

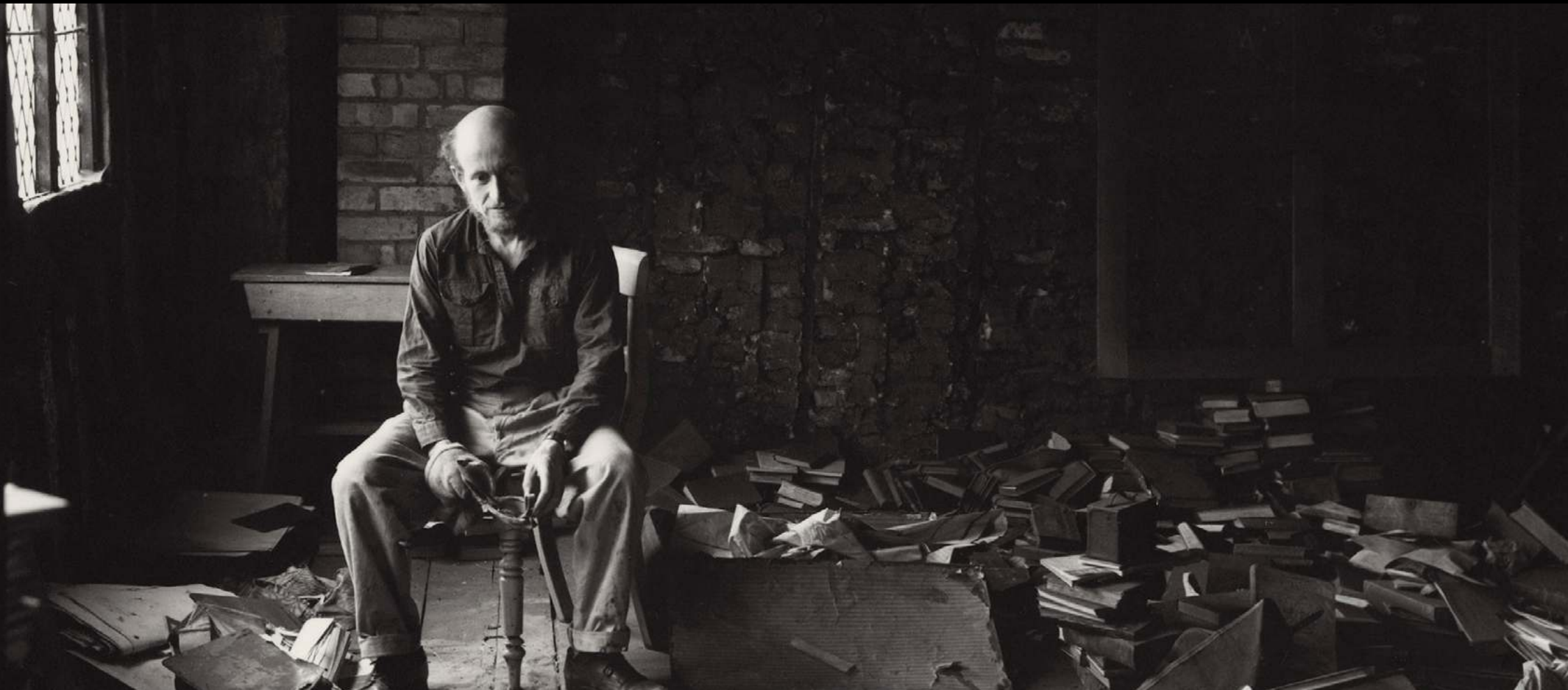
Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

BECOMING GUSTAV METZGER:

THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF AN AESTHETIC REVOLUTIONARY, 1945-72



AUTO DESTRUCTIVE ART

Auto-destructive art is primarily a form of public art for industrial societies.

Self-destructive painting, sculpture and construction is a total unity of idea, site, form, colour, method and timing of the disintegrative process.

Auto-destructive art can be created with natural forces, traditional art techniques and technological techniques.

The amplified sound of the auto-destructive process can be an element of the total conception.

The artist may collaborate with scientists, engineers.

Self-destructive art can be machine produced and factory assembled.

Auto-destructive paintings, sculptures and constructions have a life time varying from a few moments to twenty years. When the disintegrative process is complete the work is to be removed from the site and scrapped.

London, 4th November, 1959

G. METZGER

MANIFESTO AUTO-DESTRUCTIVE ART

Man in Regent Street is auto-destructive.

