

Table of Contents

Waste Product	1
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Waste Product

By Hari Kunzru

With the release of 'the first major documentary' about Gustav Metzger directed by Ken McMullen, Hari Kunzru looks at the artist's life and work

Sometimes at East End art openings, the tiny bearded figure of Gustav Metzger is to be seen, making his way through the crowd. Metzger is something of a ghost at the Shoreditch feast, an artist who has worked in East London since the 1940s, but has always vigorously opposed much of what the area has come, post-Britart, to stand for. As early as 1977 he was calling for 'years without art', in protest at the hyper-acceleration of the art market. During the '50s he led protests against the gentrification of the old fishing quarter of Kings Lynn, where he had a studio. In a week which has given us Sam Taylor-Wood posing in her knickers for the Evening Standard and Tracey Emin launching a range of 'limited edition luggage' it is worth noting that he usually refuses to be interviewed facing a camera. 'I, ' he says drily, his back turned to a TV crew making a documentary about Michael Landy, 'am against the artist as celebrity.'

Metzger has reversed his stance for the makers of *Pioneers in Art and Science: Metzger*, which bills itself as 'the first major documentary' about his life and work. It is possible that the artist's face-to-face cooperation was granted on condition that the film should consist solely of edited extracts from two or three recent conversations, without archive material, comment, or indeed context of any kind, but whether this format was decided on by the artist, the director or a limited Arts Council budget, the result is no more or less than a video interview, mildly dressed-up with DVD caption titles, not a 'major documentary', let alone (pace the back of the box) a piece 'designed to fully utilise the potential of the DVD format'. It's okay, but those seeking an overview of Metzger's practice are probably better served by the catalogue for his 1998 retrospective at Oxford MOMA [ISBN 1 901 352 04 8].

Metzger is probably best known as the organiser of DIAS, the 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium, which involved artists such as John Latham, Yoko Ono and Barry Flanagan and introduced a querulous London to the work of Viennese Actionists Herman Nitsch and Otto Mühl. This meeting emerged from his own theory and practice of 'auto-destructive art', art which enacts or in some other way contains its own annihilation. In actions during the late '50s and early '60s he donned protective clothing and sprayed acid onto nylon sheets, which dissolved over a period of several minutes. Seen in a 1961 film, the busy gestures of this small intense man, dressed as if for chemical or nuclear attack, seem to undercut the machismo of Abstract Expressionism at a moment when American government funds were propelling it through the public art spaces of Europe as part of the cultural cold war. Metzger, a founder member of the Committee of 100 and a Jew who as a child watched the Nuremberg rallies pass under his window, was taking on the system which produced both art-capitalist accumulation and the arms race.

Less discussed is his later espousal of 'auto-creative art', which led to work with liquid crystals and an uncharacteristic bout of modishness in the form of lightshows for events at the Roundhouse involving The Who, Cream and The Move. This fascination with the beauty of crystal growth suggests both a general concern with art as process (a suggestion enforced by his early interest in kinetic artists such as Tinguely) and a belated Romanticism. In his 1960 *Auto-Destructive Art* manifesto, Metzger tersely wrote 'not interested in ruins (the picturesque)' and, while it would be misleading to read auto-destruction through the Romantic cult of the fragment, he seems more integrated than might initially be suspected into the great pan-European post-war cultural project – the conversation in the ruins, the sifting of the ashes. Neither of Metzger's parents survived the Holocaust. During the '90s he

exhibited a series of 'historic photographs', iconic images partly or entirely obscured by screens. Onto a picture of Hitler taking the salute of massed Hitler-youth he welded a solid steel plate.

In the '60s Metzger's art tended to be seen as a straightforward manifestation of what the poet Jeff Nuttall termed 'bomb culture', the urgent search for alternative ways of living in the shadow of nuclear cataclysm. Since the dissolution of the binary terror of the Cold War into a distributed network, a longer historical lifespan becomes evident. Technological domination, the acceleration of capital – the intensification of these processes gives continuing relevance to Metzger's sardonic proposal that auto-destructive practice is an appropriate 'public art for industrial societies.' His lifelong (but incomplete) retreat from the art economy is perhaps just an auto-destructive piece of greater than average duration. For Metzger destruction appears to have the dual meaning of 'annihilation' and 'waste'. This art which cannot be recuperated is also a figure for the economy of consumer excess. Expenditure without hope of recompense is both a source of honour and an activity which gives off noxious emissions, black smoke from crematorium chimneys. a

Pioneers in Art and Science: Metzger, directed by Ken McMullen. University of the Arts, London 2004, DVD £14.99

Hari Kunzru's <hari AT metamute.com> latest novel is Transmission