands, Belgium, and France on a stateless passport. Studies under Gustaaf De Bruyne at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, where he draws and paints from a model every day, and, in his spare time, draws children in the streets.

1949 Returns to England and has his Haendler Trust grant extended on the recommendation of Jacob Epstein, thanks to Lord Arnold Goodman's introduction.

1950 Continues his studies under Bomberg at Borough Polytechnic (until classes end in 1953) and also attends Oxford School of Art, Central School of Art, and Hampstead Artists House.

Exhibits three paintings in the East End Academy exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery.

1951 Works as a casual laborer (until 1954), first in Royston and then in Kings Langley, Hertfordshire.

1953 Begins working from a studio near Mornington Crescent, London, which he will pass on to fellow students Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach.

Helps form an exhibiting society, the Borough Bottega, and exhibits two paintings in *Drawings and Paintings by the Borough Bottega* at the Berkeley Galleries.

Moves to King's Lynn, Norfolk.

Resigns from the Borough Bottega and subsequently receives a letter from Bomberg breaking off all communication. Ceases art-making for three years.

1954 Rents a house in King's Lynn and works at the Tuesday market, selling secondhand books, furniture, and junk.

1956 Begins painting again and organizes exhibitions at a local shop in King's Lynn, showing work by Anthony Hatwell, Eduardo Paolozzi, and William Turnbull, among others.

1957 Joins the King's Lynn Committee for Nuclear Disarmament and becomes secretary of the North End Society, taking an interest in architectural preservation and protesting local redevelopment projects.

1958 Experiments with painting on cardboard, plastic, and steel.

Becomes involved with the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War (DAC) and takes part in marches protesting the US Thor Rocket Base at RAF North Pickenham.

1959 Returns to London and begins spending time at the 14 Monmouth Street coffee shop run by kinetic artist Brian Robins.

Stages two exhibitions at 14 Monmouth Street, *Three Paintings by G. Metzger* (July 30–August 19) and *Cardboards Selected and Arranged by Gustav Metzger* (November 9–30).

On November 4, writes "Auto-Destructive Art," the first manifesto of auto-destructive art, iterations of which will follow until 1964.

1960 On March 10, writes his second manifesto, "Manifesto Auto-Destructive Art."

On June 22, stages his first Lecture/Demonstration, at the Temple Gallery, London, introduced by the art critic Jasia Reichardt. This is followed in September by a solo retrospective exhibition at the same venue.

Is a founding member of the Committee of 100, a British anti-nuclear war group, founded by Bertrand Russell and Reverend Michael Scott. Designs its founding statement, *Act or Perish*, which is issued as a double-sided pamphlet.

1961 On June 23, writes his third manifesto, “Auto-Destructive Art, Machine Art, Auto-Creative Art.”

On July 3, publicly stages a work of auto-destructive art on the South Bank, London, using hydrochloric acid on three nylon canvases, and glass sheets suspended above concrete by adhesive tape.

In September, along with Bertrand Russell and thirty other members of the Committee of 100, refuses to withdraw a call for mass peaceful protest and is imprisoned for one month.

1962 His proposal for a newspaper installation is rejected by Robert Filliou and Daniel Spoerri, organizers of the Fluxus Festival of Misfits in London.

On October 24, distributes his fourth manifesto, “Manifesto World,” at a Festival of Misfits event at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London.

Lectures on auto-destructive art at Ealing Art College, London, where Pete Townshend of The Who is a student. Townshend will later credit Metzger’s lectures as the inspiration for The Who’s onstage destruction of its instruments.

1964 Begins experimenting with liquid crystals and other forms of projecting movement in material.

Over the summer, Harold Liversidge shoots the film *Auto-Destructive Art – The Activities of G. Metzger*, in which Metzger enacts an acid painting on London’s South Bank.

Fifth and final manifesto, “On Random Activity in Material/ Transforming Works of Art” (dated July 30), published—along with the first three manifestos—in *SIGNALS: Newsbulletin for the Centre of Advanced Creative Studies* 1, no. 2 (September 1964).