Rockets, nuclear weapons, are auto-destructive.

Auto-destructive art.

The drop drop dropping of H bombs.

Not interested in ruins, (the picturesque)

Auto-destructive art re-enacts the obsession with destruction, the pummelling to which individuals and masses are subjected.

Auto-destructive art demonstrates man's power to accelerate disintegrative processes of nature and to order them.

Auto-destructive art mirrors the compulsive perfectionism of arms manufacture - polishing to destruction point.

Auto-destructive art is the transformation of technology into public art.

The immense productive capacity, the chaos of capitalism and of Soviet communism, the co-existence of surplus and starvation; the increasing stock-piling of nuclear weapons - more than enough to destroy technological societies; the disintegrative effect of machinery and of life in vast built-up areas on the person,...

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.

Other forms of auto-destructive art involve manual manipulation. There are forms of auto-destructive art where the artist has a tight control over the nature and timing of the disintegrative process, and there are other forms where the artists control is slight.

Materials and techniques used in creating auto-destructive art include: Acid, Adhesives, Ballistics, Canvas, Casting, Clay, Combustion, Compression, Concrete, Corrosion, Cybernetics, Drop, Elasticity, Electricity, Electrolysis, Electronics, Explosives, Feed-back, Glass, Heat, Human Energy, Ice, Jet, Light, Load, Mass-production, Metal, Motion, Motion Picture, Natural Forces, Nuclear energy, Paint, Paper, Photography, Plaster, Plastics, Pressure, Radiation, Sand, Solar energy, Sound, Steam, Stress, Terra-cotta, Vibration, Water, Welding, Wire, Wood.

London, 10th March, 1960

G. METZGER

Type of output:
A collection
of curatorial,
creative and
critical work
2014-2020
DOUBLE WEIGHTED

by
Elizabeth Fisher

Cover:
Gustav Metzger in his studio in
King's Lynn, 1960.

Photo credit: John Cox for Ida Kar
© National Portrait Gallery

Left:
Gustav Metzger, *Manifesto
Auto-Destructive Art*, 1960.

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SUMMARY

This research is the first body of research devoted to Gustav Metzger's early work.

It highlights the artist's engagement with science and his interest in aesthetics – two overlooked and hitherto unexamined aspects of his practice – in order to understand their role in shaping his artistic development and connect his work to new contexts and fields of artistic enquiry and discourse.

The first part of this research culminated in the exhibition and publication of the same name, *Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!* as well as a documentary film and the interdisciplinary symposium *White Heat: Art, Science and Social Responsibility in 1960s Britain* (all 2014). These examined Metzger's interest in science and technology as a critical driver behind the revolutionary developments in his practice during the dynamic decade of the Sixties. At the heart of this project was a creative collaboration between the artist Gustav Metzger (1926-2017) and the curator and art historian Elizabeth Fisher.

The second aspect of this research looked back even further to trace the origins of Metzger's revolutionary art agenda in the artist's earliest work, taking as its focus a body of paintings, works on paper and other ephemera made before 1960. This new research resulted in the exhibition *Destroy and you create: Gustav Metzger in King's Lynn* (2019).

Together these projects posit a rich new narrative regarding the full arc of Metzger's artistic development which pivots on the relationship between the work he produced before 1960 – the year of his first manifesto of auto-destructive art – and that which came after.

INTRODUCTION

This research has resulted in the following outputs:

Artworks:

Two new bodies of work made in collaboration with the artist Gustav Metzger through a process of 'creatively revisiting' a series of ephemeral, kinetic artworks originally made in 1968.



Symposium:

White Heat: Art, Science and Social Responsibility was a one-day, interdisciplinary symposium co-organised with Bronac Ferran. It brought together artists and key figures from the worlds of radical science and experimental art practice in the 1960s alongside a younger generation of artists and scholars of the period.



Above:
Cambridge University
Department of Engineering.

Left:
Light Drawings, 2014.

Two exhibitions:

- The first exhibition to focus on Metzger's engagement with science at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge in 2014.
- The first UK survey devoted to Metzger's early paintings and works on paper at the Fermoy Gallery, King's Lynn in 2019.

Documentary film:

A new filmed interview between curator Elizabeth Fisher and artist Gustav Metzger to introduce the history and creative themes of the project to a broad audience.

