

Gustav Metzger

(Nuremberg, 1926 – London, 2017)

Born in 1926 in Nuremberg to Polish Jewish parents, Gustav Metzger was taken to safety in Great Britain together with his brother and thousands of other children from Nazi Germany as part of the Kindertransport initiative: he would never see his mother or father again, as they were killed in 1943 in an extermination camp. As he declared on many occasions, it was the traumatic circumstances of his childhood that influenced the whole of his adult life, his relationship with art and his political activism. Growing up in a world dazzled by the optimism of the post-war years, he instead clear-mindedly weighed up the negative consequences of technological progress, from the arms race to environmental devastation. A diehard anti-capitalist, he launched the appeal known as *Years Without Art 1977–1980* to take a stand against the growing commodification of the system, inviting his colleagues not to produce, display or sell art for a period of three years.

In a critique of industrialised society, his youthful experimentation in the field of painting was soon abandoned in favour of poor and less traditional media such as reused objects and packing boxes, which he displayed for the first time in 1959. That same year, he published the manifesto of *Auto-Destructive Art*, in which he formulates the idea of an art in which intrinsic to the creative process are the presuppositions for its destruction. His *Acid Paintings* date back to this period, often produced during outdoor demonstrations in front of an audience. Dressed in overalls and a gasmask, Metzger would spray hydrochloric acid on large metal panels wrapped in sheets of nylon, which he would then let corrode until there was no more than a few irregular fragments attached to the structure. It's an aggressive and declaredly symbolic action addressed to the entire market system.

In a group of works from shortly afterwards, following the same mechanism of dissolving material, he introduced the use of slides to make light projections. Fascinated by liquid crystal technology, which he studied with the help of a physicist, starting from 1965 he began to exploit the principle in great immersive works, his *Liquid Crystal Environments*. The artist inserts the liquid crystals between two glass slides, which are then made to revolve in front of the lens of the projector; sensitive to minimal variations in temperature, the crystals change colour with heat, generating unique and changing images, projected for the public onto the screens of the exhibition space. The psychedelic patterns created in this manner encountered great success in 1960s London, and at the height of his experimentation with this procedure, Metzger was invited to take his images to accompany the performances of the groups The Who, The Move and Cream on the occasion of a concert at the Roundhouse.

RA