1965 On February 24, gives a lecture on auto-destructive art at the Architectural Association, London. An expanded version (including the first publication of “Manifesto World”) is published by the AA in June.

On October 11, first shows his work with liquid crystals as part of the Lecture/Demonstration “The Chemical Revolution in Art” at the Society of Arts, Cambridge University.

1966 Shows *Art of Liquid Crystals* in the window of Better Books, London, and, on January 8, stages “An Evening of Auto-Destructive and Auto-Creative Art,” featuring his second public demonstration of liquid crystal projections.

In September, with Irish poet John Sharkey, co-organizes the month-long Destruction in Art Symposium with an organizing committee of Mario Amaya, Roy Ascott, Enrico Baj, Bob Cobbing, Ivor Davies, Jim Haynes, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Barry Miles, Frank Popper, and Wolf Vostell. A three-day symposium at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden (September 9–11) is followed by events and performances at venues including Better Books, Conway Hall, the ICA, London Free School playground, and the Mercury Theatre. As a result of Hermann Nitsch’s action *Abreaktionsspiel No. 5*, staged at the St Bride Institute on September 16, is summoned to appear before magistrates for presenting an “indecent exhibition contrary to common law.”

On December 30–31, provides “psychedelic lighting effects” (liquid crystal projections) at the Double Giant Freak-Out Ball at the Roundhouse, London, featuring Cream, The Move, Pink Floyd, and The Who (technical issues prevent the projections from working during The Who’s set on December 31).

1967 Gives the lectures “Destruction in Art” at the Exeter Festival of Modern Arts (April) and “The Aesthetic of Revulsion” at Bristol Arts Centre (May).

Stands trial with John Sharkey for three days (July 17–19) at the Old Bailey, London, on charges relating to Nitsch’s action (which involved the mutilation of a lamb carcass and the projection of images of male genitalia). Found guilty and fined £100 (Sharkey is put on probation).

1968 *Extremes Touch: Material/Transforming Art* exhibition in the newly built Filtration Laboratory in the Department of Chemical Engineering at University College Swansea (January 22–February 4), as part of the Swansea Arts Festival.

1969 Is first editor of the newly formed, London-based Computer Arts Society’s journal, *Page*. Stays on as editor until 1972 and shifts the journal’s focus from technological messianism toward a critique of science and technology.

Participates in *Event One*, the first Computer Arts Society exhibition, at the Royal College of Art, London, with a model for *Five Screens with Computer* (a computer-controlled auto-destructive monument).

- 1970** Begins working with automobiles and exhaust fume pollution, creating *Mobbile*, a car modified to trap and store its own emissions, shown publicly—driven around Waterloo Bridge and Bond Street—during *Kinetics: An International Survey of Kinetic Art* at the Hayward Gallery.

In October, organizes the London demonstration for the International Coalition for the Liquidation of Art; around sixty people take part in a sit-down strike both inside and outside the Tate Gallery.

- 1971** Creates work with newspapers called *Mass Media Today* for *Art Spectrum London* at Alexandra Palace, part of the largest exhibition of contemporary art held nationwide since 1945, with exhibitions organized under its umbrella by multiple regional arts councils.

- 1972** In February, during Joseph Beuys's first visit to London, attends his *Information/Action* at the Tate Gallery and takes part in the filmed and recorded discussion, criticizing many tenets of Beuys's work.

Conceives *Project Stockholm, June (Phase 1)* for the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, but the project—which involves trapping the emissions from 120 cars—goes unrealized.

Creates an interactive environment as part of *Three Life Situations* (with Stuart Brisley and Marc Chaimowicz), the inaugural show at Gallery House, a temporary alternative art space directed by Sigi Krauss in premises belonging to the Goethe Institute (then the German Cultural Institute), March 29–April 15. Occupies the second floor and offers a separate experience in each room: the model for *Project Stockholm, June (Phase 1)*, designs for realized and unrealized projects, and the mass-media work *Controlling Information from Below*, with a final room used for preparing this work, and for private group discussions. Both the bathroom and kitchen are available for visitors to use.

