Gustav Metzger’s Auto-Destructive/Auto-Creative Art
An Art of Manifesto, 1959–1969

Andrew Wilson

Throughout the last sixty years, since he first enrolled in David Bomberg’s painting and composition class at the Borough Polytechnic in London in 1946, Gustav Metzger has followed a course that has adopted critical positions in respect of the art world and the place given to art in society. It has been impossible to isolate his practice as an artist from his engagement in different kinds of political activism. In the 1950s, while living in King’s Lynn and before his move to London in 1959, he was the founder of the local Committee for Nuclear Disarmament, and was then involved in the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War, supporting the protesters’ occupation of nearby US missile bases, while also organising a local protest movement to halt development plans for historic parts of the town. In 1960 – shortly before he co-founded the Committee of 100 and a year after his first presentation of the idea of auto-destructive art – the anti-nuclear campaigner Pat Arrowsmith wrote about Metzger that he was ‘an active campaigner for nuclear disarmament. I myself walked into London beside him at the end of last year’s Aldermaston March. He took part in the Stevenage campaign against missile manufacture a year ago, and back in the early days of the campaign stood on a soap box to address the stall-holders of Watton Market. Inevitably the art of such a person carries a social message.’

This ‘social message’ is part of the texture of Metzger’s work and cannot be disentangled from questions of artistic or aesthetic intention. For an artist who resolutely produces very little in the way of objects – and, indeed, whose major discovery in 1959 was an art form that destroyed itself – it is perhaps strange that there has not been more attention paid to the nature and form of his work that contextualised his theories of auto-destructive art: the manifesto and the Lecture/Demonstration. Between 1959 and 1966, it is by these means that the practice of auto-destructive art was given a public airing and produced an art that adopted

the form of the manifesto. Auto-destructive art was conceived by Metzger as an intrinsically public art form, and its polemical purpose aimed at triggering specific responses in the viewer concerning particular issues to do with, for instance, nuclear weapons and nuclear power, pollution and the capitalist system. This short text, by elaborating on these ideas, will suggest a historical parallel or context for Metzger’s adoption of the manifesto form and show how an attention to the manifesto reveals reasons behind his move away from auto-destructive art after 1965.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the manifesto had offered one of the major means whereby the avant-garde could publicise its aims, aspirations, beliefs and achievements. It was the place, as Martin Puchner has observed:

... where the most pressing issues and questions faced by twentieth-century art, including the relation to the audience, to society, to politics, indeed, the whole conception of what an artwork is or should be, are being dogmatically as well as symptomatically worked out.²

The manifesto-as-form both named new practices or artistic movements and also acted as a means of authorisation for that activity by virtue of the act of publication and public distribution. However, just as significant as a means of disseminating culturally and socially marginalised activities, the manifesto embodied in its form the identification of radical art practice with political action – its model being the embodiment of a revolutionary poetics in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel’s *Communist Manifesto* of 1848.

Metzger’s adoption of these forms had clear historical precedents of which he was well aware. Between 1945 and 1948 when he was first living in London, he sought out and read examples of avant-garde tracts (it was a language he knew well, since the time he spent living near Bristol in 1944 in a political commune that was run by Trotskyites and anarchists). Although he has particularly mentioned how inspirational it was for him to come across Hans Arp and El Lissitzky’s 1925 book *The Isms of Art, 1914–1924*, a catalogue of avant-garde activity that laid bare the different art movements’ often incendiary, polemical and political intent, the major influence on his activity was the use that Marinetti and the Futurists had made of the manifesto form.³ For the Futurists, the manifesto proclaimed what Futurism stood for and defined the nature of its relationship to the modern world. Although wedded to the traditional forms of painting and sculpture, the manifesto not only embodied what Futurism’s subjects were but, more importantly, it provided the critical space whereby Futurism could be seen to extend both aesthetically and politically beyond painting and sculpture, and this extension was perhaps where the essence of the Futurist project resided. Underlining such a view, the Futurists published over fifty manifestos between the 1909 founding manifesto of Futurism and 1916, on all aspects of art, and in effect set the framework for future use by artists of the manifesto form.

