

GUSTAV METZGER

AND THEN CAME THE ENVIRONMENT

13 SEPTEMBER 2024 – 12 JANUARY 2025



Born in Nuremberg to Polish-Jewish parents, Gustav Metzger (1926 – 2017) fled Nazi Germany to England via the ‘Kindertransport’ when he was 12. When he began his art studies in 1945, he entered a world inspired by scientific experimentation, just as the Atomic Age—in all its paradoxes—dawned.

Over seventy years, through his writing, calls to action and art, Metzger wrestled with the contradictions of his time by championing how both ‘auto-destruction’ and ‘auto-creation’ in science, ecology, politics and art were equally important tactics to address the state of humanity.

‘Gustav Metzger. And Then Came the Environment’ is the artist’s first solo exhibition in Los Angeles and his second major show in the US. The title comes from Metzger’s 1992 essay ‘Nature Demised’ where he proclaims an ‘urgent need to redefine notions of nature and the environment,’ because ‘environment’ is a term that ‘has been hijacked by the forces that are manipulating the world’ and it should be renamed ‘Damaged Nature.’

‘Gustav Metzger. And Then Came the Environment’ will be presented in conjunction with the Getty Museum’s citywide PST Art initiative, ‘Art & Science Collide.’



Spent Batteries

1999/2024

Batteries, wooden box

Dimensions variable



Reduce Art Flights

2007–ongoing

Leaflet

20.9 × 14.7 cm / 8 ¼ × 5 ¾ in

Gustav Metzger's Reduce Art Flights project was created to draw attention to the carbon footprint the artworld creates with its international art fairs and biennials. Metzger first produced 5000 flyers as part of his participation in Sculptur Projekte Münster (a city-wide art project that takes place every ten years) in Summer 2007 when three other major art events were also taking place in Europe: the Venice Biennale, Art Basel, and Documenta. The design of Reduce Art Flights is based on an old Royal Air Force (British air defence) poster from 1942 that refers to the bombing of Germany during World War II.

The project has taken place in 8 cities to date, each time with a new flyer. In an interview on the project, Metzger said he was not optimistic about affecting peoples' behavior, but he hoped that it would serve as a reminder of the artworld's complicity in climate change and to encourage people to think more about their own impact on the environment.



Earth from Space (revisited)

1966/2014

Liquid crystal on object slide (glass), electric motor, heating coil, pedestal

Ed. 2/5

24.3 × 24.3 × 13 cm / 9 5/8 × 9 5/8 × 5 1/8 in

'Earth from Space' was one of Metzger's first 'auto-creative' artworks. Liquid crystals are sandwiched between four conjoined slides that rotate slowly, passing over a heating coil, then a cooling fan. As they turn, the movement, color and shape of the liquid crystals shift.

The work can be seen as mirroring earth's cycles between day and night, but also alludes to a new, distanced, aerial perspective brought on by the space age, of which Metzger was particularly critical about the significant financial and ecological implications, as well as growing military technology.

The work followed a series of liquid crystal experiments Metzger conducted in 1965 during his lecture 'The Chemical Revolution in Art' at Cambridge University. He went on to exhibit the results in various venues throughout 1966. 'Earth from Space' was the first, shown in the window of Better Books in London, as part of his exhibition there.

Between 2012 and 2015 the artist remade the work in an edition of 5, collaborating with the engineer Adrian Fogarty, who supported Metzger on evolving many of his Liquid Crystal projects.



Project Stockholm, June (Phase I)

1972/2007

Film

Duration: 4:45 min

Courtesy of the Sharjah Art Foundation

Photo: Peter Reidlinger



Earth Minus Environment (Model)

1992

Wood, perspex, model cars

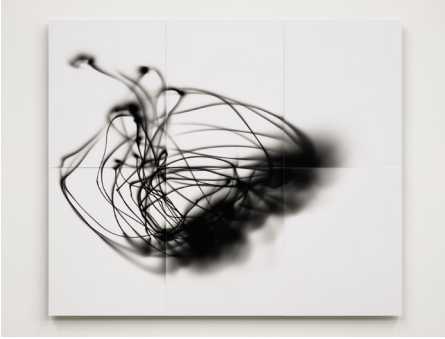
Unique

83 × 130 × 130 cm / 32 5/8 × 51 1/8 × 51 1/8 in

From 1970, Metzger developed a series of projects using car exhaust gases to address pollution from emissions. The largest proposition was for a public work intended to coincide with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, known as the 'Earth Summit.'

