



Fig. 1. *Untitled*, Gustav Metzger, 1958-59.

This paper was first presented on the occasion of *The Drawing Research Forum*, The Drawing Room, London, Nov 1<sup>st</sup> 2019 & subsequently revised for *Becoming Gustav Metzger, Uncovering the Early Years 1945-49*, The Ben Uri Gallery & Museum, London. 16<sup>th</sup> June – 17<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

### ***Abstract Now – Abstract Then***

David Osbaldeston

#### **Introduction**

The aim here is to begin to sketch out what I see are related elements which adhere to the principals of non-representational drawing and mark making found in separate realities transcending space and time.

The research is conjoined by a renewed understanding of the presence of abstraction as a shared phenomenon at opposite ends of the historical timescale. From the abstract drawings in the early career of Gustav Metzger; a strategy which he returned to much later in his life, to the recent discovery of hundreds of remarkably preserved inscribed stones from the Neolithic period produced within the context of a very different understanding of human relationship to the cosmos. Given the distance between the deep past and the present moment, the title of this paper could very easily be inverted from abstract then to abstract now, and back again.

So, to lay some groundwork I will begin by making some general comments and observations on aspects of abstraction as it is currently understood and in relation to the activity of drawing.

This will be followed by an examination of the relationship between drawing and material culture as something deep rooted and all encompassing. That is to say, of all the known methods of image making drawing is a process unlimited by the interaction of materials, yet is realised by their very transformation.

Whilst the limitations of language present an obstacle in this exercise, it is one which I am very happy to have the opportunity to take on. The relationship between the internal and external voice is notoriously fraught especially when speech is conveyed through the written form. When Barthes said writing is

*'always rooted in something beyond language, he did so in the knowledge that language is itself an abstract circle of truths': a pre-ordained code.*

I'd like to offer some perceptions on abstraction across a vast timescale in relation to drawing as something primarily generative in nature which may evolve and affect community. So, to continue in the shadow of Barthes it is important to acknowledge there is an inherent duality between the analytical truths afforded by academic theory, and the speculative truth in how art is revealed to us through encountering and talking about it.

### Abstraction

In recent years there has been a re-evaluation of abstraction not only in artistic terms, but as a defining principle of the conditions for contemporary human experience, economically, socially, and emotionally. In the past, abstraction may have been envisaged as a *modus operandi* which arguably possessed agency to aid the pursuit of higher goals. Today however, in a world where systems, code, and machine learning have evolved into organisms of infinite complexity it is no longer just the process and the form but very fabric of the subject itself; abstraction has evolved into the immaterial substance on which reality is built.



Fig 2. *Untitled (Abstract)* Gustav Metzger, 1958.

Whilst abstraction may be loaded with its own aesthetic codes, on the conceptual level it arguably occurs beneath the threshold of visibility. Nowhere more so than through the predominance of algorithmic code which has become emphatic in the organization of goods and services, and is well understood as just one example of a mechanism which has come to increasingly dominate, penetrate, and monetize multiple aspects of human relations.

Thus, abstraction is the process which stretches relations to the point where they are no longer recognizable, and this phenomenon has re-gained purchase as an operative language for 21<sup>st</sup> century experience. As Luttiken observed *'This development occurs at a time when capitalism seems to abstract itself beyond recognition, entering a post visual "conceptual" phase in which even pseudo-concrete appearances are abandoned.'*<sup>2</sup> This point was made at the height of the financial crisis, and a time when the implications for this were perhaps less obvious than they subsequently came to be.

It would now seem that new developments between societal, technological and economic narratives have assisted in the re-animation of this as an effective mode, and consequently abstraction could be seen to have undergone a conceptual and semantic reconditioning. One could argue there is after all nothing new in this observation. Yet whilst in the formal sense abstraction may be dismissed as an exhausted mode of expression offering '*no privileged insight*'<sup>3</sup> it may act as a conduit to a parallel system for re-presentation; to afford the possibility for new narratives to be simulated or re-built from the ruins of the past (Luttiken).

