

## Vanishing Point

### Gustav Metzger & Self-Cancellation: Round Table Discussion, Chair Brian Morton

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<http://www.arika.org.uk/instal/2008/selfcancellationevents/>

**Brian Morton:** This morning we heard about Gustav Metzger, we didn't hear from him, but we have him here with us now. Gustav, rather than talk about the past, which I am sure we will touch on, can you talk about the present and the things you are involved with now. You just passed me this, which I'll show round 'Reduce Art Flights'. Can you explain what this is about?

**Gustav Metzger:** Yes. About 2 years ago in connection with the Art Basel Art Fair, while it was going on I thought it would be possible to appeal to this art loving crowd to reduce the volume of flights they take to different venues in the art world in general, and so on the spur of the moment I telephoned one or two friends in Basel, this was while it was going on, in the middle of it would they perhaps take some kind of action with the slogan 'Reduce Art Flights'. Well they said, 'It can't be done there is just a few days to go', and that was that. And then I received the invitation to exhibit in the Münster Sculpture Project (2007), last year and again it occurred to me that we could use that venue to, as it were, project this proposal to the art world, and in fact in Münster 5000 copies of this leaflet were produced, 'Reduce Art Flights' and in German it says 'Münster - Die zweite Bombardierung' which translated is, 'The second bombardment of Münster'. And this was lying out. The second bombardment is a play on several aspects which is the suggestion that we are now being bombarded by the pollution of aeroplanes crossing Münster and everywhere else, and the second bombardment was in fact this leaflet being distributed in Münster. In Turin, there is an exhibition on ecology and environment organised by artists in Barcelona<sup>1</sup>, and this exhibition opens at any moment and they have picked up this idea and they have got a leaflet which says, 'Reduce Art Flights', Torino, the date of the exhibition (28.02.08). So it seems that this is now an ongoing idea, spreading from place to place, from Biennale to Biennale and maybe it will have a bit of an effect somewhere.<sup>2</sup>

**BM:** Well your ideas have certainly spread over the last 40 years since your initial manifestos and I'm sure we will be picking up on lots of those ideas through the course of the next hour or hour and a half. Can I ask first of all if there are any responses or reactions or ideas arising out of the talks that we heard this morning, if anyone has anything they want to raise relating maybe more directly to one of those as a way of getting us rolling? ... [Silence] ... This is where we have top mark a silence in a self-cancelling discussion. Ross, do you want to set an agenda?

**Ross Birrell:** My question is about the shift from auto-destruction which seems to be general in relation to mechanisation, and to the conditions of capitalist production and the production of destruction in the Cold War through the Mutually Assured Destruction policy, and the move from auto-destruction, which seems to be divorced from the notion of self, from auto-destruction to self cancellation which seems to be a

far more personal self-criticism, in a sense, which brings you into a more personally-engaged context rather than a politically-engaged context with auto-destruction. And so I'm just wondering about the terminology, and if there is a shift for you in the move from auto-destruction to self-cancellation or do you see that as an evolution, a development, a continuation of that activism and militancy within activism in the context which you continuously work in.

**GM:** I couldn't say anything specifically to your question but I shall just as a matter of information say, self-cancellation is a term that cropped up in heavy discussions that took place in London a few months ago. And so this came about in discussions with a number of people, many of them are in this room, Rhodri in particular. And so this is a communal effort which led us to suggest that self-cancellation would be a central term for a programme initiated by you and your colleagues. So it's more with other people than myself that this term [emerges] and therefore I can't directly respond to your question.

**BM:** Can I bring in Rhodri Davies, can you speak to those discussions?

**Rhodri Davies:** As Gustav said it is a collaborative discussion. My interest comes from trying to expand his ideas into sound and referencing his first manifesto, which wrote in or scribbled in 'sound can be a process'. So that was the springboard for the whole event really.

**Angus Farquahar:** Could you clarify. Is self-cancellation a new term or is it one that was historically referenced and is being brought back into this event. Or was it as a term specific to this work.

