

PHOTOGRAPHY FBM STUDIO ZÜRICH/2009 GUSTAV METZGER

Q&A: Gustav Metzger on destruction

Gustav Metzger's monumental and technical artworks comment on the capacity of human society to obliterate itself. From displays that eat themselves with acid to liquid-crystal patterns projected onto performing bands such as The Who in the 1960s, he questions environmental degradation, nuclear war and capitalism. As a major retrospective of his work opens, Metzger argues that scientists should be more active in counteracting society's tendency to seek oblivion.

Why is the destruction of nature an important theme for you?

My childhood experience of visiting the huge forest near Nuremberg, where I was born in 1926 before moving to England when I was 13, had a very strong impact on me. And a Jewish orthodox upbringing stresses value judgement and concern with life. Being a Jew, making judgements, arguing about what to do and how to live: all of this has formed me.

Do you think science is broadly constructive or destructive?

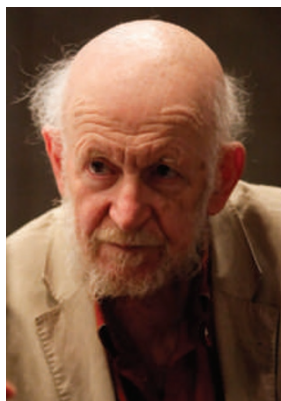
We human beings wouldn't have survived without science and technology, so it is constructive. But the physics that has led to nuclear weapons has occupied me in particular. Thinking about how humans ever came to conceive let alone construct nuclear weapons, I concluded that there must be destructive forces inside us.

It is a desperate situation — more desperate now than in the 1960s. Many small states are acquiring nuclear weaponry and the biggest units on the planet, China and India, are forging away in a direction that we recognize will destroy us. Science is in the middle of it all, but it is capitalism that has fuelled its destructive capacity. Technology is paid for

by people who want to grow, to catch up, and in the process they are destroying life.

Scientists are trained to be impartial observers. Do you think more scientists should become politically active in protecting the planet?

We are each responsible and need to interact with society to try to stem its destructivity. I appeal to scientists to do just that. Some scientists have warned us, like those who got together after the Second World War to try to stop atomic war. But we need to look at the crisis in society from the standpoint of the existing system. Without bringing in a critique of the capitalism at the centre, nothing will happen. Scientists should take a stand against the dangers inherent in the capitalist system.



Why does the technical aspect of working with materials appeal to you?

I moved into technology as separate from the act of painting at the end of 1959. In order to develop auto-destructive art I had to involve myself with certain techniques. The liquid-crystal work started from seeing them on a cover of *Scientific American* in

the spring of 1964. It led me to project the colour pictures onto screens. The years 1966–67 were among the best of my life, with the excitement of new techniques, of learning from science and applying the technology.

This year at the Manchester International Festival, you planted 21 willows upside down in concrete, their roots taking on the appearance of stunted branches. Why?

It is not just a question of showing destruction, how we misuse nature. Beyond that there is a potential to find beauty in this chaos, in this overturning of normality. In the period that the work was up, the roots were covered with a kind of brown skin, and it began to fall off and reveal a white structure underneath. As the years go by, it will change.

Do you have hope for the future — will nature triumph?

I am afraid the answer is no. Let us take the word hope away. As I see the future, it is exceedingly grim.

Interview by **Emma Marris**, a writer based in Columbia, Missouri.

B. JOHNSON

Gustav Metzger: Decades 1959–2009
Serpentine Gallery, London
Until 8 November