Invited by Harald Szeemann to participate in Documenta 5, but the proposed project, *KARBA* (involving four modified cars), isn't realized.

Unrealizable Disintegrative Architecture and Other Projects, exhibition and talk at the Architectural Association, London, in April.

Executive Profile, exhibition at the ICA, London, November 24–December 22.

Elected deputy chairman of the Artists' Union.

1974 Invited to participate in *Art into Society – Society into Art: Seven German Artists* at the ICA, but declines. Instead, he is a consistent presence in the gallery, taking part in individual and group discussions, and contributes to the catalogue, using the space to advocate for other artists to join him in “Years Without Art,” an art strike planned for 1977–80.

Meets the German artist and art historian Cordula Frowein, with whom he begins a long collaboration.

1976 Publishes “Art in Germany under National Socialism” in *Studio International* 191, no. 980 (March/April).

Organizes, with Frowein, Art in Germany under National Socialism (AGUN), the first international symposium on National Socialist art and design. For three days (September 17–19) scholars meet in closed sessions at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and the Drill Hall.

1977 Begins his planned three-year art strike, despite having received no support from fellow artists.

Takes part, with Frowein, in the conference *Faschismus – Kunst und visuelle Medien* at the Historisches Museum, Frankfurt, October 8–10.

1981 Lives in Frankfurt and participates in the group exhibition *Vor dem Abbruch* at the Kunstmuseum Bern, exhibiting photocopies from National Socialist publications listing all the laws passed against Jews from 1933 to 1943 (later titles this work *Faschismus Deutschland: Darstellung Analyse Bekämpfen*).

Together with Frowein and Klaus Staeck, organizes the exhibition *Passiv – Explosiv* at the Hahnentorburg, Cologne, as a protest against the exhibition *Westkunst: Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*.

Over the next decade, is active in research in various areas, attending conferences and exhibitions throughout Europe, with very little time spent in the UK between 1984 and 1994.

1983 Extensive documentation exhibited at the Gardner Arts Centre, University of Sussex, Brighton, May 16–21. Gives a Lecture/Demonstration on his work, May 19.

Initiates the group Artists Support Peace, active through 1984.

1990 Lives in the Netherlands and studies the work of Johannes Vermeer. Remains distant from the world of galleries and exhibitions, despite having completed his “Years Without Art” a decade earlier.

1992 Proposes the project *Earth Minus Environment* for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (“Earth Summit”) in Rio de Janeiro; the proposal—which requires the emissions from 120 cars to be fed into a large transparent enclosure in the shape of an *E*—is rejected.

1994 Gives the lectures “Johannes Vermeer and Cesare Ripa” at Utrecht University (August) and “Vermeer and Freud’s Fetish Theory” at University College London (December).

Returns to live in London and begins to formulate the Historic Photographs series.

1995 In April, first interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, at the Cosmo café, London.

Damaged Nature: Two New Works and Documents, exhibition at workfortheeyetodo, London, September 29–December 2—his first UK exhibition of new work since his art strike ended in 1980, and the first time the Historic Photographs are shown. The accompanying publication, *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*, features selected writings by Metzger.