**RD:** It's specific to this work, I think Gustav came up with the title after much discussion.

**BM:** If I can throw Ross's question back to you. What essentially is the difference as you see it or as it relates to music and sound rather than the visual arts, between auto-destruction and self-cancellation. Is there a qualitative difference or is it just a matter of different application?

**RD:** Yes. Obviously there are differences. I was less interested in the self aspect of it, more in the auto-destructive aspect. Yes, maybe sort of more non-human centred cancelling is what I was interested in exploring. And I was trying to get a way from thinking about the self too much and getting bogged down with it.

**Emma Hart:** My name is Emma Hart and myself and two other artists did a really short performance as part of the first event at Beaconsfield, where we tried to explore what is the difference between auto-destruction and self-cancellation.<sup>3</sup> We decided that to cancel something you have to know it precisely, and so you have to have knowledge of what it is. And to destroy something you can obviously just destroy it. So we did a short performance about how to get rid of a mark on an OHP. And the best way was when we actually knew exactly what the mark was we could just cover the mark up. Rubbing it out and trying to destroy it didn't work.

**BM:** Does anyone else have experience in working specifically in this field and wants to come in at this point?

**Mark Bain:** My name is Mark Bain I'm an artist from the States but I live in Holland right now. I've been described as an artist who creates work through a kind of destruction. I have this performance with my brother recreate the sound of the building that we had last night after the break there that's sort of a compact version of a system we've designed which deals with architecture and sound and how it injects sounds into buildings and tuning resonant frequencies. I have another system that's heavier that puts oscillators directly onto the surface of the buildings and these will actually destroy buildings with sound, so that's a kind of cancellation I suppose. And it's a kind of relationship with buildings and architects, you might

say, in a built environment. Because there's a feeling that architecture is a kind of graffiti in that field you might say. And architects have this kind of attitude that what they do is for the social good, a bit of a pompous attitude. And in this sense I use sound as a kind of cancelling out factor, I suppose. But that's my experience.

**BM:** The social and political activism dimension of this is obviously extremely important as well and Stewart Home touched upon this in his presentation this morning. Do you want to pick up on the social impact of these kinds of gestures and these kinds of procedures.

**Stewart Home:** I was very much struck with the relationship between self-cancellation and the Festival of Non-Participation by Pete Horobin, but I think what's interesting more with Gustav's work is there is more social engagement. What Pete Horobin seems to enjoy doing is living in a very marginal dropped-out way. I admire him for it, I'm astounded by the amount of money he can live on, on a really low income. It's very much living an alternative lifestyle within a capitalist economy. It's not really challenging that economy. He has working tax credits as an artist, and folk have to go for interviews and be asked about 'How can you live on this amount of money? It's impossible' and they say 'Have you got a TV?' and he says 'No'; 'Have you got a car' - 'No'; 'Do you go to the cinema?' - 'No'; 'Do you buy new clothes?' - 'No', etc., etc. So he's been living in this pretty marginal fashion and done some very interesting work at the same time. For example, there was a film I made with him in 1984 called *Pram 84* which was shot on Super8 with a camera which was barely functioning. We digitised this recently and I was looking at it again and was just astounded that there were actually shots where the camera is in focus on the edge of the frame and out of focus in the centre, I mean that kind of poverty leads to a kind of certain aesthetics through the limitations of the equipment as well. He re-edited the film, not entirely to my satisfaction but his own satisfaction this year and gave me a copy on CD and said I wasn't to show the film so I didn't make a copy of it and bring it in and show it to you today as I did with some of my own films. But that kind of drop out alternative thing doesn't challenge something, whereas Gustav's 'Reduce Art Flights' is a useful think and there's a social engagement there and one can link that up with political critiques. And obviously one of the things my activities has always been predicated upon is trying to work across boundaries, but actually I like the separation between art and politics and literature and everything else and try and overcome those and at the same time realise that outside the imaginary transformation of society one has to kind of exploit those and put them in contradiction with one another which I think is something you can definitely see that in Gustav's work from the 60-s onwards. So I think there is a long history of self-cancellation. To answer Ross's question, I think there's an evolution in Gustav's work rather than some kind of transformation but this could be confused with other work which is much more kind of marginal, just deliberately 'drop out' and which politically I would characterise as anarchistic without necessarily being ideological about that. As Jean BARRAULT in *Critique of the Situationist International* said that 'Criticise them for thinking that one could live differently in this world and that all of anarchism could be found in that idea.'