To be successful, beyond acting as a means of self-authorising an artistic practice, any manifesto’s synthesis of artistic and aesthetic values with ideological, ethical and political values has to find a way of intervening in a collective or mass audience beyond the narrow confines of

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³ Much of this information derives from ongoing conversations with Gustav Metzger, to whom I am most grateful.
the art world. One way in which the manifesto has achieved this is by identifying its polemical and declarative style of delivery with theatre, in the sense that many manifestos since the Futurists were intended to be read aloud or performed in front of an audience – or as the Futurists, and after them the Dadaists, discovered, delivered as a carnivalesque rupture to more established theatrical events. This goes some way towards explaining why Metzger linked his production of manifestos with the form of the Lecture/Demonstration – the Lecture/Demonstration being a performative realisation of the manifesto to explain and declare the aims and beliefs underpinning auto-destructive art and show clearly its relevance and meaning to a contemporary audience, while at the same time remaining apart from the structures of the art market – there being no by-product, nothing to sell.4

It was during his time in King’s Lynn in the late 1950s that Metzger moved closer to an art of the manifesto. Although this corresponds with his increasing political activities, especially with the growing anti-nuclear movement, there are also particular artistic reasons for this development in his work. In 1953, just before he moved from London to King’s Lynn, he broke off relations with the Borough Bottega and David Bomberg – the move from London was in one respect a tangible effect of this rupture and his wish to reassess his artistic practice. However, although he rented a large building in the town, where he established himself as a junk dealer, he would not start to paint again until 1956. Then, during August and September of the same year, he made repeated visits to London primarily to visit the ‘This is Tomorrow’ exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. The initial reason for visiting the exhibition was probably the inclusion of Eduardo Paolozzi in the exhibition. Metzger had met and made friends with Paolozzi in Oxford in 1944, and through him he had also met and become friendly with Nigel Henderson and William Turnbull, although he had lost contact with them soon after. During his visits to ‘This is Tomorrow’ he collected together copies of all the different posters produced for the exhibition and exhibited these at a local shop in Kings Lynn,5 where a short while later he re-visited his friendship with Paolozzi and mounted a small exhibition of works by Paolozzi, Turnbull and Anthony Hatwell.

The reasons why Metzger was so enthralled by the exhibition are not hard to see. Its presentation of different specific collaborations between architects, painters and sculptors was premised on ways in which art could be integrated with the structures of society and daily life. Where some groups approached this from a utopian and idealistic point of view, those groups associated with the Independent Group (IG) – most notably that of Richard Hamilton, John McHale and John Voelcker; and that of Paolozzi, Henderson and Alison and Peter Smithson – presented a vision of daily life that swung from the ironically celebratory to the post-apocalyptic. Furthermore, Hamilton’s rejection of style, rigid formal concepts and declaration that ‘What is needed is not a definition of meaningful imagery but the development of our perceptive potentialities to accept and utilize the continual enrichment of visual material’,6 or McHale’s view that ‘Any change in man’s environment is indicative of a change in man’s relation to it, in his actual mode of perceiving and symbolising his interaction with it’,7 would have chimed with Metzger’s changing viewpoint on the place of the artist in society following his

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4 Nevertheless, Joseph Beuys, who harnessed the lecture form as part of his practice in the 1970s and ‘80s, was able to market his blackboard drawings that resulted from his lectures as art objects of some value.

5 These were all printed in editions of about thirty as dyeline transfer prints. Each group produced one print which was exchanged among fellow exhibitors or pasted onto the exterior entrance walls of the gallery. Theo Crosby’s set is preserved in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum.


7 Ibid
break with Bomberg. Furthermore, elements of the Smithsons’ explanation of ‘The New Brutalism’ the following year were echoed by Metzger two years later in his aims for auto-destructive art:

Any discussion of Brutalism will miss the point if it does not take into account Brutalism’s attempt to be objective about ‘reality’ – the cultural objectives of society, its urges, its techniques, and so on. Brutalism tries to face up to a mass-production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work. Up to now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical.⁸

What is clear, however, is that despite his friendship with Paolozzi, Henderson and Turnbull over ten years earlier, Metzger had been completely unaware of the activities of the IG, though he left London about a year after the IG had first started meeting. Despite the manifesto intentions of the IG presentations within ‘This is Tomorrow’, it would be wrong – however tempting it might be – to suggest links between Metzger’s later use of the Lecture/Demonstration form after 1960 and the fact that many of the meetings of the IG had adopted a similar form; even so, the parallels are instructive.

