

Pioneers in Art and Science: Metzger

Ken McMullen; UK 2004; DVD; 28'20" plus 111'00" of additional material.
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Gustav Metzger is best known for his theories of auto-destructive art, first presented in 1959. Auto-destructive art, according to Metzger, "re-enacts the obsession with destruction, the pummelling to which individuals and masses are subjected."¹ Billed as "the first major documentary on the life and work of Gustav Metzger" this DVD was commissioned and funded by the Arts Council England as part of its Pioneers in Art and Science Initiative and supported by the University of the Arts London and the European Commission.² As a scholar whose research focuses on intersections between contemporary art, science, and technology, I was eager to see how this video – the first produced by the Pioneers in Art and Science Initiative – represented Metzger. For indeed, one would hope that such a high profile production would lead to the creation of more documentaries on other interdisciplinary pioneers, contributing to the nascent literature in this field and providing a useful pedagogical tool for teachers and students.

A prominent figure of the avant-garde in the 1960s, Metzger's presence faded until the mid-1990s. The artist's place in the history of art has been buoyed by a series of exhibitions in the last seven years: a 1998 solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, his inclusion in the exhibition "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object: 1949-79" organized by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 1998, and most recently by the 2004 exhibition, "This Was Tomorrow: British Art in the 60s" at the Tate Britain, which selected the Destruction In Art Symposium (DIAS), which Metzger organized in 1966, as one of its nine thematic areas.³ In May 2005, "Gustav Metzger – Geschichte Geschichte" (Gustave Metzger – History History), opens at the Generali Foundation in Vienna.

I learned of Metzger's work as a Ph.D. student of art historian Kristine Stiles, who completed her nine-hundred page doctoral dissertation on DIAS (including some two-hundred pages on Metzger) at Berkeley in 1987.⁴ Stiles introduced me to Roy Ascott, who introduced me to

¹ Gustav Metzger, "Manifesto Auto-Destructive Art," London 1960. Reprinted in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 402.

² Arts Council England website project description.

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/project_detail.php?sid=6&id=93&page=5> Cited February 1, 2005.

³ I was in the audience at "Out of Actions" in 1998 when Metzger perform a failed re-enactment of his famous 1961 demonstration of auto-destructive art at the South Bank in London. Apparently, the hydrochloric acid that Metzger utilized in LA in 1998 was not strong enough to dissolve the nylon sheeting. Two other DIAS participants re-enacted works for "Out of Actions: John Latham's SKOOB Tower performance in LA also failed, however Raphael Ortiz's piano destruction, dedicated to Al Hansen, remains etched in my mind as one of the most powerful art experiences I have ever witnessed.

⁴ Stiles's first publication on Metzger and DIAS was "Synopsis of the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) and Its Theoretical Significance," *The Act* 1 (Spring 1987): 22-31. Her essay "The Story of DIAS and the 'DIAS Affect'," is forthcoming in *Gustav Metzger – Geschichte Geschichte* (exhibition catalog) Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2005.

Metzger at a lecture in London in 1995. Ascott had invited Metzger to lecture at Ealing College of Art in 1960 and was invited, in turn, to serve as a member of the DIAS Honorary Committee. As Stiles notes, Metzger's lecture at Ealing was attended by Ascott's student Peter Townshend, who later formed the rock band, The Who and has credited Metzger's theory of auto-destructive art for giving him the idea to smash guitars onstage. This connection also led to Metzger's development and use of "Liquid Crystal" projections for psychedelic light-shows for The Who and Cream. I later edited a collection of essays by Ascott and mentioned some of this interwound history in my introduction.⁵

Feeling like part of an extended family, I was very much predisposed to like the documentary and took special delight in being able to screen it for some colleagues at the Savannah College of Art and Design.⁶ Unfortunately, despite its distinguished sponsorship, handsomely designed packaging, and well-researched and clearly written liner notes by Michael Benson, the film fails to provide a compelling account of Metzger's life and work. This is a missed opportunity. One only hopes that the Arts Council will continue to support the creation of documentaries as part of its Pioneers initiative, but do so in a way that enables scholars to play a role in forging their intellectual content. The following comments refer specifically to the main program, a twenty-eight minute documentary, though the nearly two hours of additional material were not any more inspired or inspiring.

Metzger's ideas and artistic activities have been diverse and influential yet remain obscure. Audiences interested in art since WWII, destruction, and art and technology would be well-served by a documentary film that offers insight not only into the artist's theory and practice of auto-destructive art, but his development of liquid crystal projections for rock concerts, organization of DIAS, engagement with computers and art, unrealized large-scale plans for auto-destructive monuments, disappearance from public view for two decades, and reappearance and reappraisal in the mid-1990s. In particular, a film that includes archival video and still-images from Metzger's demonstration of auto-destructive art on the South Bank in London, 3 July 1961, and from DIAS, would be a useful pedagogical tool for students and educators. Interviews with artists, critics, and art historians would provide much needed contextualization of Metzger's contributions to contemporary art. Alas, *Pioneers in Art and Science: Metzger* furnishes little if any of this hoped-for material. Moreover, what the film fails to provide is no more disappointing than the anemic content it offers and the feeble way it is presented.