- 1996** On June 10, gives the illustrated lecture *Mad Cows Talk* at East West Gallery, London.
- Participates in the *Life/Live* exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris at the invitation of Hans Ulrich Obrist.
- Participates in the exhibition *Made New* at City Racing, London, with a reconstruction of *Cardboards*—the exhibition that accompanied his first manifesto of auto-destructive art in 1959.
- 1998** *Gustav Metzger*, a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, October 25–January 10, 1999. Includes ten of the Historic Photographs as a large installation.
- 2000** Included in *Protest & Survive* at Whitechapel Gallery, London.
- 2003** *100,000 Newspapers*, a “public-active installation,” is the inaugural show at Wolfe von Lenkiewicz’s T1+2 Artspace, London, January 21–23.
- Participates in the Venice Biennale project Utopia Station, at the invitation of Hans Ulrich Obrist.
- Participates in *Independence* at the South London Gallery with the video piece *Power to the People*.
- 2005** *Gustav Metzger: History History*, a survey exhibition at the Generali Foundation, Vienna, May 11–August 28.
- Exhibits *Eichmann and the Angel* at Cubitt Gallery, London, September 7–October 23.
- 2006** *Gustav Metzger: Works*, exhibition at Lunds Konsthall, Lund, Sweden (May 20–August 27). Features *Eichmann and the Angel*, the Historic Photographs and the first realized version of KARBA.
- Participates in the Interview Marathon, speaking with Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist, at the Serpentine Gallery, London, July 28–29.
- 2007** Initiates the campaign *Reduce Art Flights* (RAF) to advocate for carbon neutrality in the art world. Distributes flyers for the campaign as part of Skulptur Projekte Münster 07 alongside an exhibition, *Gustav Metzger: Models*, at the Westfälischer Kunstverein, June 17–September 30.

Participates in the 8th Sharjah Biennial, *Still Life – Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change*, where a version of *Project Stockholm, June (Phase 1)* is realized using one hundred cars.

On October 13, gives a Lecture/Demonstration as part of the Experiment Marathon at the Serpentine Gallery, London.

2008 On February 6, gives the first lecture in the Art & Compromise series at Beaconsfield, London.

On March 29, is interviewed by Andrew Wilson as part of the series Talking Art at Tate Modern, in association with *Art Monthly*.

2009 Participates in the fourth Tate Triennial, *Altermodern*, at Tate Britain, London.

Participates in the Manchester International Festival with the work *Flailing Trees* (July 4–20) and, on July 5, a public conversation with Marina Abramović and Hans Ulrich Obrist.

Gustav Metzger: Decades 1959–2009, retrospective exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London, September 29–November 8.

2011 *Gustav Metzger: Historic Photographs*, first solo museum exhibition in the US at the New Museum, New York, May 19–July 3.

2012 Participates in Documenta 13 in Kassel, with sixty works on paper and a selection of paintings on steel. First showing since the Temple Gallery show in 1960 of his pre–auto-destructive works.

Participates in *Null Object: Gustav Metzger thinks about nothing*, in collaboration with London Fieldworks (Bruce Gilchrist and Jo Joelson) at WORK Gallery, London, November 30–February 9, 2013 (a sculptural, “null” object was carved in stone by a robot following instructions derived from EEG readings of Metzger’s brainwaves as he attempted to think about nothing).

2013 *Supportive, 1966–2011*, exhibition at the Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon, France, February 15–April 14.

2014 *Lift Off!*, exhibition at Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge, May 24–August 31.

Co-organizes and participates in the Facing Extinction conference at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, UK, June 7–8.

Participates in the Extinction Marathon at the Serpentine Galleries, London, on October 18–19, after suggesting the idea to Hans Ulrich Obrist and assisting in its planning.

2015 *Gustav Metzger: Towards Auto-Destructive Art 1950–1962*, display at Tate Britain, London. Includes works not shown since the Temple Gallery show in 1960.

Gustav Metzger: We Must Become Idealists or Die, solo exhibition at Museo Jumex, Mexico City, July 19–October 25.

Act or Perish! Gustav Metzger – A Retrospective opens at the Centre of Contemporary Art, Toruń, Poland, on March 27, and travels to Kunsthall Oslo and Stiftelsen Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo, in November.

Begins composing the *Extinction Handwritings*, a collection of drawings and notes for Hans Ulrich Obrist's Handwriting Project.

On November 4, instigates the annual day of action *Remember Nature*, which calls for artists to create work that addresses extinction, climate change, and environmental pollution.

2017 Dies at the age of ninety on March 1 at his home in London and is buried in Highgate Cemetery.