Publication:

Exhibition catalogue: *Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2014)

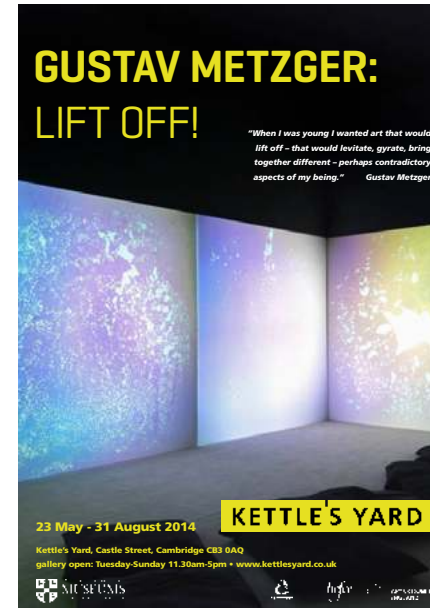
Right:
Still from documentary film.

Below right:
Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!
exhibition catalogue front cover.



Right:
Cambridge exhibition poster.

Below:
King's Lynn exhibition banner.



RESEARCH CHALLENGE

This research examined Gustav Metzger's lesser known early works, specifically his creative output prior to 1960 – the year which saw a decisive shift in Metzger's approach to the materials of art-making – and a group of ephemeral, kinetic artworks created in 1968 using techniques the artist had been developing and theorising since 1960.

Created as a temporary installation in a filtration laboratory at University College, Swansea and largely undocumented, research into the work from 1968 was made possible through a close collaboration with the artist himself in which Fisher assumed multiple roles as art historian, curator, and collaborating artist. Following a process of 'creative revisiting' the work, the research involved staging a series of scientific/aesthetic experiments with materials and techniques based on the artist's original notes and his own recollections, creating space to reflect, adapt and extend the lines of enquiry that had been articulated in the original works in ways that engaged with the contemporary context.

The second part of this research represented the first attempt to assess and engage with a large, uncatalogued archive of over 3,000 works on paper, paintings and notes made by Metzger between 1945-60. It sought to establish key navigational aids such as thematic preoccupations and a chronology within the material in order to provide a context for the closer examination of individual works with a view to understanding the relationship between the artist's earliest experiments during these critical formative years and the work which came later.

Right:
Gustav Metzger,
Untitled painting on newspaper,
October 1956 (detail).





AIMS:

To create new knowledge, opening up a more nuanced appreciation of Metzger's work and a clearer picture of the full arc of his artistic development.

To foreground Metzger's engagement with science and his interest in aesthetics and assess their role in shaping his artistic development.

To connect Metzger's work to new contexts and fields of artistic enquiry and discourse, exploring the historical and contemporary resonance of Metzger's aesthetic theories.

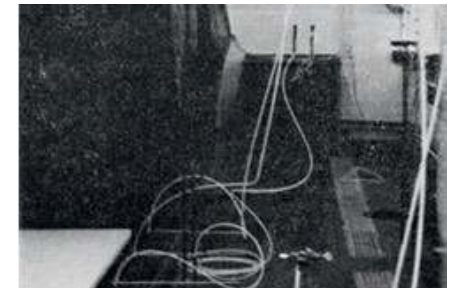
Left and below:

Dancing Tubes work in progress.

Photo credit: Paul Allitt

Below:

Installation view, *Extremes Touch*,
Swansea 1968.



When I was young I wanted an
art that would lift off, that
would levitate you, bring
together different - perhaps,
contradictory aspects of my being.
The search for - the need to
encapsulate varying kinds of
contradictory elements, the urgency of
stopping sharp - extinct
twist and: razor - sharp
endpoint.

After the experience, we expand
reconnect with a normality
which is not the same as it was
But normality once changed,
is not the same.

OBJECTIVES:

To use a range of historical, creative, curatorial and collaborative research methods to tease out and understand relationships between this period of experimentation and Metzger's mature practice.

To create exhibitions and artworks articulating this research in the form of visual narratives and multi-sensory experiences alongside more conventional language-based forms, echoing Metzger's own cross-disciplinary practice.

To build a cross-generational network of academics, artists, scientists, sociologists and key pioneers of interdisciplinary experimentation and radical science activism to explore intersections between Metzger's aesthetic theories and the philosophy and practice of science in the postwar period.

Left:

Untitled note by Gustav Metzger, N.D.



