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Transcription of an interview with Pete Townshend of The Who by Philip Dodd

Philip Dodd: We begin talking with The Who's Pete Townshend about politics, spectacle, music and art and the effect on him of one of his teachers Gustav Metzger the Nuremberg-born, London-based artist who has a major exhibition opening this week.

Gustav Metzger's now 84, was evacuated to England in 1939, was one of the founders CND's committee of 100 and in the later 1950's forged the idea of auto-destructive art working with Yoko Ono amongst others. Art that could not be bought and sold, art that self-destructed such as the painting he made destroyed slowly by acid. He went on to use everyday objects, cardboard packing materials, newspapers, polythene bags to make art. The wastage of consumerism and of capitalism have never been far from his imagination. 'Kill the Cars' is the title of one of his pieces.

Pete Townshend first met Gustav Metzger when he came to guest lecture at Ealing College of Art in the early sixties. When I met Pete Townshend earlier I asked him about the myth that it was Gustav Metzger and his auto-destructive art that was the inspiration for his spectacular on-stage guitar smashing.

Pete Townshend: About 1967 I took him to see Cream and to meet Eric Clapton. I asked him what he thought – because we'd played that night as well – what did he think of my guitar smashing routine. And I just remember him kind of going "It was very interesting" and I

said to him “Is it not right, doesn’t it fit?” And he said “It fits in some ways.”

PD: This is a very small diminutive, Jewish guy born in Nuremberg, here you are a West London boy at the beginning of the sixties. What was it that drew you to him, do you remember?

PT: He was just so obviously on the money. If you go back a few years I was sixteen or seventeen at that time – I started art school when I was sixteen so I was an early starter. If you go back to my age the post war syndrome for British kids, London kids in particular was quite interesting because around eleven or twelve the Order Master marches were happening. People like Bertram Russel and Victor Gollancz were still going strong and they were very very dystopian. This idea that the nuclear problem would be the problem in a sense overruled the idea that there was in any sense anything ecological that we should worry about.

Gustav was politically adept and aware and obviously as somebody that had run away from the Holocaust carried a kind of fresh perfume of all of that stuff. He was the first person that I ever heard use the word ‘environment’ and he used the word environment – he said that the word environment is a word that we have invented to describe the world that we live in that is not nature.

So a load of my early writing although it was about our neighbourhood, as soon as I started to write seriously that was

all about the destruction of the planet, the decline of the planet, the decline of the atmosphere. How we would turn to technology to save us; to living in air conditioned spaces, to breathing through gas masks to you know, trying to deal with the problems that we created. And all of this I got directly from Gustav and understanding that his notion that art should reflect accurately – should mirror accurately and should comment accurately on what society was doing to its habitat was the duty of every responsible artist.

PD: He had a particular history which in 1960 in London must have been very powerful; the Jew who escaped the terrifying things that happened. But it was as an artist he came to you, that's what got hold of your imagination was it?

PT: Yes and he was introduced to me as an artist so that month of lectures; David Mercer telling me that I had to write for my people, for my class, for my gang. Malcolm was saying "There are no borders, a musical instrument is a tool, if it makes a good sound sawing through it with a wood saw let's do it." And Gustav saying "The artist has a duty to destroy not only the work that he creates as an artist but also the tools that he uses to make the work."

So I thought "This is it!" And my manifesto for The Who – not that any of the other guys bought into it because they were not college boys at all. It was a punk manifesto. The Who would last a year and then we would destroy ourselves. That was our plan, of course a few hit records kind of undermined it. But it was,

that was our plan. And then I planned to go on to become a serious artist. So that period...

PD: It's interesting you've still got that old tic which is you want to be a serious artist as if being a rock musician wasn't really serious enough. And of course Gustav's position partly was actually you could be an artist in 100 ways.

PT: I think I've suffered from being at the leading edge, I'm one of the people that's had to fight to even allow the idea that the word artist when you talk about pop artist doesn't mean pop artiste but pop artist.