Both on the experiential and conceptual level, my suggestion here is abstraction can, in simple terms be considered as a form of archaeology for the present. Whilst it's visual languages, styles, and conventions have arguably been serially re-heated over a number of decades, it also serves as *the* aesthetic coda for modernity. Somewhat inevitably, it is as if this coda provides an operative lexicon which is re-aligned to newer ideological interests or power relations, which in turn guarantees their continual re-emergence for sustained re-evaluation and/or ironic displacement (Gillick).

### **Drawing**

What has this got to do with drawing? The answer to this, I feel, can be found in a very human idea.

What is drawing but a continuing process of expectation and for the need to be surprised?

The aim here is to begin to draft out some elements presented by the properties of agency observed within certain kinds of non-representational drawing, and to understand how new co-existences or relations between narratives are still in the process of being revealed.

Drawing can of course, like painting, be an *activity* in the form of a verb as well as a *thing* in the form of a noun. '*Hegel's definition: "art is the sensible presentation of the idea" to go quickly we can also call it truth, sense, subject, being itself. The idea is the presentation to itself of being or the thing' – it is the thing itself as vision.*'<sup>4</sup> Hegel makes the distinction between representation and presentation; art as the echo of an idea. The point to make here is, at its root the qualities within the process of drawing have less to do with the former and more to do with the latter. With respect to abstraction both as a subject and mode of expression, it is materially and formally presentational in tone, *the sensible presentation of the idea*. Drawing is an activity unrestricted by linguistic boundaries which translates the physical gesture of sensation into communication as an axiomatic and fundamentally human activity.

I would like to propose the relationship between abstraction and drawing is deep rooted and is a process for the presentation of previously unseen pictorial and linguistic arrangements. What follows denotes the relationship between visible and invisible worlds. The work of art is not only a product of the mind's relationship to internal or external reality, but also the trace of a sign, and what is left exists as its presentation, or *vestige* as Luc Nancy would refer to it, for the idea itself.

### **Agency**

So now I've drawn attention to the term agency. What do we mean by it?

In the generic sense drawing is a direct alignment between thought and action, and is foremost a process which is catalytic in nature. This marks a departure from the passive to the active tense and towards the delivery of an idea in the form mentioned earlier to one of presentation.

This of course is not always immediately evident in all drawings, but my interest here is to tie together some of these relationships between drawing and the language of abstraction not as an end in itself but as a generative process requiring a range of initial conscious decisions where the conditions for making are pre-organized i.e., selection of materials, size, procedure etc.

A catalyst in the broadest sense can be defined as a trigger to stimulate action and/or a reaction. It is a term which traverses the scientific and artistic realms and alludes both to the transformation of substances as well as the generative aspects of life.



In the artistic sense what can be thought of as the catalytic work has more to do with the effect of what it *does* rather than what it *is*. The sentiment behind this process is active and not passive. Whilst the catalytic work may involve a process that evokes meaning somewhere between the initiation and completion of an idea, it can also be thought of as the embodiment of an idea that projects forward in direction. This, I would like to think of as the teleology of drawing.

Interestingly, this idea dovetails with a term which goes to the heart of arts function. Agency, is derived from the Latin verb *agere*, *to set in motion*, or the medieval term *agentia*, *doing*. Both terms consider ways an artwork may embody some operative function whose meaning may be collectively evolved and are non-hierarchical in spirit.

How might agency be evidenced through abstraction in relationship to drawing?

An answer to the above question can be bookended from two quite different perspectives which are manifested through non-representational drawing and can be found in separate realities transcending space and time.