Of these meetings, Paolozzi’s ‘Bunk’ presentation in April 1952 has retrospectively been feted, but at the time was known only by the handful of initiates who attended the event. For this, Paolozzi used an epidiascope to project collage material that he had collected together, mostly from American magazines, as well as postcards, diagrams and other graphic material. This was presented sheet after sheet at a rapid pace with no apparent sense of hierarchy, no thematic narrative and with little commentary other than assessments like ‘This is better; it’s bigger’.⁹ Henderson later remembered the antagonistic reaction of sections of the audience:

... the visual wasn’t introduced and argued (in a linear way) but shovelled, shrivelling in this white hot maw of the epidiascope. The main sound accompaniment that I remember was the heavy breathing and painful sighing of Paolozzi to whom, I imagine, the lateral nature of connectedness of the images seemed self-evident, but the lack of agreement in the air must have been antagonistic and at least viscous.¹⁰

The manner in which Paolozzi presented his visual imagery is very close to the ways in which Metzger was to do so eight years later at Ealing where he was to yoke together declamation and a rapidly changing sequence of images. However, even though Metzger did not know of Paolozzi’s 1952 lecture at the ICA to the nascent IG, it is probable that he had heard about a similar public lecture that Paolozzi gave to the ICA in 1958. Paolozzi’s notes for this particular lecture, on his recent mecano-morphic sculptures, were published with accompanying illustrations in the art and design magazine *Uppercase* (edited by Theo Crosby, organiser of ‘This is Tomorrow’); furthermore the lecture was reported by *The Times*, which described it in ways that bear close comparison with Henderson’s description of the earlier lecture for the IG. Paolozzi gave the lecture at ‘break-neck pace, against a quick changing background of slides of his figures as well as of photographs of crashed cars and aircraft, men with mechanised arms, and other odds and ends which he had carefully cut out of newspapers’.¹¹

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⁸ Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘The New Brutalism’, *Architectural Design*, April 1957


¹⁰ Ibid, p 21

¹¹ See *The Times*, 2 May 1958, p 7. See also Eduardo Paolozzi, ‘Notes for a lecture at the ICA’, *Uppercase*, no 1, Tonbridge, Whitefriars Press, 1958, unpaginated.
Shortly after Metzger moved back to London, two events were to confirm the direction and form which his work was now adopting. In October 1958 the Lord’s Gallery in London had mounted a retrospective exhibition of Kurt Schwitters and Metzger had visited London specifically to see it. Shortly after he returned to live in London the gallery mounted a second exhibition that was also seen by Metzger. In his work Schwitters sought a ‘unity of art and non art’ and his conception of Merz was a way of defining an approach to making art that also encompassed its embodied aims and beliefs. As much as Schwitters is known as an object maker and collagist, Merz significantly also defined a performative role for art as declamation. Furthermore, as Alan Bowness wrote in the catalogue to the 1958 exhibition:

His use of rubbish is something more than a desire to employ unusual materials. One could interpret it as a protest against the false and shiny standards of modern society, or as an almost mystical affirmation of the value of everything, even that which is rejected and despised, or perhaps as a psychological necessity on the artist’s part to identify himself with what has been cast out.12

Schwitters’s ‘unity of art and non art’ also entails the unity of art with adoption and presentation of ethical positions and acts. For Metzger this realisation was of major significance for the appearance of an auto-destructive art in 1959 that could embody – rather than just represent or symbolise – ethical or political ideals and acts in its form.

Metzger’s first public exhibition of auto-destructive art in November 1959 at 14 Monmouth Street (a coffee house run by the kinetic artist Brian Robins) set the parameters for the next few years. The exhibition was a presentation of objects that provided an example of auto-destructive art named and explained by a manifesto sheet and was also the subject of carefully organised publicity in the Daily Express. By adopting these strategies Metzger was not only laying claim to a currency of traditional avant-garde practice but also doing so in a way that negated the need to make art objects as such. Indeed, the theory of auto-destructive art as an attack on the capitalist art market and on capitalism in general necessarily spurned the production of art objects in favour of a means of working whereby the results of practice were a polemically and ethically conceived art without final material form. Seen in these terms, auto-destructive art described processes rather than objects as such, and was presented as occurring over time as an event. And as a statement or declamation, the manifesto was the one thing that could remain to be freely circulated after the event had taken place.