PD: What do you think Gustav thought of you? This young kid which is what you were then, do you know what I mean, beginning to make your way doing these radically different things. Because you weren't an artist in his way of being an artist.

PT: No I wasn't, and neither I don't think could I have been. I don't think I do – I certainly didn't experience what he experienced. You have to remember my upbringing was – the climate of my childhood was I didn't know anything about the war. All I knew was that the squadron band that my Dad played in had been an air force band and in a sense that all I understood was the glory, the celebration, the post war celebration. When the band

started and when I was at art school I started to realise in reality that this country had been completely smashed by the war in a way that even today we pretend that it didn't happen. I'm not a historian and I'm not trying to pretend that I know exactly what transpired but I remember a song like *My Generation* about ageing. It was about these young men; 25 to 30 year-old men seemed like old men already because they'd been involved in the war they were so smashed by it. Men that came home from the war and their wives had married Americans, this celebration of chewing gum, Guy Mitchell and Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald as though they were gods. You know all of this stuff...

PD: Yes but that's interesting because the way you describe it is very American: the dream. Now in that sense Metzger is a European hero isn't he defiantly not an American.

PT: He is. Gustav's gentleness, his preciseness, his inability to completely and totally deliver forcefully his thesis were all things that I found very very attractive. Because I felt in a way that what we were dealing with was not the fact that it was good to celebrate that somebody couldn't communicate but that we had to accept that communication had not begun.

PD: Can we [say] in this context that you did a gig at the Roundhouse in '66 where Gustav – you gave him the opportunity to do the environment, to use that word, of the show. What led you to do that, do you remember?

PT: What Gustav never did at Ealing was his light shows. He talked about them but he always used to say “It’s very difficult because you need to combine just the right amount of acids and chemicals and shine light through and then you can see the process of you know.” And when we subsequently got to New York and then on to San Francisco we found this company called Joshua’s Light Show who were doing all that psychedelic stuff you know, firing light through moving liquids and stuff like that. Gustav had been doing it for years but his reason for doing it was very different to theirs, they were just making pretty patterns, they were evoking acid trips and that wasn’t his business. His business was to demonstrate – I suppose there’s an amazing picture by a National Geographic photographer who had photographed oil residue in the sand from where they extract oil from sand in Canada and it leaves these disgusting swirls of tar.

He’d flown over in a helicopter and taken a beautiful picture of it – that was Gustav’s thing. This is beautiful what we do, it’s elegant what we do, he’s not even saying that it’s wrong, he’s just saying “It’s happening” and as artists we have a responsibility to address it and reflect it.

PD: Is there one moment, one event, one artwork that impressed itself on you above all?

PT:

He made quite a big thing in his first lecture at Ealing. So I'm seventeen, I'm already in the band; we probably still had a Cliff Richard style singer Roger Daltrey was probably the lead guitar player, which when I look back is hysterical because he's a terrible guitar player. He's a great guitar player but you know what I mean.

I was playing rhythm so I certainly wasn't looking for a trademark. However there was this moment when he showed this slide of this boy who'd just done this picture – it was a short film I think, a Super Eight film. And it was followed by the smashing up of a piano so Gustav said to me that I probably made a connection, but the image was of this boy charging through his picture. He's a Japanese boy I think – he's one of Yoko's acolytes. And as he comes through he's holding his arm in the air and it's very characteristic of loads of photos that you see now of me as a young man with my arm in the air – I'm in the middle of a swing.

That picture I've still got it in my head. I suppose I must have tried to evoke it many times. And there was something so powerful about this young man, I can't remember exactly but I think he had a great big brush and a beautiful swirling image and you just think "God that's incredible." Goes round the back and then slashes through it with a Samurai sword and yes, I was obviously very affected by it. I do still feel to this day that that image – which is not so much about destroying an instrument which I obviously went on to do but destroying the actual work, that thing itself. And that being frozen in the way we can today in yet another image in a photo or a movie. That

seemed to me to be the way that now art will travel through and yes, I'm very grateful that I met Gustav when I did.

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