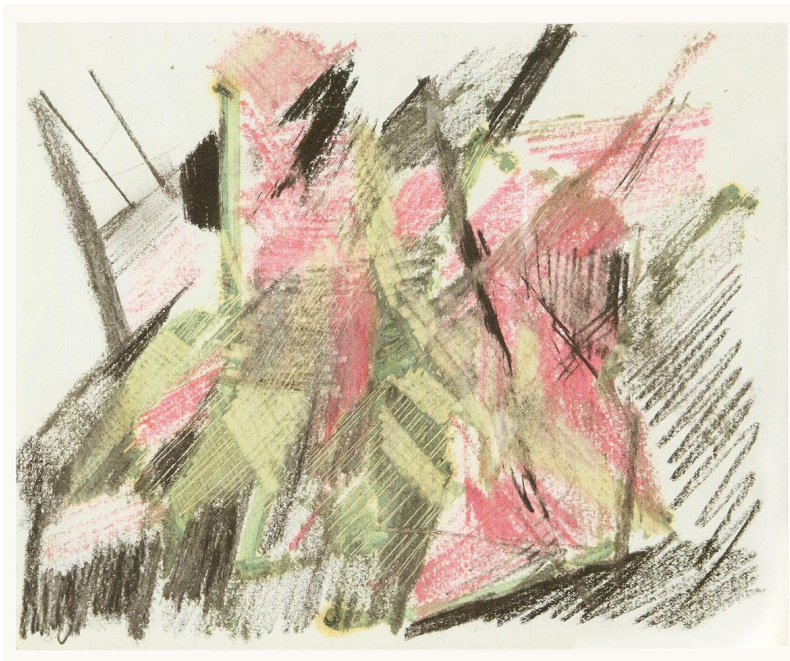


Fig 3. *Untitled*, Gustav Metzger, no date.

### **Gustav Metzger**

Known principally for his life and work as an activist, Gustav Metzger attempted to pursue some kind of equilibrium, by balancing his better known *Auto Destructive Art* with another body of works termed *Auto Creative Art*. Whilst the former mirrors the relations between the ceaseless production and consumption of goods as metaphor for de-generative breakdown (extinction), the latter embraced an intuitive belief by the artist in the relations between art, science and technology as productive mediums in and between themselves.

As a precursor to these developments, through the early part of his life Metzger made several series of paintings as well as abstract drawings until the very early 1960s. Many drawings were made with chalk and ink on found materials and convey a sustained attempt to signal a response to the structural definition of space.

The surviving drawings are the product of an organic imagination which increasingly amplified process above form and it is well documented that his arrival at this method occurred under the formative influence of David Bomberg. Working mostly on paper and card, the drawings of this period relate the properties of materials with the concept of intuitive feeling as a mimetic process. *'Not the representation*



*of the appearances of form, but more the representation of all our feelings about form...an exploratory art not divorced from life and ways of living.*<sup>5</sup>

Up close, the drawings are in a state of perpetual becoming; where the internal perception of life is reconciled with external elements and properties of materials in a physical way. *'You don't have to see something for its presence to be felt, the substance of material speaks'*<sup>6</sup> remarked Metzger, and what becomes evident through the interchange between delicate and forceful movement is an exposure of the inherent contradictions between constructive and deconstructive elements.

Once the parameters for the drawing are set, the works appear to be the product of controlled bursts of energy which evoke the speed of attack, occasionally penetrating the surface. This is often echoed by shards of directional tone amongst linear configurations and sometimes cross-hatched lines, interchanging with the spatial and dynamic organization. The line and the penetrating cut become part of the same visual organization.



Fig 4. *Untitled*, Gustav Metzger, no date.

Less the product of depiction, the drawings have been realized in mixed media, subtle flesh tones of variable dirty pink mixed with deep sooty black, sometimes pierced with blood red and cold zinc white. Individually and as a series, they are imbued with the sensation of experience, of an idea of what the mind intuits and made visible not only through the hand, but by extension, the body as an energetic force; a living being.