Metzger’s first exhibition at 14 Monmouth Street had taken place three months earlier when he showed three paintings on mild steel. These works were a study in contrast – between the imposing quality of a steel sheet and the ephemeral fragility with which colour was applied in chalk to these sheets. However, being mild steel the surface was easily attacked and had been scraped by tools over which chalk had been rubbed. Only a photograph of one of these paintings survives. The abstract image is an amalgam of the tachism of an artist like Serge Poliakoff and the structured composition of Bomberg which recall ‘a spirit in the mass’, but the adoption of an industrial prefabricated support anticipated his Cardboards installation in the first presentation

of auto-destructive art. This consisted of the cardboard packaging for a TV set that Metzger had simply disassembled and hung on the wall as if it formed a multi-part constructivist relief. Making acknowledged reference to both the Duchampian ready-made and Russian Constructivism,
In this respect it is interesting to note how the meaning of this work has shifted over the three occasions it has been presented – in 1959 it referenced the Duchampian ready-made and Russian functionalism; in 1996, remade for ‘Made New’, an exhibition at City Racing, the work reacted to those realisms recording the material waste of pollution and the human tragedies of homelessness (furthermore, for this version Cardboards was not presented as a set of reliefs on a wall but now as a brutally realist intervention in a space that was defined by dimension or aesthetics as much as it was by ideology); then for the exhibition ‘City Racing 1988–1998: A Partial Account’ at the ICA, in London in 2001 – again the source and configuration of the cardboards were changed, as was the title to Been There, Done That, KS, making direct reference to Kurt Schwitters.

One example of this manifesto, preserved in the collection of the Sohm Archive in Stuttgart, has a seventh sentence added by hand by Metzger to the effect that ‘The amplified sound of the auto-destructive process can be an integral part of the total conception’.

A facsimile of this text is included in K G Pontus Hultén, Jean Tinguely ‘Méta’, New York Graphic Society, Boston, 1975, pp 113–20. This also includes a photograph of the event taken by Terry Hamilton showing Metzger in the audience, p 111.

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A few days after Cardboards opened, Metzger attended Jean Tinguely’s lecture and Cyclo-Matic event at the ICA. This spectacular event featured two out-of-phase recordings of Tinguely haltingly reading a lecture, ‘Art, Machines et Mouvement’, in a barely understandable English; a cigarette girl manipulating a small hand-operated painting machine; and two cyclists who competed in creating a huge Métá-Matic drawing from mile-long roles of paper in the fastest time, the results of which were spewed out over the audience as they cycled. Although aspects of Tinguely’s lecture accord with Metzger’s recent formulation of auto-destructive art – that ‘the only certainty is that movement, change and metamorphosis exist… Ideas, works and beliefs change, transform and disintegrate… Only in movement do we find the true essence of things… we are afraid of movement because it stands for decomposition – because we see our disintegration in movement… Time is movement and cannot be checked’ – what made more of an impression on Metzger was that as an event it was an undoubted success and could
form ‘a type of template’ for the presentation of auto-destructive art, albeit dispensing with Tinguely’s predilection for show business-style entertainment.

One of Metzger’s disappointments was that despite his first manifesto, and the existence of artists whose thinking was close to his, he was unable to use auto-destructive art as a basis for a group movement at this time. Nevertheless, the news that Tinguely was preparing to present a large self-destroying machine – *Homage to New York* – in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in March 1960 encouraged Metzger to pre-empt Tinguely and present to the public his own model for an auto-destructive monument alongside a privately distributed manifesto – and again a report in the *Daily Express*.

This second manifesto is, unlike the first, titled ‘Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto’, but is printed on a sheet that also contains the first, a ploy that immediately declares auto-destructive art to have a history (however brief). This effect is doubled by the juxtaposition of the two very different manifestos, in terms of the type of language they deploy. The simply stated sentences of the first manifesto shift in the second to a more obviously declamatory, performative and poetic language. This manifesto splits between explaining the purpose and meaning of auto-destructive art – that it is ‘not interested in ruins’, that it reflects the power man has over nature ‘to accelerate [its] disintegrative processes’, that it is ‘the transformation of technology into public art’ and that it embodies ‘the chaos of capitalism and Soviet communism, the coexistence of surplus and starvation; the increasing stock-piling of nuclear weapons... the disintegrative effects of machinery and of life in vast built-up areas on the person...’ – before then examining its material properties, ending with a long list of the materials and techniques that could be used.