**BM:** Gustav, we've talked a little about there how your ideas have evolved in time. The other thing that interested me and that we might tease out a little bit is that, given that it does on the surface sound like a potentially totalizing concept, was auto-destruction perceived the same way and used the same way and developed along similar trajectories in different locations in different countries; was there a marked difference in how the idea was received in Britain, in the States, in France as it spread?

**GM:** The quick answer is that it did not spread, it did not spread. It still hasn't spread. Auto-destructive art remains an isolated phenomena. There was never a movement of auto-destructive art, you know that much better than I. It was an English, not a British, an English phenomena, by one person, centred around one person. Jean Tinguely, of course, did auto-destructive art, famously in the New York Museum of Modern Art where he could have burned the place down. And he pursued destruction, auto-destruction, self-destruction - he used the term self-destruction - for two or three years and then just stopped except for one

more attempt in Milan and then it sort of fizzled out, he gave up. I continued but I never went beyond the manifesto stage because auto-destructive art was never made, never made as I had conceived it, in terms of large public monuments and so really it's a failed project. Auto-destructive art is a failed project. At the same time it could at any moment be resurrected if somebody gives the means to make an auto-destructive monument it would be made and would be palpable and possibly successful. And so, I think, here I'm very happy that this has come about and I'm grateful to Rhodri Davies and his colleagues and all the other organisations who supported this project, started in London ten days ago I think and is continuing this weekend in Glasgow. I'm very, very happy, or at least I'm participating, put it like that, I'm anticipating that.

Now the analysis of the term, I can never remember it, self-cancellation is fascinating and it's useful. It is quite, quite different to auto-destruction and to auto-destructive art which is a kind of closed, sealed-in term we find again and again in one way or another, and to some extent practiced in terms of acid on nylon [*Acid Nylon Action Paintings*] there is no doubt that is a form of auto-destructive art. Now to think of self-cancellation opens up an entirely different perspective, one which is certainly worth pursuing which I'm sure when people leave this weekend there will be articles and notices published here and there and people will go on thinking, what is self-cancellation. Well what is it, we have an hour in which to go into deeply, I hope we will, but it certainly opens up a different direction of thinking than auto-destructive art. They go in tandem, they are certainly not the same, which I think is very good. Self-cancellation I think is great, it opens up medicine, it opens up all the arts, ballet, dance, constantly people folding in on themselves, it relates to industrial production, it applies to what I regard as the most important word in the world which is waste, waste. One third of food in this country, according to a page in the *Guardian* you probably saw a few weeks ago, one third of food in this country is wasted. The basis of capitalism, and this is analysed in a beautiful book which I came across in the Science Library a few months ago which I think its title is *Waste*, so it should be very easy to find this book by an American author, where the author claims that waste as a project started in the middle of the nineteenth century in America, it is now universal. Almost everything in this world is produced as waste, for waste, so it is wasted, so it is all sold and then eliminated. Not to speak of weapons of war, not to speak of armaments, not to speak of criminality and deliberately... waste and waste and waste. And certainly, when you think of waste, self-cancellation you could put it next door. Waste: self-cancellation. Self-cancellation: waste. Now if we begin to use this term in the universal sense, we could transform the world of thought; we might, if we push hard communally, change the world against self-cancellation, against waste. But then in medicine we came across, when we did research, as you have written in a note here, when we researched the acid nylon thing in Imperial College, one scientist brought up another use of the term self-cancellation. So I do support our enquiry into the term and it will be fruitful and it will multiply, ending on a biblical note.