For Metzger the opening up between hitherto discrete fields of knowledge to expose new realities for human relations with the world were key. Central to this was the process of transformation and a belief in the artistic testing of materials and their properties. *'Certain major forms of art can be described as the drawing of belief'*<sup>7</sup>, so began his 1964 manifesto, and in a near perfect definition of what Eco might have referred to as *the open work* he went on to describe *'The artist desires, and achieves a certain form, rhythm, scale: intends, and identifies with, all the transformations, predictable and unpredictable, that the work is capable of.'*<sup>8</sup>

The drawings are extensive and numerous and it is clear after a three-year period of reflection in the late 1950's Metzger's thinking evolved particularly through his works on hardboard, galvanized steel, and also with cardboard into something closer to his own distinctive use of abstraction. The selection of these materials would arguably have offered a resistance and durability he was seeking, and it is understood through the shared language of marks and gestures these works led toward the formation of *Auto Destructive Art* in late 1959 which came to fruition in 1960. It is also clear during this period he understood the literal and metaphorical difference between to *draw from* and to *draw upon*. At this

relatively early part of his career the significance of a truly interdisciplinary practice between art, science and technology had begun to be realised.



Fig 5. *Untitled*, Gustav Metzger, 2002-3

As if to de-limit the possibilities for the making, presentation, and reception of the work itself Metzger further remarked... *'to draw in any other manner would be to kill the spirit and capture a mere fragment of reality.'*<sup>9</sup> What remains evident through Metzger's adherence to abstraction, and his subsequent return to this later in his career, is their sequential nature and collective presence as a life form. These drawings were not only evolved through chalk, pastel and ink to realise the sensation of light and passing of time crossing the studio, but if anything, extend the methods evolved earlier in his career to produce new values for *Auto Creative Art* as a reality in itself.

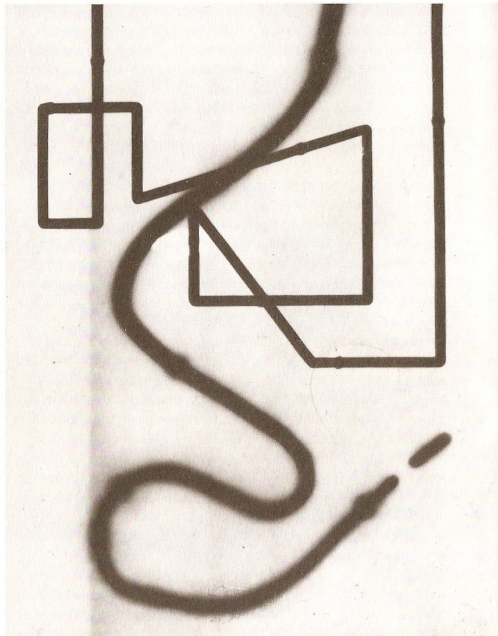


Fig 6. Plotter drawing (darkroom/fibre optic) Gustav Metzger, Imperial College London, Spring 1970.

Similarly, these principles of drawing came under greater scrutiny in a series of later works in 2014 founded on a series of earlier works developed in the early 70's to explore the chemical and physical properties in photography. The etymology of photography translates as light drawing, or alternatively,

drawing *with* light. Employed with a fibre-optic light, the artist sets the conditions to produce seemingly random configurations, to make recordings of physical movements by human hand and/or by machine. Critically, in the emerging field of computer science, Metzger arrived at an inclusive method of working with others through experimentation with materials and processes. These ideas were foregrounded in the 1970 text 'New Ideas in Plotter Design Construction and Output'<sup>10</sup> in order to rethink a synthesis between the human and mechanical and to realize new transdisciplinary attitudes between art and science.



Fig 7. *Light Drawings* (1-7) Gustav Metzger, 2014

In their subject, the later *Light Drawings* (eventually realised in 2014 at Kettles Yard Gallery, Cambridge) may be seen as a culmination of these processes alongside the studio drawings which draw from outside sources in such a way that sensation is activated as a cypher for the shared experience of existence. Abstraction in this sense is both the process and the product, it is simply *the sensible presentation of the idea*. Materiality and planned process coexist to share the same properties of feeling in a way that lies either side of the expressionist realm. This I would argue is its agency. This leads to the next concern which is commonality, or community.