Despite the change in tone, the understanding of auto-destructive art as a public form of art that embodies ethical, critical and political positions is still made clear. Indeed, the manifesto was produced to coincide with his publicity for his *Model for an Auto-Destructive Monument*, 1960, which was to consist of three massive towers – one leaning – constructed out of mild steel around a skeleton from which the steel would fall away over a period of about ten years. The model was made from office staples stuck onto the back plate of an old radio, and in both versions – the model and the never built full-size monument – technology is harnessed to mount a stark critique of technological power, in total contrast to Tinguely’s playful *Homage to New York* that took place two days after John Rydon’s story about Metzger’s monument in the *Daily Express* under the title ‘Modern art will fall to bits’.

Three months later, on 22 June 1960, when Metzger mounted his first Lecture/Demonstration on auto-destructive art at the Temple Gallery in London, a gallery in Belgravia that specialised in exhibitions of Russian icons, there could be no greater contrast. By this time he had gathered together a body of processes that were identified by him as auto-destructive, all of which were shown and performed to the audience of about thirty people: the Cardboards and the Model for an *Auto-Destructive Monument* alongside fabric-filled transparent rubbish bags taken from the streets outside textile shops near Regent Street (the first line of the second manifesto had been the declaration ‘Man in Regent Street is auto-destructive’). Earlier in the month, in his studio in

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16 John Rydon, ‘Modern art will fall to bits’, *Daily Express*, 15 March 1960
King’s Lynn, Metzger had perfected a technique for painting with acid on nylon – the surviving photographs by John Cox suggest paintings somewhere between the taches of his mild steel paintings and the cuts opened up by Lucio Fontana’s work. However, as Cox’s photographs show, Metzger’s cuts were more like wounds that would not heal but instead expanded over time as the nylon was eaten up. Coming hard on the heels of this development, the Lecture/Demonstration at the Temple Gallery presented this form of painting as manifesto. The critic Jasia Reichardt, who had introduced the event, provided Metzger with a
Bearded man trips over a box and finds a new form of art

"Cardboader" Gustav Metzger yesterday—and some of his works

IT'S PICTURES FROM PACKING CASES

A LONDON artist, who considers old cardboard boxes have qualities equal to the greatest in modern painting, is showing his first exhibition of "machine-made art."

He is bearded, 33-year-old Gustav Metzger, German-born abstract artist, who discarded his new "art" when he fell over a packing-case for a TV set in a shop doorway three months ago.

Mr. Metzger told me last night: "I took the packing-case to pieces and thought of using them as decorations for my room."

"These cardboard are nature unadorned by commercial considerations or the demands of the contemporary consumer."

"I stumbled upon a precipice..."

By JOHN RYDON

should like to have the chance of turning these into architectural decorations. You move them in any way you like.

"There is an inherent harmony and artistic quality in all of them."

Then the ex-boxer who has studied at art schools in Britain and the Continent asked whether I was interested in hearing his theory of "autodestructive art."

I said I had heard enough.

Newspaper review by John Rydon, 'Modern art will fall to bits', copyright *Daily Express*, 15 March 1960. Photo: John Cox
lineage back to Dada as well as a comparison with Tinguely, while invoking lines from the second manifesto, and suggested that his

... at first sight perverse performance is not without either logic or symbolism. Art can only be the mirror of society, and a civilisation half-hypnotised by the prospect of atomic suicide, geared to consumer ‘durables’ which seldom last five years... may well be fairly reflected in works of art containing the seeds of their own decay. The idea has a distinct aesthetic appeal, as well as the morbid fascination of renouncing the tradition that works of art are inherently worth preserving for future generations.17

Over the following two years the delivery of Lecture/Demonstrations, and production and circulation of manifestos followed the model he had by now developed, whereby the studio became the laboratory for working out new ideas, which were then given a public airing by his use of both formats, often in tandem. In October 1960 he gave a Lecture/Demonstration at the Heretics Society of Corpus Christi in Cambridge at the invitation of the mathematician Ian Sommerville whose partner and collaborator, William Burroughs, was in the audience along with Brion Gysin.18 The following July, Metzger presented his acid on nylon technique on the South Bank to an audience mostly made up of construction workers along with a few passers-by. The demonstration had been intended to be one of the opening events for the International Union of Architects Congress in Jubilee Gardens. But after the organisers changed their minds and refused to allow it to go ahead, Metzger – helped by a group of students – erected a framework structure, near the IUA pavilion, across which sheets of white, black and red nylon (pointedly anarchist colours) were stretched. As soon as this had been set up, Metzger painted, flung and sprayed hydrochloric acid onto the nylon screens, which immediately corroded and fell apart.19 To accompany this event, which also included a presentation of large suspended glass sheets falling onto the concrete ground in a pre-arranged sequence, a new manifesto was handed out, printing not only the texts of the first two manifestos but also a description of the demonstration. The title of the new manifesto, written on 23 June, signalled that it placed equal emphasis on both auto-destructive art and machine art (a form of ready-made born of industrial societies), and also auto-creative art, that together ‘aim at the integration of art with the advances of science and technology’ and yet also unequivocally stated that ‘Auto-destructive art is an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation’. Just as Metzger was increasingly identifying himself with the activity of the scientist, his activity continued to be defined by its political motivation – between the autumn of 1960 and the spring of 1961 he had been involved in the formation of the Committee of 100 and the organisation of demonstrations, culminating in his imprisonment in September 1961 for refusing to be bound over to keep the peace.20