**BM:** I don't remember how many weeks ago but some time towards the end of last year, George Lewis, the American trombonist, composer and computer pioneer was in Scotland working with the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra, and when I was talking to him he was talking about approaches to improvisation that involved, he didn't use the words, but that involved some kind of elimination of the old Romantic sense of the self. He said he wasn't interested in any creative processes that were merely about projecting the self. I wish he had said 'self-cancellation' because it would have fed into this much more elegantly. But Raymond MacDonald from the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra is here who was working with George Lewis on that project and performance and I think Raymond it's fair to say that that is one of George Lewis's sort of core concepts, the idea that improvisation is not about the self it actually specifically involves some element of cancellation.

**Raymond MacDonald:** I think he defines improvisation through social processes and sees improvisation as being a fundamental aspect of daily life and to take it into the artistic context, into the musical context is in some way rarefying it, and so he wants to celebrate the fundamental nature of improvisation. But I wonder too if, thinking of self-cancellation in a

musical context and last night's performance is the performative aspect of the musicians playing in real time and having an audience experience the performance makes self-cancellation, in that musical sense, different from the visual art examples given this morning in the lectures. But last night, when I was watching and listening to the concert and seeing the sudoku piece and the way in which the concept was unfolding, but I was also drawn to the musicians and how the musicians were negotiating were negotiating as a group and the kind of gradual unfolding almost. On the one hand there was a cancellation in the sudoku piece but on the other hand for the musicians I was thinking of it as a development, I was interested to see, you know, it was John Butcher playing and how would that fit in with the piece. And so the real time negotiations between the audience and the musicians made it fundamentally different from possibly experiencing an installation in an art gallery where the focus is much more on the product. I don't know if that makes sense, but is there something different between the musical performative aspects of self-cancellation and the more gallery-orientated installation approach.

**BM:** Louise K. Wilson was one of the speakers this morning. Product is probably not a word that you would want to use, but what is your immediate reaction to that distinction?

**Louise K. Wilson:** I wanted to go back to Alvin Lucier's 'I'm sitting in a room' (1969), I imagine most people know that piece, where the composer is sitting reading out this text 'I'm sitting in a room', basically it is a short paragraph in which he's explaining this action that will take place whereby he will speak a text, it's recorded, it's then played back in that space and played back again, sound mirrored over a period of time, about 45 minutes, and over that time his voice is self-cancelled, in fact the acoustics, the resonant frequencies of the room reduce his voice to a drone.<sup>4</sup> Obviously it is very different depending on where it is performed. I actually heard it presented recently at Dartington and it was very interesting, after about 30 minutes the piece gradually faded out because of the particular acoustics were operating on very high frequencies. But to cut along story short I think where I was interested in looking at the two, at that process of self-cancellation in earlier versions with the voice and then this interesting move by Jacob Kirkegaard and a number of different artists to make something not out of nothing, but out of the inaudible or intangible aspects of the world, places of fraughtness or difficulty. This interesting move by artists working with field recording to make something out of that away from the self, away from the voice and subjectivity implied in Lucier's work. So I just thought that was an interesting move, that sort of fitted into that notion of radiance and this thing mutating out from the centre from something fairly indefinable to start with.

**GM:** As we are talking there's an image that has come to me of the Hindenburg in New York in the 30s, I think about 1937, [came] into flame, That is one of the iconic images, one of the photographs of world significance. That's it, it is self-cancelling in every sense of the term. It also has, of course, a profound aesthetic element. And then following from that logically, we have, I hate to say it, we have to think of New York, again New York, two aeroplanes self-cancelling themselves and in the process, very closely related to the vision of the Hindenburg, and the reality of the Hindenburg where a lot of people died, a lot of people will have died self-cancelling on 9/11. The aeroplane self-cancelling, and, this is so important, *knowingly* self-cancelling, creating this collapse, this step-by-step we've got books and films and hundreds of thousands of eye-witness accounts of what happened. And so I think this must be very relevant to our discussion.