### Community

The qualities which define agency are subjective and are best explained by the shared understanding of meaning gained through a collective access to common experience. What might be considered as agency for a Neo-Liberalist is a different kind of agency for a Socialist and whilst there *is* such a thing as society, there is no such thing as a *single* community, arguably there are only communities.

Whilst it would be odd at this stage to make a literal connection between abstraction and community (although this may have clearly been evident in the historical sense) it is on the meta level where the powerful effect of abstraction may be felt and transformed into a catalytic force. According to Adorno this occurs when '*aesthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object, in that instant when artworks themselves become animate under its gaze.*'<sup>11</sup> Or to put it another way, aesthetics activates experience and beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Whilst lived experience is central to the conception of both drawing and abstraction as an active and living phenomenon. In light of startling new discoveries made on a remote Scottish island dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, the next aim is to examine this from an entirely different position.





Fig 8. Removal of Large Stone, Ness of Brodgar, Image: Antonia Thomas.

#### **Abstract Then**

The second part of research deals with the recent discovery of hundreds of inscribed stones at a major archeological dig on Orkney, found amongst the morass of former Neolithic building structures repeatedly built and rebuilt on top of one another over millennia.

At the latest count, archaeologists have discovered up to 800 marked stones, often with compelling regular geometric score marks cut into the side edge or face. Whilst archaeologists can only speculate upon how the purpose and significance of the site altered through time, it is nonetheless thought to have been active between 3100-2000BC.

The site known as the Ness of Brodgar is extensive and complex. What is remarkable about the discoveries made here is the re-writing in our understanding of early human societies within the Neolithic period. In particular how the presence of a distinctive vocabulary of mark making appears to have evolved through the enunciation of certain kinds of geometrical signage. These signs were evidently realized through the material properties held within the selected stone. Perhaps more significantly, by marking and subsequently scoring, each was a site where the mind could intuit, triggered by the recognition of drawing as a process.

Whilst many of the stone works are inscribed, they will have been undoubtedly arrived at through the process of approximating a linear formation, firstly through marking out and sketching into with flint. This sounds more straightforward than it would have been in practice. To achieve geometric regularity on uneven surfaces would undoubtedly have required some form of technique. The earliest examples place opposing triangles to produce a symmetrical butterfly effect built into some of the structures. In most cases, this initial process of marking-out clearly gives way to repeated action which penetrates the surface layer to form a visibly tactile line.

What has become clear is that certain linear configurations, consisting primarily of nets, chevrons, diamonds, and triangular forms maintained their significance across hundreds of years throughout the life of the site. This particular lexicon of image making was of course not produced by a single identifiable artist or individual, but was a shared process which held a continuing and mimetic power for the community. The process of making cannot be separated from the material culture.



Fig 9. Inscribed stone, butterfly design, Ness of Brodgar. Image: Antonia Thomas.

The sheer number and repeated use of certain geometrical motifs would likely have been the product of a wider shared identity seemingly handed down through and across different generations (Thomas). The presence and siting of these works are a product of shared experience, and community. The evidence of an early aesthetic mind at work points toward a distinctly human physical encounter, the basics of symmetry perform as a key to a distinctly human expression. An expression which resists any translation in modern terms. On the surface, it has a clear gauge of materials and perhaps more significantly it is an expression which demonstrates a clear sense of direction and intention to designate a space either for practical *use*, spiritual contemplation, or both. In short, a design that often possesses a symmetrical quality and is visually harmonious in nature, which in the Kantian sense *might serve as a foundation for taste*.

This is followed by the second typology of inscriptions consisting of tessellated and infilled triangular structures which are sometimes aligned in rhythmic formation on a base line, or alternatively mirrored to make a symmetrical form. These designs exist in differing levels of complexity and craftsmanship and again are distributed widely across the site.



Fig 10. Inscribed stone, Skara Brae. Courtesy of National Museum of Scotland. Image: Antonia Thomas.