Through 1962 Metzger developed the themes introduced by his third manifesto in a text for Ark magazine, ‘Machine, Auto-Creative and Auto-Destructive Art’, as well as his fourth manifesto entitled ‘Manifesto World’, together with his non-participation in the ‘Theatre of Misfits’ exhibition at Gallery One, for which he delivered a demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art as part of the Misfits evening at the
Art as movement. Obsession of modern artists with movement. From to Impressionism.

This need is seen in A.D.A.

Free movement in thought. Auto-destructive.


Inevitably technical advances lead to a d.o.


Describe and justify auto-creative.

Found on form and action + muted steel.

AUTO-DESTRUCTIVE ART

Historical

Existence of art independent of noise and religion.

Examples are displayed.

Dea Fleur, Rabel. Auts Beil Trio.

Swedish experiments + war.

SOCIAL

No society can exist without the allocation of the artist. In the technological society.

Childhood lost. Today's society geared to self-destructive activities.

Harshness is the embryonic today's society.

Harshness is the embryonic today's society.

Harshness is the embryonic today's society.

Harshness is the embryonic today's society.

Fundamentally the sacrifice of a drawing.

Unreasonable efforts of the drawing of the arcades.

Drawn, that is drawn. Self Depriving...
ICA. This fourth manifesto was the most strident and viciously worded – a reaction against the Cuban missile crisis, his imprisonment the previous year and an obviously burgeoning art market. The manifesto’s opening lines set the tone: ‘everything everything everything everything A world on edge of destruction’, that then leads into a reflective passage on the role of the artist and the observation that ‘Artists cannot compete with reality’. But a mood of invective soon comes through. He declares galleries are ‘Boxes of deceit’, before then moving on to address the vitality of ‘New Realism’ which for Metzger heralds ‘the next development of art. The world in its totality as work of art. Including sound. Newspapers.’ Despite its power, Metzger recognised the increasing commercialisation of New Realism and could not resist the scathing declaration: ‘You stinking fucking cigar smoking bastards and you scented fashionable cows who deal in works of art... The artist does not want his work to be in the possession of stinking people.’ Metzger’s declamatory tirade takes its place in the tradition of such statements of refusal of avant-garde recuperation; however, it was the last time that he would use such language in his manifestos or other publications (even though the underlying message remained). In the following few years, his recognition of an auto-creative art within auto-destructive art, allied to the position he had adopted as an artist who produces no objects, led him to an increasingly close identification with science whereby his view of the studio as laboratory became actual.

Two months after he distributed ‘Manifesto World’ at the Misfits Evening at the ICA, Metzger gave a Lecture/Demonstration at the Ealing College of Art under the title of ‘Auto-Destructive Art, Auto-Creative Art: The Struggle for the Machine-Arts of the Future’. This event,
mounted as part of the Groundcourse run by Roy Ascott, married Metzger’s explanation of his work with a succession of about fifty slides representing art, society, space research and war taken from newspapers and magazines, as well as two films on automatic mechanical self-replication and the movement of cells. For Metzger this remains the strongest Lecture/Demonstration from this period, not just for its sustained political emphasis throughout the projection of imagery (the Duchamp/Man Ray image of *Dust Breeding* from the *Green Box* was memorably related by Metzger directly to a discussion of nuclear annihilation), but also for the manner in which it codified in public (as opposed to in print, as with the issue of *Ark*) the integration of scientific activity into his work.\(^{22}\) One aspect of Metzger’s manifestos was the way in which a list of the techniques and materials from which Auto-Destructive Art was formed was paired with polemical statements, such as those against the capitalist art market in ‘Manifesto World’ or, as he explained in the third manifesto, ‘an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation’. This is also the case with the *Ark* text, but contained within it is a much more closely argued statement that ‘Machine Art’ will inevitably lead to ‘the entry of the artist into factories and the use of every available technique from computers downwards for the creation of works of art’, while the ‘image-multiplication’
of ‘Auto-Creative Art’ – embodied in the London Transport Electricity Substation at Elephant and Castle – ‘proves beyond doubt that only the collaboration of the artist and technology and the use of machine forms can give us certain experiences we need’.