**BM:** Given that we touched on 9/11 this morning, I think it's worth developing that and asking Michael Hampton about this. I mean the obvious argument about that and against what you've said, about that whole issue, is what the difference is between those two events. I mean there is an argument that the Hindenburg was sabotaged and there is an argument that the pilots of those planes were already self-cancelled by ideology, and by a specifically self-cancelling ideology, but that's an argument we can't and shouldn't have here.

**Michael Hampton:** Well the Nazi pilots, apparently they were exhausted because they were being pushed to the limits in flying backwards and forwards. It was a luxury liner, as it were, of the air. And apparently they made a fatal error when they landed, they miscalculated wind speeds and that apparently is the reason why it crashed. I think Gustav said something very important because the term cancellation it usually crops up in people's daily lives in the context of travel – 'your flight has been cancelled', 'your train has been cancelled' – that is the most common context. And so I think that is important because it suggests in the formulation self-cancellation that the self has got a forward dynamic, has a thrust which has suddenly been stopped and so my reading of it is that there is a stoppage going on here and so whether that is in sound or visual arts doesn't really matter because they are both material. I'd rather not see them as different disciplines but just look at the materials, just look at sound as material, look at paint as material, etcetera, etcetera. And so I'd just say it is some kind of post-historical formula, the notion that everything has suddenly stopped, or there is no kind of dialectic between communism and capitalism, for instance, and so everything has just stopped. And self-cancellation is like the experience of inertia and being stopped all of a sudden, of having to face up the fact that what you wanted, perhaps, or what you were conditioned to believe that what you should do with your life as a project has also been cancelled and therefore you've got this, not a clean stop because there is no such thing, but you've got this new situation.

**MB:** It becomes like transmutation into another material.

**MH:** Yeah, because there is no end, no actual end point. There is only an illusion of an end point.

**MB:** On the Acid Nylon piece, I mean we're reading the materials of this project also, so it just sort of mutates them into another piece. And then as far as time-based work in relation to sound I think you should also think about the idea of the accelerator. So perhaps, not a cancellation but just a mutation into something using an accelerant – [To Stewart Home] like the petrol you were drinking earlier, this is also an accelerant. With the jets full of jet fuel or the Hindenburg full of hydrogen, so these things always end in something else.

**MH:** Yeah, putting out fire with gasoline.

**MB:** Yeah, why not?

**Ross Sinclair:** I just wanted to raise something, kind of going on from one of the comments Gustav said about waste and this idea of the accelerant and the idea of the two things side by side. When Stewart mentioned this morning appropriating the idea of the art strike from Gustav, and re-introducing that or re-imagining that somehow and you also touched on Bill Drummond, if you think about his idea of 'No Music Day',<sup>5</sup> in a way if you look at those three things together, that reinforces the idea, or posits another idea that this self-cancellation, is that a misnomer? Is it a way of actually a way of turning these forms against themselves in order to better understand them? I mean, Bill's 'day without music' thing, you could fairly easily, perhaps, argue that that in a sense leads to, on one level, a more critical evaluation of actually what you're listening to on any given moment or what we're using as waste as Gustav is implying and Stewart, your re-livening of the art strike idea. I mean, you mentioned that as a cancellation, but is it really a cancellation or is that a kind of looking back over, what was touched on this morning, the post war or even 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde and seeking out the bits of that that are somehow relevant or have some meaning in a context today?