Whilst there's evidence to suggest some of these works were re-visited and worked over at different stages in the life of the site, their scope in size ranges from the portable, to larger stones which had structural integrity i.e. they are large. Compellingly, some not only decorate the interior structure walls but are placed at varying points of accessibility, whilst others appear to have been placed facing away from the interior structure, hidden out of sight deep inside the structure walls. Whether these were re-purposed during a re-build, or this action holds other significance remains open for speculation (Thomas).<sup>12</sup>

As a product of the drawing process, and by refusing to signify, these works retain an unknowable mysterious hold which were both produced by, and embedded within a common existence. As these works slowly give themselves up to a new consciousness, along with the absence of any historical narrative, this only serves to further widen the relationship between the internal and external world.

Be they depictions of the hidden clockwork of nature, time, celestial diagrams, or the product of induced states of spiritual consciousness are theories which will ultimately be argued over and in some ways misses the point. Decryption may ultimately lead to disappointment. It is a view which can only be filled through speculation and this ultimately is where the magic lies.

In the context of the vast expanses of time, this arguably invokes a vertiginous feeling. *'If we are moved, fascinated, and touched in our souls by the images from the caves of our prehistory, it is not only because of their troubling antiquity, but rather because we sense the emotion that was born with them, this emotion that was their very birth.'*<sup>13</sup>



Fig 11. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, film still. Stanley Kubrick/Warner Bros Entertainment. 1968.

It is this kind of recognition which reads like an eerie echo of the monolithic sentinel and the device so effectively put to use in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*: the compellingly perfect cypher for reflective intelligence as something inherently silent, impenetrable, or untranslatable.

In the artistic sense, we only see what we choose to see, the discoveries perhaps lend themselves more to a reading of our own mythological prejudices bordering on poetic fiction. However, whilst this is not an ethnographic study it would appear abstraction as a process which excludes all pictorial elements down to pure form, leads to a new experience of humankind's relationship to the cosmos in all its increased complexity. This complexity can be enshrined within the artwork as something other than aesthetic. The drawing merely reinforces *the sensible presentation of the idea*.

As an archaeology for the present, the thread of these values is not only evident in the body of work which artists such as Metzger left behind. They are the echoes and reverberations of a kind of work which would be capable of expression of feeling, and to articulate previously unseen arrangements whilst resisting linguistic conceptualization.

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## Images.

Fig 1. *Untitled*, 1958-59. Oil on mild steel, 94 x 91cm, Image courtesy The Estate of Gustav Metzger ©Photo: Wojciech Olech, Photo courtesy: CoCa Torun

Fig 2. *Untitled (Abstract)* 1958. Engraving on plastic 63 x 76cm. Image courtesy The Estate of Gustav Metzger ©Photo: Wojciech Olech, Photo courtesy: CoCa Torun

Fig 3. *Untitled*, no date. Ink & pastel on paper, 21 x 29cm. Image courtesy The Estate of Gustav Metzger

Fig 4. *Untitled*, no date. Ink & pastel on paper, 21 x 29cm. Image courtesy The Estate of Gustav Metzger

Fig 5. *Untitled*, 2002-3. Ink & mixed media on paper, 21 x 29cm. Image courtesy The Estate of Gustav Metzger

Fig 6. Plotter drawing (darkroom/fibre optic) Imperial College London, Spring 1970. Image courtesy The Estate of Gustav Metzger

Fig 7. *Light Drawings (1-7)* 2014 Image courtesy The Estate of Gustav Metzger

Fig 8. Removal of Large Stone, Ness of Brodgar. Image: Antonia Thomas

Fig 9. Inscribed stone, butterfly design, Ness of Brodgar. Image: Antonia Thomas

Fig 10. Inscribed stone, Skara Brae. Image courtesy of National Museum of Scotland. Image: Antonia Thomas

Fig 11. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, film still. Stanley Kubrick/Warner Bros Entertainment. 1968

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