Although in principle I am sympathetic to a documentary approach that trades production values to gain immediacy, intimacy, and candidness, the scenography and filmography throughout most of the primary section are unnecessarily poor, the direction is undirected, and the editing is practically non-existent. What viewers are left with is neither intimate nor candid, but an unconstructed, nostalgic, and self-indulgent rehashing of ideas nearly a half-century old. Director Ken McMullen has failed to give significant shape -- either conceptually or cinematically -- to the art, ideas, and personality of his subject. He has probed neither the breadth nor depth of Metzger's work but seems to be content to allow the artist to ramble. While the director deserves applause for taking on a challenging project, he equally deserves blame for failing to

⁵ Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness*, ed. Edward A. Shanken. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

⁶ The opinions in this review are my own, however they were shaped by discussions held as part of a private screening of the film at my home on October 21, 2004, which included SCAD faculty Avantica Bawa, Tim Jackson, David Jeffreys, Heather Dune Macadam, Adrian Parr, and graduate student Brantley Johnson. I am grateful for their insights and collegiality.

do justice to his subject. Although I would be equally critical of an overly romantic portrayal of Metzger, what McMullen has created is an unnecessarily unflattering portrait of the artist as an old man, a *has-been*.⁷ Moreover, because the film provides no documentation that substantiates the importance of Metzger's work, the viewer might well remain unconvinced that Metzger ever really was. Technically, the sound quality is acceptable; unfortunately, the video resolution, which is adequate on a computer monitor, is dark and grainy when projected. The liner notes quote a description of McMullen as "our secret auteur" but he might be described as "our secret amateur."

The film begins with a single camera following Metzger and McMullen as they walk out of a large building, having a discussion that is all but inaudible to the viewer. This scene is interspersed with scenes of the artist reflecting on destruction in his thick German accent during an interview recorded in London in June 2002. His head is cropped on the top, filling the frame. Behind him, a window casts a glaring light that is neither becoming to the speaker nor graphically attractive. In another sequence, Metzger is presented from the knee up, in a trenchcoat that he wears throughout the film, seated by a radiator and framed by the same glaring window. The ubiquitous presence of the trenchcoat makes it seem as though the director selected low-budget, unheated rooms in which to interview his subject and/or the whole affair was shot so hastily that Metzger did not have time to take his coat off. Symbolically, the dissheveled image of Metzger in his late seventies indoors in a trenchcoat not only implies an ambiguous seediness but suggests that the coldness of winter -- and the corresponding stage of life -- has penetrated the interior spaces of site and subject.

There are a few other scene settings, including a digitally grey-toned sequence, during which Metzger recites the appropriate materials and techniques, including cybernetics and wood, from "Manifesto: Auto-Destructive Art" (London, 10 March, 1960). This recitation ends on a misleading note, when Metzger states (in reference to the use of wood and his apprenticeship as a cabinet-maker at the age of sixteen) "...indeed, it's 1941-42." His apprenticeship would have taken place in 1941-42, but the manifesto was written nearly twenty years later. Perhaps the most disturbing sequence shows Metzger wandering aimlessly, while in the background his voice-over recites the 3rd Manifesto. Although I hesitate to mention McMullen in the same sentence as Théodore Géricault, this segment sadly reminds me of the French painter's psychological studies of 1822-23, for Metzger appears feeble and confused, cold and alone in the world. Maybe that is also the most insightful moment of the film. Metzger's family perished in Poland during the holocaust, he refers to himself as nationless, and his visionary work of the 1960s has vanished -- by design -- with barely a trace.

Perhaps one should keep in mind that despite the dictates of his theoretical manifestos, Metzger's work was *not* strictly auto-destructive; his demonstrations from 1960-62 required that he apply hydrochloric acid (the active ingredient in household bleach) to the nylon sheets, first with brushes, then with a spray-gun. Similarly, Lucio Fontana had pierced canvases as early as 1949 and Saburo Murakami had broken through "canvases" (paper sheets on stretchers) with his body in 1955. Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York* actually did self-destruct in the Sculpture Garden at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in March 1960, several

⁷ At the risk of making comments that could be interpreted as ageist, my observations regarding the representation of Metzger's elderliness must be made. As pictures from DIAS in 1966 reveal, Metzger appeared much older than his chronological age would have suggested for an average white European male at the time. Aside from social norms and expectations regarding the visual appearance of age, representations of a person's age can range from celebration to debasement. It is my position that McMullen's visual representation of Metzger frames his age in a negative light, emphasizing decrepitude.

months after Metzger theorized auto-destructive art but several months before he claims to have enacted his first demonstration. Given his meager production of art, its failure to logically concretize his theory, and the planned obsolescence of that which he did produce, Metzger's place in the history of art remains uncertain. *Pioneers in Art and Science: Metzger* does not help his case.