Top left clockwise:
Gustav Metzger Untitled (Table
Painting) oil on canvas c.1957.

Gustav Metzger Untitled
mixed media on paper c.1958.

Gustav Metzger Untitled oil and
charcoal on found board c.1958.

Gustav Metzger Untitled
oil on found board c.1958.



Above:
Gustav Metzger practicing for a public
demonstration of auto-destructive art
using acid on nylon, 1960.

*Photo credit: John Cox for Ida Kar ©
National Portrait Gallery.*



CONTEXT

Gustav Metzger is considered one of the most important artists of our time (Obrist), ‘the conscience of the art world’ (Walker) and a key figure for successive generations of artists working in activist, performance and expanded art practices today. His work is the subject of major international exhibitions (West Den Haag 2018; Hauser & Wirth London 2021), ongoing scholarship (Jonathan P. Watts, *Animating the Archives in British Art Studies*, forthcoming Jan 2021) and critical discussion within the context of contemporary art practice; (*Extinction Marathon*, Serpentine Gallery 2014).

However, the political nature of Metzger’s practice dominates interpretations of his work and has allowed certain aspects of his activities to overshadow others; the relationship between the explicitly politicised auto-destructive art and its less controversial twin auto-creative art, which evolved in tandem over the course of the 1960s and deploy the same functioning principles, materials and techniques, is a case in point. Furthermore, critical attention has invariably focused on his activity post-1960, leaving substantial gaps in current narratives around his artistic development. This research addresses these gaps and seeks to enrich prevailing understanding of Metzger’s work with new knowledge and insight.

Elizabeth Fisher began working with the artist Gustav Metzger in 2012

Right:
Fisher & Metzger experimenting with ink,
water & glycerine to recreate Brownian motion
light projections, April 2014.

Photo credit: Paul Allitt

and continued to pursue her research into the early and lesser-known aspects of his work with the support of the artist until his death in 2017. Her work has continued with the support of the artist’s estate, and the outputs listed here are part of an ongoing engagement with Metzger’s work that will, among other things, see her curate a survey exhibition and catalogue raisonné of Metzger’s works on paper at Norwich Castle Museum in 2023.



METHODS AND PROCESSES

At various points in this research, Fisher adopted the roles and methodologies of art historian, curator and collaborating artist.

Strategic planning took place in 2012 and 2013 in liaison with the artist and partner institutions to secure funding, establish timescales, undertake risk assessments, gain access to closed archives and put in place practical facilities and support.

Drawing on Fisher's curatorial expertise, the research process was organised around two **exhibitions** in 2014 and 2019. The first dealt with work made in the decade after 1960 and wove historical material around immersive installations to explore Metzger's aesthetic theories as embodied experience. A different approach was taken in the second exhibition, which, through the selection and juxtaposition of artworks and archival materials, layered historical narratives and visual relationships to open multiple routes into and through the body of work, testing formal conversations against chronological information.

Historical research built around archival study, conversation and exchange with Metzger's peers and collaborators, as well as a filmed interview with the artist. This research formed the basis of Fisher's essay in the exhibition catalogue *Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!* (Fisher 2014). The focus of archival research shifted in 2015 to focus on preparations for the second exhibition.

A **symposium** convened in July 2014 in collaboration with curator Bronac



Above:
Gustav Metzger, Untitled works on paper,
N.D.
(sifting through the archives, April 2019).

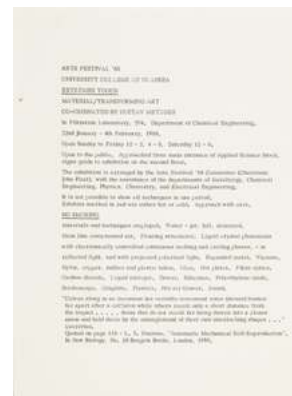
Ferran brought together a diverse network of artists, curators, historians, philosophers of science and writers to reflect on the interweaving of arts practice and scientific activism in 1960s Britain.