In the following year Metzger attended a film course at the Slade School of Fine Art, one result of which was a film by a fellow student about Metzger’s work. Harold Liversidge’s Auto-Destructive Art – The Activities of G Metzger included shots of some of Metzger’s first light projections, one of the first tangible results of his increasing interest in an explicitly scientific process. Another outcome of this shift in his attitude was his involvement with the Italian kinetic artist Marcello Salvadori in planning to set up in London a Centre for Advanced Creative Studies – bringing together art, science and technology – which soon became the Signals gallery and magazine under the guidance of David Medalla and Paul Keeler. Signals’ own statement of intent, as a platform ‘for all those who believe passionately in the co-relation of the arts and Art’s imaginative integration with technology, science, architecture and our entire environment’, declares an adherence to a critically multidisciplinary approach to art that directly applies to the thinking behind the shifts occurring in Metzger’s own work. This new context for Metzger led to the publication of his fifth manifesto within the pages of Signals alongside a brief discussion of Medalla’s bubble and sand machines. In this manifesto he refers to molecular theory as a way of explaining his production of an art defined by ‘image-multiplication’ and auto-transformation by recourse to random variable theory. His aim was to produce an art where ‘at a certain point, the work takes over, is an activity beyond the detailed control of the artist, reaches a power, grace, momentum, transcendence... which the artist could not achieve except through random activity’. Rather than solely illustrative of aesthetic responses to movement, Signals framed the kinetic art it exhibited and wrote about as a tendency that reflected the wide social, political and technological structures of reference that this work encapsulated, above and before it might be considered aesthetically. Metzger was to find a material and form in light projections of structural movement that could embody the random and uncontrollable activity he sought.

On 24 February 1965, Metzger gave a Lecture/Demonstration at the Architectural Association. An expanded version of the lecture was subsequently published (first by a student press at the AA in June and then in October by Metzger himself). This act of publishing the lecture, and the way in which Metzger controlled the means of distribution, echoes the production of his manifestos. It is significant not only that both editions of the publication carry on its cover an image of notes by Metzger for his first Lecture/Demonstration at the Temple Gallery in 1960, but also that the edition of the lecture published by Metzger himself includes reprints of his manifestos. Both features of the publication declare the history that Metzger has given to auto-destructive art. This text, more than any other produced by Metzger, codifies the theory and practice of auto-destructive art. Having done so, Metzger could develop his theories in other directions – signalled by the name he gave to the publisher of the lecture, Destruction/Creation, and, as we shall see, by the techniques that he would use and refine over the next few years.
Between September 1965 and the summer of 1966, Metzger mounted a series of public events – the first two of which were aptly titled ‘Notes on the Chemical Revolution in Art’ and ‘The Chemical Revolution in Art, Lecture/Demonstration’ – through which he evolved and refined his approach to using light projections of various types. At the second of these, held at the Society of Arts of Cambridge University, Metzger showed ten different techniques, including the technique that would occupy him for the next few years – that of displaying the effect of heating and cooling on liquid crystals. As he described in the press release for his display at Better Books in January 1966 of the ‘Art of Liquid Crystals’, this ‘new art technique’ consisted of:

... a chemical... mounted between microscope cover slips. In the course of a one-minute cycle, the chemical is melted and then cooled. As the chemical cools, colour changes are observed which vary according to the position of the spectator and the light source. This work is called Earth from Space. The technique is based on the use of liquid crystals. It can be used on a large scale, inside buildings or out.

