

Gustav Metzger

Ethics into Aesthetics

Exhibition: 01.12.2017 — 04.02.2018, Opening: Friday 01.12.2017, 9 PM
West Museumkwartier, Lange Voorhout 34 + West, Groenewegje 136, The Hague, The Netherlands

The words ‘Act or Perish’ are emblazoned on the leaflet of British anti-war group the Committee of 100, co-founded by artist and activist Gustav Metzger in 1960. Metzger fiercely opposed the atomic bomb, and spent much of his time participating in protests and organizing peaceful demonstrations. This exhibition emphasizes Metzger’s pragmatic yet radical approach, and his belief that art could and should be used for social change. His strong principles were reflected in both his art and his actions, always intrinsically connected.

Born to Polish-Jewish parents in Nurnberg, Metzger was evacuated to Great Britain in 1939 at the age of twelve with the help of the initiative known as the Refugee Children's Movement. As a young boy, he became aware of the atrocities of the totalitarian Nazi regime, and his parents and other relatives were killed in the Holocaust. During the war he became interested in left wing politics and wanted to become a political revolutionary. Metzger became an artist after realizing the potential of art to transform society and throughout his career he explored the ways in which aesthetics could be used to convey political ideas and encourage action.

In 1959, Metzger wrote his first manifesto, titled ‘Auto-destructive Art’ and with this became the founding father of a radical new form of art. With this and his later manifestos, he showed how society could be destroyed by capitalism, but also highlighted the transformative potential of destruction; for example, the possibility for transformation of society through individual and collective action. In 1961, Metzger demonstrated the concept of ADA for the first time by vigorously spraying nylon canvasses with acid, causing them to disintegrate. This was an attack on, and even a symbolic destruction of, the system. At the same time, Metzger not only rebelled against the political system, but also against the commercial aspects of the art world. In 1977, he proposed a three-year Art Strike, which he hoped would cause a collapse and complete restructuring of the art system.

The monumental work ‘*Mass Media – Today and Yesterday*’, which was first created in 1972, is a massive installation comprised of a sculpture made out of thousands of newspapers and wall panels filled with clippings on important topics cut out by visitors. The clippings form a constantly growing and changing collage - an audience-selected collection of important news stories - while pointing out the importance of focusing on issues such as extinction and endangered species, however distracted or desensitised we may be to the onslaught of bad news in the media.

In his ‘*Historic Photographs*’ series, Metzger enlarged and obscured old press photographs, combining them with raw materials such as wood, textiles and steel, to create sculptural tableaux that challenge the viewer to literally look beyond the surface of the piece. The works reflect on our recent history and some of its most appalling events and attempt to alter the way that the viewer perceives these pictures, their content and, on another scale, history itself.

As relations between world powers are again on edge, the climate crisis is denied at a political level, and our planet is increasingly destroyed, Metzger’s work is more relevant than ever. It reminds us that, while the destruction of humankind is looming close, as Metzger said only months before his death: ‘not only can art cause change, art must cause change’.

Gustav Metzger (10 April 1926 - 1 March 2017) has had solo exhibitions at Serpentine Galleries, London; Tate Britain, London; Museo Jumex, Mexico City; Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin; Haus der Kunst München, Munich, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel; New Museum, New York; Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv and many others. Moreover, his work was shown at documenta 13 (2012), the Venice Biennale of 2003 and the Sao Paulo Biennale of 2010.

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Huis Huguetaan is eigendom van Rijksvastgoedbedrijf en wordt tijdelijk beheerd door ANNA Vastgoed & Cultuur. Het programma van West wordt mede mogelijk gemaakt door Gemeente Den Haag en Ministerie van OCW. .