Collaborative creative research over 4 months (February-May 2014) involved staging a series of practical, scientific/aesthetic experiments based on the artist's original notes and his own recollections of the installation in Swansea in 1968. A range of materials were used, including compressed air, copper pipe, electric fan, floating polystyrene sheets, fibre optics, graphite, heat, hotplates, ink, light (reflected, refracted and projected polarised), light sensitive photographic paper liquid crystal in continuous melting and cooling phases, mica, plastic pipe, vintage slide projectors and water (jet, fall, atomised, liquid state). Supported by Cambridge-based artist CJ Mahony, Fisher and Metzger revisited many of the techniques used in Swansea, learning and adapting processes with a view to re-presenting them in a gallery setting. This research led to the re-fabrication of *Mica Cube*, a new variation of *Drop on a Hotplate* (both 1968/2014) and the creation of two entirely new **artworks**: the kinetic installation *Dancing Tubes* and the *Light Drawings* series of photographic prints (both 2014).

Dancing Tubes drew on experiments in Swansea where Metzger connected flexible plastic piping to compressed air outlets around the laboratory (documented in the only surviving image on p.8). Adaptations included the use of a portable compressor in lieu of a mainline source of compressed air, introducing an aggressive new element of sound to the work.

Right: Exhibition handout, *Extremes Touch*, 1968.
Far right: Gustav Metzger, *Plotter Drawings* c.1970.

The Light Drawings were created by Metzger and Fisher in the darkroom at Cambridge School of Art. They were made using techniques developed during the experiments with compressed air but also drawing on a line of enquiry and a methodology Metzger had begun to explore around 1969/70 while working with early plotters/printers to produce a series of plotter 'drawings.' Each 'drawing' on light-sensitive paper was made by Fisher in response to a set of instructions given by Metzger and within specific parameters (i.e. duration) which were adjusted for each drawing. Some were made by allowing the light source to be moved solely by air currents created by portable fans; in others Metzger described a gesture (i.e. 'imagine you are chopping wood') which Fisher then interpreted while executing the drawing.





Creatively revisiting *Extremes Touch*:
Experiments with compressed air / *Dancing Tubes* (work in progress)
Elizabeth Fisher and Gustav Metzger with CJ Mahony at Aid and Abet studios,
Cambridge, Feb-May 2014.

Photo credit: Paul Allitt



Dancing Tubes 2014. Portable air compressor, plastic tube, air. Installation view, Kettle's Yard.
Photo credit: Paul Allitt



Left:

Light Drawings 2014

Two series of unique photographic prints

(8 unique single panel & 4 unique multi-panel photographic prints).

Below:

Light Drawings, installation view, Kettle's Yard, 2014.

Photo credit: Paul Allitt



DISSEMINATION

The **exhibitions** in Cambridge and King's Lynn attracted almost 15,500 visitors and highlighted the artist's connections to the East of England, leading the King's Lynn Historical Society to install a permanent 'green plaque' marking where Metzger had lived and worked.

Gustav Metzger: Lift Off! at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge ran from 23 May - 31 August 2014, receiving 11,887 visitors including 270 (est.) participants in public events.

Destroy, and you create...Gustav Metzger in King's Lynn at the Fermoy Gallery, King's Lynn ran 28 June – 3 August 2019 as part of the King's Lynn Festival, with an audience of 3432 (including 450 school & community workshop participants, 119 attendees at public events including a Study Day co-organized with GroundWork Gallery and 12 young people involved in curatorial training and mentoring with Fisher, organized in collaboration with Stories of Lynn Museum as part of the national Heritage Lottery-funded project Kick The Dust.



Right:
Gustav Metzger green plaque.



Bottom left:
King's Lynn exhibition banner.

Below:
Gustav Metzger: Lift Off! Kettle's Yard, 2014.
Photo credit: Courtesy Kettle's Yard



A **documentary film** of Gustav Metzger in conversation with Elizabeth Fisher at the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge, introduced the exhibition and research themes to a broad audience.

Access at:

<https://vimeo.com/96332028>

Below:

Gustav Metzger and Elizabeth Fisher in conversation at the Cavendish Laboratory, May 2014.

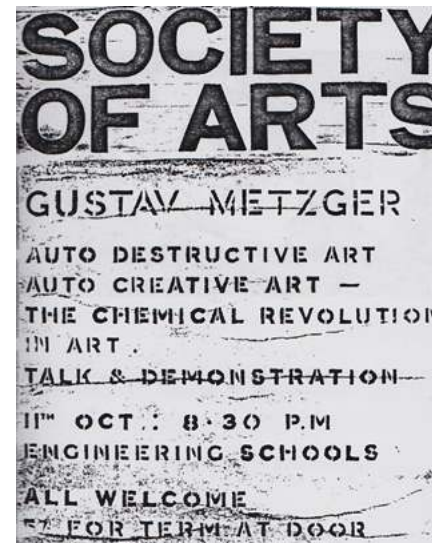


The **symposium** *White Heat: Art, Science and Social Responsibility* in 1960s Britain took place in Cambridge on 26 July 2014, in the same lecture theatre where, fifty-one years earlier, Metzger gave his 'Chemical Revolution in Art' lecture/demonstration. Speakers included pioneering figures Jasia Reichardt, Jonathan Benthall, Jonathan Rosenberg, Roger Malina and John Dunbar.