The proposal consisted of 120 cars arranged around a large construction in the shape of the letter E. Engines were to be left running day and night, with all the car exhausts connected via a clear plastic-enclosed structure which would change as it reacted to the entrapped fumes, water and dirt. Metzger proposed that the project be realized both in Brazil and in Europe concurrently, in line with the central issue of the Earth Summit: the indivisibility of North and South in solving global problems.

This work was never realized in full, however Metzger was able to show a slightly smaller version, 'Project Stockholm, June (Phase I)' at the Sharjah Biennial in 2007, which was originally conceived for the first UN conference on the environment in 1972, hosted in Stockholm. (Pictured here alongside the model and with video documentation playing on the monitor.)



Light Drawing

2014

Photographic print on aluminium, 6 parts

Each: 51 × 40.5 × 3 cm / 20 1/8 × 16 × 7/8 in

Overall: 102 × 121.5 × 3 cm / 40 1/8 × 47 7/8 × 1 1/8 in

Between 1969 and 1974, Metzger was the editor of the Computer Arts Society bulletin, PAGE. During this time, his fascination with computer graphics technology began to integrate into his creative practice. Initial experiments involved what he called 'self-organising drawings,' where marks were produced on photosensitive paper through manipulating the fiber-optic light guide of a plotter machine, the latest device in print-technology at that time. Enlisting the artist Heather Peri as an intermediary to whom he gave instructions, Metzger inserted magnetic control tape, light sources, mirrors and filters into the printing mechanism to create marks governed by randomness and chance.

In 2014, Metzger revisited this process to create his series of 'Light Drawings', exchanging the plotter machine for a fiber-optic light stylus. The movement of the stylus was manipulated by either air or the artist's hand. These were his last works to involve his direct physical intervention in their making.



Light Drawing

2014

Photographic print on aluminium, 6 parts

Each: 51 × 41 × 3 cm / 20 1/8 × 16 1/8 × 1 1/8 in

Overall: 102 × 123 × 3 cm / 40 1/8 × 48 3/8 × 1 1/8 in



Light Drawing

2014

Photographic print on aluminium, 6 parts

Each: 51 × 40.5 × 3 cm / 20 1/8 × 16 × 7/8 in

Overall: 102 × 121.5 × 3 cm / 40 1/8 × 47 7/8 × 1 1/8 in



Light Drawing

2014

Photographic print on aluminium, 4 parts

Each: 40.5 × 51 × 3 cm / 16 × 20 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ in

Overall: 81 × 102 × 3 cm / 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 40 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ in



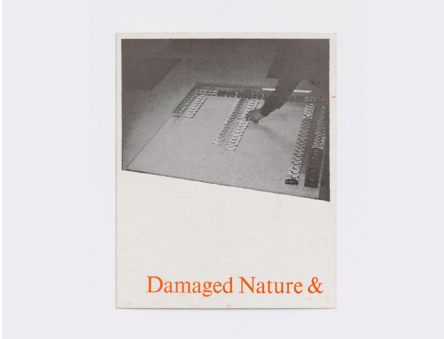
Light Drawing

2014

Photographic print on aluminium, 4 parts

Each: 40.5 × 51 × 3 cm / 16 × 20 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ in

Overall: 81 × 102 × 3 cm / 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 40 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ in



Damaged Nature &

1995

Invitation card

13.5 × 11 cm / 5 3/8 × 4 3/8 in



Auto-Destructive Art: The Activities of G. Metzger

Directed by H. Liversidge

1965

Film

Duration: 7:36 min

In 1961, as a member of the Committee of 100, Metzger played a key role in organizing numerous demonstrations and protests across London against British nuclear armament policies. His creative endeavours also followed suit, transitioning into the public realm.

That July, Metzger conducted what would become one of his most iconic auto-destructive artworks at the South Bank in London, as captured in this film, which came out in 1965. Initially, the artist was invited to perform the demonstration as part of the International Union of Architects (IUA) summer conference, but the invitation was ultimately withdrawn by the IUA's press officer. Undeterred, Metzger proceeded with the event, supported by a team of architecture students, stretching three large sheets of nylon around metal frames onto which he sprayed acid, which began to disintegrate, puncture and tear. This act of deliberate destruction was a powerful manifestation of Metzger's ideas about art, society and the role of the artist, as he later articulated in a 2009 interview: 'I was very aggressive putting the acid onto that nylon...it was partly me attacking the system of capitalism, but inevitably also the systems of war, the warmongers, and destroying them in a sense symbolically.'