For Metzger the liquid crystals promised a set of visual experiences that could not be predicted and were infinitely variable, in contrast to the ‘solid state’ nature of most kinetic art. As he had explained in Cambridge:

... art is enriched by an astronomical number of new forms, colours and textures when the rigidity of material is loosened... The new art forms are related to current ideas in science and to current technology. This relation is on the level of ideas. It is intuitive and emotional. It is a physical involvement. In disintegrating and growing art, time ceases to be unidirectional. At ‘one instant’ - sic - of time, the work may be going in ten different directions in time. The anisotropy of time.26

With this technique the disintegrative effect of acid on nylon was exchanged for a process that brought together destruction and creation as well as a random unpredictability of appearance, and a multiplication of image.

For artists such as Metzger, time rather than space, ephemerality rather than an object’s permanence and volume, had determined the creation of a new art of engagement. With the liquid crystals, linear time could be exchanged for an omni-directional event structure. The 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS), initiated in part by Metzger, has often been cited as a codification of those aspects of countercultural artistic activity that sought to create an art of engagement out of this move from the object in art, exemplified by performance and happening, and that could be recognised by Metzger’s continuing statements concerning auto-destructive art. However, what is significant in this context is not just that since 1965 Metzger had been increasingly linking auto-destruction with auto-creation, but that this was couched in terms that made clear his growing attachment to processes drawn from science. DIAS, however, reflected this shift wholeheartedly in its clear statement of aim to involve scientists, philosophers and psychoanalysts as well as artists in its discussions that hoped to tackle ‘atmospheric pollution, creative vandalism, destruction in protest, planned obsolescence, popular media, urban sprawl/overcrowding, war... biology, economics, medicine, physics, psychology, sociology, space research’.27 Even so, if the


majority of the discussion and presentations were by artists, the course Metzger followed after DIAS reveals the extent to which his interest in auto-destructive art was decisively shifting in favour of an involvement in the possibilities for new approaches to art promised by science.

At sessions of the ‘Dialectics of Liberation: Towards a Demystification of Violence’, held at the Roundhouse in July 1967, Metzger had met John Plant, who was to invite him to mount an exhibition as part of the Swansea Arts Festival in January 1968. For Metzger the resulting exhibition, ‘Extremes Touch’, was a tremendous liberation and offered the perfect identity and environment for the direction in which his work was going. If the demonstration and manifesto had taken the place of the exhibition or display, it was apt that a scientific laboratory – the Filtration Laboratory at Swansea University – should be the location for a scientific art exhibition, and the works he exhibited were created as a direct response to and in relation to that space. From one perspective, with this event Metzger returned to what had charged his mind as a young artist responding to the modern movement of Futurism, Dada and Constructivism: space, light, science, technology and hygiene. The handbill accompanying the event gives a sense of Metzger’s excitement in working in such an environment – the list of ‘materials and techniques employed’ itself striking a manifesto-like note:

- Water – jet, fall, atomized. Main line compressed air. Floating structures.

This event determined the course of his activities over the next few years, such as his work as publisher and editor of PAGE, the bulletin of the Computer Arts Society between 1969 and 1973; his six-month research into automata for two articles in Studio International in 1969; or his involvement after 1969 with the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science, founded in 1969 by the biophysicist Maurice Wilkins. Just as his theories and practice of auto-destructive art were wholly linked with social and political engagement, so too was his use of science in terms of a social responsibility in which the use of these techniques in other areas was continually questioned – a point made by the ‘Zagreb Manifesto’ of June 1969, that Metzger co-signed with Gordon Hyde and Jonathan Benthall and published in Studio International, when it stated that:

... artists are increasingly striving to relate their work and that of the technologist to the current unprecedented crisis in society. Some artists are responding by utilizing their experience of science and technology to try and resolve urgent social problems. Others, researching in cybernetics and the neuro-sciences, are exploring new ideas about the interaction of the human being with the environment. Others again are identifying their work with a concept of ecology, which includes the entire technological environment that man has imposed on nature.28

Although over the last fifteen years Metzger’s working practice has noticeably shifted, with work being made and remade for exhibitions,
and entering public collections here and abroad, there is a real sense in which the manifesto and Lecture/Demonstration remain at the heart of his activity as an artist. For instance, each of the works that make up the ‘Historic Photographs’ series, as indeed the series as a whole, can be read as manifesto in the particular way in which this body of work addresses a whole range of social and artistic issues. Furthermore, and more specifically, the lecture has continued to this day to be his preferred form for engaging in public discourse concerning his ideas and work. Indeed, the lecture, the Lecture/Demonstration and the manifesto provide the theoretical basis for understanding the nature of Metzger’s practice as an artist.
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