**SH:** I can why you are arguing it's a transformation rather than a cancellation and it kind of depends upon how position yourself in relation to that. And what I always find interesting hearing people talk, I mean you were just mentioning Bill's 'No Music Day'. His point is that we have access to all these recordings, you can hear virtually anything you want to any time you want now, and for Bill recorded music is redundant and he wanted to hear live music. If you have the opportunity to sit down and talk with him as I do from time to time, and you

may well have done, I'm not suggesting that you haven't, then you probably have a slightly different take on it. Because I have an obsession with historiography, I keep thinking about other things that get missed out. Also I would point out that although Gustav's Art Strike was what inspired me to do an art strike premised on slightly different things, there were other art strikes, or attempts at art strikes in Eastern Europe, for example, so things can kind of get lost. And what I was thinking about when you were mentioning Bill, was Luke Haines, who was in *The Autuers* and *Black Box Recorder* also had an no music / anti-music thing, it was a few years ago in *The Guardian*, where he acknowledged me and Gustav as inspiration, but again that has kind of dropped out with Bill's thing. Luke has a slightly different take on all those things. But again I speak from the position of being able to sit down with Luke and talk to him about what he thinks he's doing, but this is going back somewhat further than the last time I talked with Bill. So there are all these different positions emerging, and maybe kind of coalescing into more interesting things and one persons re-working of something will never be perfect but then someone else can go on and re-work that.

And the example I always give with that is when I was involved in the Neoist Network in 1980s, until the mid-80s, one of the ideas we had was a lot of people working with the same name. There was this name identified with an American Mail Artist, David Zack, 'Monty Cantsin' and the I started using the name Karen Eliot, because I didn't like the male domination of that and also the fact that the Monty Cantsin name became very associated with one particular Hungarian/Canadian performance artist, Istvan Cantor. But then when you looked at the people who started the Luther Blisset project in Bologna in the mid-90s, they looked at what had happened with these attempts to use multiple identities, and said, the problem is they end up getting tied back to someone: Monty Cantsin was being tied back to Istvan Cantor, Karen Eliot was getting tied back to me, because someone would write a letter to *City Limits* or *Time Out* and sign it Karen Eliot and then someone would write in the next week and say I know this is Stewart Home, even though it wasn't me who had done it because the name, against my wishes, became associated with me. So they looked at what had been done and they created a founding myth for Monty Cantsin, where this non-existent performance artist, Harry Kipper, loosely based on the Kipper Kids but not actually a real person, had been cycling across Europe spelling out the word 'Art' by linking up major European cities and disappeared whilst asking everyone to call themselves Luther Blisset. So I think out of that process there can be a cancellation of the earlier project, and obviously I think Luther Blisset did eclipse the use of multiple identities I'd been involved with in the 80s and in some ways cancelled them out but in that very cancelling improved on what I'd been working on with other people. And I was very happy to see that success that kind of collective originated in Bologna but then pulling other people in, had with that project, they obviously dealt with what failed in the earlier projects and improved on them. And so there's a positive and negative to that cancellation and maybe cancellation isn't the right term.

**BM:** Is there a fundamental difference between self-cancellation as an aesthetic strategy, an aesthetic process and simple destruction of your own body of work? There have been many examples over history of artists drawing a line in their work and destroying everything that precedes that point, so there's a chronological aspect to it as well as a stylistic one or philosophical one. But is there a fundamental difference between those two things?

**MH:** Maybe it's an editing process. There's a famous anecdote about Francis Bacon one day, I think in the late 1950s, walking along a street and seeing one of his own early paintings in a shop window, on sale for about £25,000, and he was really upset to see it there. And because he was a control freak to put it mildly with regard to his work and how it was presented and released in the world and existed in the world, he went in to the shop and he bought his own painting back, just paid for it there and then with a cheque, bought his own paint back took it out onto the street and just put his foot through it and just smashed it to pieces outside the shop because he just didn't want that to be his legacy, that particular work. So I think it's a question of editing as well: self-cancellation involves editing.

**EH:** I was thinking that I haven't flown here from London to see anybody cancel something

out, I've come here to see Rhodri Davies, John Butcher and Gustav Metzger think about self-cancellation. And had it been some other people talking about self-cancelling I perhaps might not have come. And then when I go to watch them perform I cancel myself out as a viewer. They remain there performing and I lose myself and concentrate on them. And then I was just thinking there is a lot of people in this room now, cancelling yourselves out, not saying anything because you are here to hear these names have come to say. I'm confused about the term self-cancellation, when I've come so far, I'm the one that gets cancelled.