<https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/art-science-and-social-responsibility-in-1960s-britain-0>

Below:

Poster for 'Chemical Revolution in Art' lecture, Cambridge, 1965.



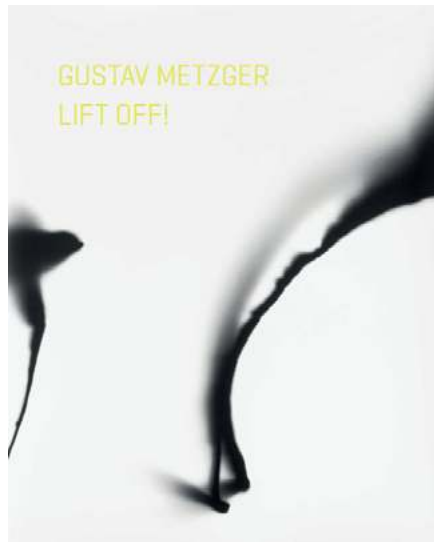
Below:

Gustav Metzger at 'Chemical Revolution in Art' lecture, Cambridge 1965.



Written and edited by Fisher, the **exhibition catalogue** *Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!* (Fisher 2014) was published to coincide with the opening of the exhibition of the same name and brought together new research into Metzger's engagement with science and his early connections with Cambridge while also documenting the new and refabricated artworks realised as part of this research.

The research was further disseminated a **conference paper** given at the symposium *Gustav Metzger: The Conscience of the Art World* in The Hague, Jan 2018. Access at:
http://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/17_11_Gustav_Metzger_II/more2
<https://vimeo.com/253998404>



Below left:

Journal article & guest-edited issue of *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!* Vol.42 nos.1-2: The Experimental Generation (Fisher & Ferran July 2017).

Below right:

Video still, Elizabeth Fisher speaking at the symposium *Gustav Metzger: The Conscience of the Art World* in The Hague, Jan 2018.



Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge 23 May – 31 August 2014

‘The ordinary made extraordinary...a must-see exhibition. Go see it and fill your boots’

Tom Hackett,
Artists' Newsletter



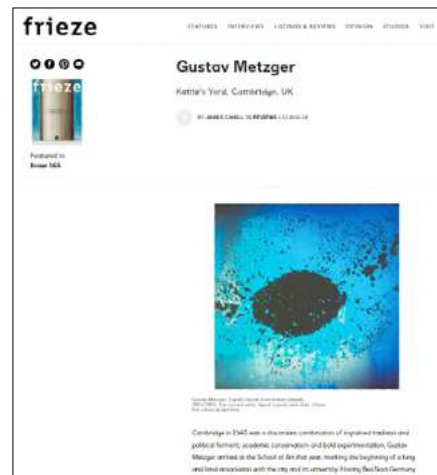
Installation views, *Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!* at Kettle's Yard showing: documentary film (right); *Light Drawings* 2014 (far right).
Photo credit: Courtesy Kettle's Yard

Installation views, *Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!* at Kettle's Yard showing:
Drop on a Hotplate 1968/2014 (right);
Archive materials & ephemera (far right);
Mica Cube 1968/2014 (bottom left);
Drop on a Hotplate 1968/2014 (bottom centre);
Liquid Crystal Environment 1965/2005 (below right).
Photo credit: Courtesy Kettle's Yard



‘If his art’s visionary gleam seems dated, that may simply be an indictment of the polite conformity – creative and discursive as much as political – of the present. His radical synthesis of scientific rigour and pure sensation, of conceptual nicety and an unchecked embrace of beauty, are the peculiar product of his transient and felicitous post-war moment.’