Dancing Tubes

1968/2024

Plastic tubing, compressed air, aluminium, water

Ed. 1/7

Dimensions variable

In January 1968, Metzger spent three weeks in the Filtration Laboratory of University College Swansea conducting a series of experiments that became a landmark for kinetic British art.

Metzger titled the project 'Extremes Touch' and utilized the Lab's then cutting-edge facilities—including powerful water jets, compressed air and a wide selection of chemical compounds and minerals—to produce a series of kinetic artworks viewed by visitors who were escorted to the laboratory. Through 'Dancing Tubes' and other works in the project, including 'Mica Cube' (also exhibited here) Metzger sought to blur the boundaries between aesthetic and scientific enquiry, extending scientific concepts, language and philosophical frameworks into art and theory.



Untitled

c. 1951

Ink on paper

40 × 50.6 cm / 15 ³/₄ × 19 ⁷/₈ in

48.3 × 58.7 × 3.8 cm / 19 × 23 ¹/₈ × 1 ¹/₂ in (framed)

The act of drawing lies at the heart of Metzger's practice, even if he was to reject painting early on in his career. Four of these works appear to be rendered from the same object at varying levels of abstraction, most likely an artifact in the British Museum where he would often go to sketch during the 1950s. Using charcoal, pencil, pastel, watercolor and ink, Metzger would spill, rub and scratch the surface, sometimes wearing holes in the paper, embracing the potential for disintegration. As such, these drawings are a prelude to what would become Metzger's 'auto-destructive' art which first appeared with his 'Acid Nylon Paintings' in 1959/60.



Untitled

c. 1951

Ink on paper

40.4 × 50.8 cm / 15 ⁷/₈ × 20 in

48.3 × 58.7 × 3.8 cm / 19 × 23 ¹/₈ × 1 ¹/₂ in (framed)



Untitled

c. 1951

Ink on paper

40.3 × 50.8 cm / 15 ⁷/₈ × 20 in

48.3 × 58.7 × 3.8 cm / 19 × 23 ¹/₈ × 1 ¹/₂ in (framed)



Untitled

c. 1951

Ink on paper

40.4 × 50.7 cm / 15 ⁷/₈ × 20 in

48.3 × 58.7 × 3.8 cm / 19 × 23 ¹/₈ × 1 ¹/₂ in (framed)



Untitled

c. 1951

Ink on paper

42 × 53.5 cm / 16 ¹/₂ × 21 ¹/₈ in

49.8 × 61 × 3.8 cm / 19 ⁵/₈ × 24 × 1 ¹/₂ in (framed)



Liquid Crystal Environment

1966/2024

7 Kodak SAV 2050 slide projectors, control units, rotating polarized filters, liquid crystals

Dimensions variable

In the early 1960s Metzger began experimenting with industrial-quality slide projectors, which enabled him to develop a range of striking visual effects. Exchanging the traditional photographic slide with combinations of nylon, hydrochloric acid, graphite, glycerine and ink, the artist produced ephemeral images that could be magnified to a monumental scale. He showcased three of these projections in 1965 at an ICA benefit organized by Mark Boyle and John Latham, creating unprecedented visual effects.

Later that year, Metzger was invited to give a second demonstration in Cambridge, titled 'The Chemical Revolution in Art.' He saw this as an opportunity to explore liquid crystals—a material he had first come across in Scientific American magazine in the summer of 1964—and began collaborating with protein chemist Arnold Feinstein to develop various processes for manipulating the crystals using heat, movement and light. Although the first display in Cambridge was unsuccessful, Metzger's Liquid Crystal Environments became legendary, including as the backdrop to performances by Cream and The Who at London's Roundhouse.

At the core of Metzger's Liquid Crystal Environments is his emphasis on bringing unity between man, nature and the environment. Within the installation two choreographies unfold: the chemical and mechanical movements of the crystals, and the way spectators navigate the space in response. Countering the violence of auto-destruction, these works center auto-creation, embodying endless possibilities of change and movement.