**MH:** So you're saying open the box.

**EH:** Yeah, maybe that would be the best form of self-cancellation.

**AF:** Just to pick up on that with regard to last night, I think there was a tension with this term self-cancellation I'd like to ask some of the people who were performing last night, There was a narrative structure, they were sort of vignettes, little packages, which is quite a conventional form of putting things together. And it seems to me a field where people are very self-effacing anyway in the way they present their work, people under a spotlight still using traditional theatrical narratives, a passive audience watching someone present their work. And I felt there was a sort of quiet tension, that people were trying to self-efface further than they even normally do and sort of negate, and that was some people's approach to their work, to try and make themselves more invisible, other people were letting the work do that and obviously the work was more suited, but the works themselves weren't cancelling each other out. And I'm interested in that tension as to the position of a person who is performing or their invisibility to their work because I didn't feel that was particularly resolved, not that it should be but it was definitely there as a tension. And for some of the people who were doing that last night, how it affected their normal way of working and how they responded to the brief.

**MB:** Well I think it is just a process of curatorial decision-making and designation of a symbolic name. You get shows, you get invited, you see a title, and it's like what the fuck, who cares? You just do your own thing. So it doesn't matter.

**SH:** I felt particularly with your work that the building was resonating through me, and I didn't feel cancelled in that work, I was very much a part of it.

**MB:** Exactly, and that's part of the research I've done and also written texts about making a definition between these kind of frequencies in the body and the same frequencies that relate to the architecture, there's a matching up there, there's a connected attitude. So in a way really it's a connecting of space. It's not about cancelling the audience. The only thing we cancelled out, perhaps, besides the frequency of the wave forms was the fact that we played in the back of the hall with a front of the house mixer, which is the opposite place on the stage, and maybe we were hidden behind a lot of equipment. That's our cancellation, I suppose. But otherwise I had a great time. [Laughter]

**RMacD:** Do you think you could say that the performative aspects of what was happening last night makes cancellation impossible? Because it's transformation, it's a narrative and both the performers and the audience, it's almost as if there's an implicit contract when you enter into an event like last night that you're on a journey and everyone is involved in it. So whilst cancellation conceptually happens, in real time it's impossible.

**Briony MacIntyre:** I think that's what's really interesting about some of the pieces that were particularly simple, like Robin's and like Lee's, for example. You can set up a situation, you put something into a bowl, and then you are the audience yourself. You are just standing back and watching it yourself. So you are an instigator but once that motivational process is just been started then you step back from that process as well. In the same way you weren't really in control of what on earth your tuba was going to sound like when it did eventually get filled with sand.

**Robin Hayward:** Yeah, you can't control it, exactly.

**BMacI:** And so I think those performances which were the really simple ones were actually effectively thought about, if we're talking about what that term self-cancellation means, in a kind of simple way. I don't know what you thought.

**Lee Patterson:** Yes, there's two pieces that I attempted to do. You've got a set of materials, when as an artist you input some energy into those set of materials, there's like a transmutation of materials and sound, obviously the sound effuses out into the space, into people's heads. But eventually it runs out of energy because it goes to materials to run out of energy, sound dissipates and the piece finishes. In a way it is self-contained, well not quite because you need that initial input from the artist setting a process going then, yeah, you step back and as an individual I'm cancelled but the materials go through that process.

**BMacI:** In a way it goes back to what Emma was saying... in John Butcher's thing he set up this process and he knew what he had to do to make that sound not happen, and he went about trying to replicate that but it wasn't in a case of knowing it and being in control of that situation as opposed to being kind of out of control.

**MH:** It's almost as if the term self-cancellation is running out of steam as we sit here. [Laughter] That shelf life has is looming, at the end of its shelf life.