James Cahill,
Frieze



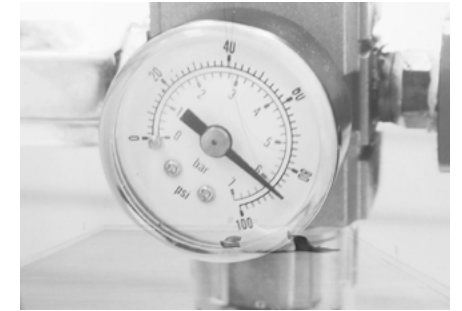
Left to right:
Frieze July-September 2014;
Kettle's Yard Annual Report 2014/15;
AN Reviews July 2014;
Studio International August 2019.



Reviews and articles on the exhibitions appeared in print and online, including the following:
<https://www.frieze.com/article/gustav-metzger-0>
<https://www.ft.com/content/d806733c-e4ca-11e3-894f-00144feabdc0>
<https://www.a-n.co.uk/reviews/gustav-metzger-lift-off/>
<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/gustav-metzger-in-kings-lynn-review-fermoy-gallery>
<https://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/about/news/gustav-metzger-returns-east-anglia>



Artist Gabriella Daris visited the exhibition at Kettle's Yard and was inspired to develop a new work in response to *Dancing Tubes* which was performed



Right:
Gabriella Daris *Dancing Tubes Interventions*, 29 August 2014.
Photo credit: Courtesy Kettle's Yard

Destroy, and you create...Gustav Metzger in King's Lynn
Fermoy Gallery, King's Lynn, 28 June – 3 August 2019.

'a fascinating glimpse into the origins of Gustav Metzger's art and ideas.'

Catherine Mason,
Studio International

Below:
King's Lynn exhibition poster.



Below and right:
Destroy, and you create...
Installation views, main exhibition.
Photo credit: Courtesy King's Lynn Festival





Left: The 'public-active' artwork *Mass Media: Yesterday and Today* (1972/2019) was a key feature of the public engagement programme in King's Lynn. Visitors were invited to take part in an ongoing conversation about the world we live in by cutting out articles and images from newspapers and adding them to the panels installed around the room.
Photo credit: Courtesy King's Lynn Festival



Top right:
 School children selecting material to add to the installation *Mass Media: Yesterday and Today*.
Photo credit: Courtesy King's Lynn Festival



Right:
 Artwork produced in community workshop.
Photo credit: Courtesy King's Lynn Festival

Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!

<https://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/events/gustav-metzger-lift-off/>

Destroy, and you create...Gustav Metzger in King's Lynn

<https://www.eastangliaartfund.org.uk/exhibitions/destroy-and-you-create-gustav-metzger-in-kings-lynn#>

White Heat: Art, Science and Social Responsibility in 1960s Britain

<https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/art-science-and-social-responsibility-in-1960s-britain-0>

The Experimental Generation

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03080188.2017.1297167>

Science, Technology & Gustav Metzger' conference paper

http://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/17_11_Gustav_Metzger_II/more2

Cahill, James. 2014. 'Gustav Metzger' Frieze 165, July-September 2014

<https://www.frieze.com/article/gustav-metzger-0>

Fisher, Elizabeth A. 2014. *Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!* Cambridge: University of Cambridge

Hackett, Tom. 2014. 'Gustav Metzger: Lift Off!' *Artists Newsletter* 24 July 2014

<https://www.a-n.co.uk/reviews/gustav-metzger-lift-off/>

Mason, Catherine. 2019. 'Gustav Metzger - in King's Lynn' *Studio International* 1 August 2019

<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/gustav-metzger-in-kings-lynn-review-fermoy-gallery>

Obrist, Hans Ulrich. 2017. 'Gustav Metzger: a true revolutionary and a wonderful human being' *The Guardian*, 3 March 2017

Walker, John A. 2002. *Left Shift, Radical Art in 1970s Britain*. London: IB Tauris & Co.

Wullschlager, Jackie. 2014 'Gustav Metzger: Lift Off! Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK - Review' 26 May 2014

<https://www.ft.com/content/d806733c-e4ca-11e3-894f-00144feabdc0>

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Tate
The Computer Arts Society
Wysing Arts Centre
MI Broadcast Ltd
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Destroy, and you create...Gustav Metzger in King's Lynn was made possible through the financial support of:

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GroundWork Gallery
True's Yard Museum
Tate Britain
Jayhawk Ltd
Norfolk Museums Service
Archant Community Media
Lynn News

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All images courtesy the Estate of Gustav Metzger unless otherwise indicated

Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory.

REF2021 Research
Excellence
Framework

