

Gustav Metzger
Gustav Metzger Writings (1953–2016)
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Gustav Metzger, the doyen of shamanic-artistic creative-destruction, is best known (if known at all) as the artist who inspired the 1960s mania for apogee instrument-smashing stagecraft spearheaded by Pete Townshend of The Who. Townshend was directly influenced by Metzger as a student at Ealing School of Art, attending Metzger's "Auto-Destructive Art, Auto-Creative Art" lecture, and helped finance the book *Gustav Metzger Writings (1953–2016)*—recently published by JRP|Editions—which collects 350 of Metzger's art activist texts, written between 1953 and his death in 2017 and now edited by curator Mathieu Copeland. The writing style is, in Metzger's words, "deliberately flat" (glee free) and the cover is of inexpensive cardboard, reminiscent of *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus, 1990-1962*, Achille Bonito Oliva's 1990 Fluxus compendium published in conjunction with the Venice exhibition *Ex Granai della Repubblica alle Zitelle (Giudecca)*. For Metzger, a Trotskyist and German Jewish immigrant to Britain who lost family in the Holocaust, cheap auto-destruction has virtues that solid structure does not know (to paraphrase Pascal).

Metzger first writes of self-destructive art in the passionate unpublished draft of his 1959 *Manifesto SDA*, which he would continue to refine through to his climatic, short, and punchy 1968 statement *Theory of Auto-Destructive Art*. There he inserts his acerbic ideas into Kinetic Art, and, as in his first, 1959 version of the *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, petitions for creations of therapeutic self-destructive public monuments, paintings, and sculptures—upping what Proust said: that "time, like the sea, takes everything away." In the 1960 version of his *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, Metzger unequivocally states that "Auto-destructive art is art which contains within itself an agent which automatically leads to its destruction within a period of time not to exceed twenty years."

Unsurprisingly, Dada had inspired him, citing Francis Picabia's 1920 blackboard drawings as proto-auto-destructive art. Also important was *The New Vision* (1928) book by László Moholy-Nagy, the experimental Constructivist who ordered his paintings *EM (Telephone Pictures)* (1923) by phone from a factory. But unlike Moholy-Nagy, Metzger's theories of auto-destruction were intended to dismantle the myth that technology was rational or neutral. Far from impartial, Metzger states in the 1960 *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto* that "auto-destructive art mirrors the compulsive perfectionism of arms manufacturing" by pushing art towards an "Eve of Destruction," as Barry McGuire would sing in the 1965 anti-nuclear protest song.

The previously mentioned first published version of *Auto-Destructive Art* (November 4, 1959), was released as press statement for Metzger's London exhibition *Cardboards*, held at artist Brian Robinst's Monmouth Street basement coffee house, of found packaging materials disassembled and hung up: an obvious over-ripe reference to Duchampian ready-mades. From the get-go Metzger worked against art as market transactional objects and for a public art of recycling, contending in his 1960 *Manifesto* that "Auto-destructive art is the transformation of technology into public art." Thus he advocated—not for passive artistic nihilisms familiar to *Fin de siècle* decadent dandies—but for generative curative nihilisms that unleash virulent disintegrations as corrective forces.

This new collection of writings documents the vital influential affiliation Metzger had with Jean Tinguely, who was then living in Paris. Though Metzger began floating these kinds of ideas in 1959, Tinguely was first to publicly realize them with his self-destructive machine sculpture *Homage to New York* (1960) that self-deconstructed in the Sculpture Garden of MoMA in March of 1960. The collection includes pertinent information on how Tinguely boosted Metzger's auto-destructive art theory, as Tinguely's work was a revelation for Metzger when he received an invitation to Tinguely's 1960 ICA London Happening. For just after *Cardboards* opened, Metzger had attended this event, featuring two out-of-phase recordings of Tinguely's utterances dubbed *Art, Machines et Mouvement*, accompanied by a painting machine. And *voilà*. *Homage to New York* directly inspired Metzger's maquette *Model for an Auto-Destructive Monument* (1960): three weak steel towers that would break down in 10 years.

In the context of the then new threat of global nuclear destruction, Metzger's auto-destructive theory of art was intended as radically political; anti-capitalist; anti-consumerist. It brutally addressed society's insalubrious hang-up with assured mutual destruction. Indeed, March 10, 1960, Metzger published *Manifesto Auto-Destructive Art* that explicitly addressed the nuclear arms race. In the third manifesto of 1961, he assertively states: "Auto-destructive art is an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation."

Taking his kinetic theory into public practice, on July 3, 1961, a gas-masked Metzger sprayed hydrochloric acid on three stretched nylon monochrome sheets at South Bank London, creating *Acid Action Painting*. The disintegration of the aesthetic picture planes was intended to trigger psychological release for world peace, as Metzger was active in antinuclear movements and jailed for encouraging non-violent civil disobedience. I expect the photograph of Thích Quảng Đức, the self-immolating Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk who burned himself to death in Saigon in June of 1963 was an important protest image for him.

One of the largest sections of the book documents the London 1966 *Destruction in Art Symposium* (DIAS) that Metzger and others organized. Some of the material here is redundant, because ultimately his manifestos did not change much between publications, but ironically, Ad Reinhardt submitted a 1963 *Art-as-Art* statement for DIAS, reproduced here as slap-dash collage. With DIAS, Metzger advocated for a global movement of disintegrative-degenerate art as radical protest art. But if, as the aesthete writer Walter Pater purported, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," then Raphael Montañez Ortiz's *Duncan Terrace Piano Destruction Concert* (1966) was the DIAS highlight.

From 1968 to 1974 Metzger focused on cybernetics and computer art, wishing to expose the destructiveness he saw at their core. His self-exterminating art projects were intended to critique computer-driven techno-capitalism, but, it seems to me, auto-destructive art is the height of techno-capitalism: an example of hyper-consumerism's planned obsolescence. In 1969 Metzger wrote voluminously on the history of automata and idiosyncratically interviews Buckminster Fuller in 1970. Though Metzger initiated/practiced Art Strike in 1974, he continued to copiously write shambolic project proposals (now connected to environmental concerns) until 2016.

The moral content of this collection is unashamed melancholic rage at the state of the world. But its antipathy towards delicacy, flamboyant irony, or black humor

makes for peevish reading. Thankfully, Metzger's slim art output out plays nihilistic negativity by intensifying its forces into an affirmative nihilism. As such, Metzger's auto-destructive writings—though utopian naïve—can still mess with heads in right-wing America.

Contributor

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JOSEPH NECHVATAL's book *Immersion Into Noise* was published in 2011 by the University of Michigan Library's Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press.