**MB:** Which goes back to waste. The funny thing is right now they have these new EU laws, it's related to capitalistic strategies of making money and self-cancellation of the product. So now they're designing how these things get thrown out, or recycled or something like this, and now this becomes something that we all must think about about these objects. And then you have something like a plastic bottle which goes into the ocean and floats around in a giant cess pool in the middle of the Pacific that's the size of Texas... and this doesn't break down, you just dispose of this instantly. Actually there's a company that runs bio-degradable bottles out of London but anyway this just goes back to simple polymers, the Benzine strings and chains, and it never goes away. But other things too, and everything's related that's why I was talking about acceleration, everything is related to acceleration and it's just a matter of time. So even this beautiful building we are sitting in will probably fall down at some point unless we keep on patching it up and keeping it going. Anyway I like Gustav's reference to waste.

**RH:** I'd like to go back to what you were saying that yesterday was quite a conventional narrative way of presenting the works and therefore it couldn't completely self-cancel. I can't actually imagine a piece that completely self cancels, for example the piece I did yesterday, where sands goes into the tuba. Certain aspects of the tuba sounds are self-cancelled, the conventional tones are self-cancelled, but the way in which I normally play the tuba is in a sense self-cancelling in a different way, like when I played in Rhodri's piece I have the tuba so it's positioned horizontally which means that I'm invisible to the audience, which is self-cancelling a different way aspect of the performance. And I can't imagine a performance where everything is self-cancelled otherwise there would really be nothing to see.

**BM:** That takes us back to Angus's point about the functional difference between self-cancellation which we're maybe beginning to admit is one of those concepts that does have a vanishing point and self-effacement as a strategy. Can you Angus just develop that point just a little bit, what you meant about self-effacement?

**AF:** Well I mean it's an argument that says that in a lot of this work the person doesn't really need to be there, doesn't need to be seen. In the pure realm of sound the human is a distraction. But if you are going to be there, you have to be very decisive about how you are going to be, how you are going to be seen and what we're watching. And I've often just felt in this type of work that that's quite uneasy, that it's not necessarily resolved or resolvable and

just the term itself takes that a stage further. It is interesting, the Rhodri you said that the self aspect was the least interesting to you. I'd quite like to hear Rhodri expand on that, is that what you meant by taking yourself out of the picture and addressing a different set of questions that before.

**RD:** Yeah,, when Barry and Ben first approached me to do this project I instantly thought it should be a collaborative project and not just me and Gustav working together, so I was very keen to take myself out of the focus as much as I could really. And I remember Gustav, when we met the second time, Gustav came saying he wanted to remove himself as much as possible from the project. And so yes, working collaboratively and also not working towards one performance, we had two, and this event itself is as important as the concert last night, and Gustav gave a talk, and we did a residency and so there is so many people involved in it, and so I was being self-effacing.

**BM:** Anybody else want to make a point or raise a point?

**SH:** Well I think that self-effacement and self-cancellation are quite interesting when you look at artists' cancelling because in some ways, you take piece like Michael Landy destroying his possessions which he presented as a kind of a radical anti-consumerist act and actually what it does is replicate possessive individualism, so there's an argument that its reinforcing the capitalist social system rather than undermining it. And I think questioning the right of the artist once they've put something into circulation, and again this brings up a lot of questions of copyright control, but actually culture is produced socially; you know a painting takes its power from its reception as much as anything inherent in the painting or more from its reception, the same with music. And again this was one of the things why the distinction that was being set up between visual art and music was possibly a distinction that didn't work for me because I think it is how the musician or the person creating the installation is thinking about that. I mean for example I was thinking about a show I did collaboratively with various people in Transmission in 1987 called *Desire in Ruins*, one of the things we did was - this was in the old Transmission space not the current one - we painted one of the old walls with a picture taken from a Dutch postcard of two naked children holding hands, which was also used on the poster and caused us a lot of problems with the Strathclyde Police, and we put balloons filled with white paint over different points on that picture and there was an air rifle so people shot at the balloons and the paint obliterated the picture. This was only one part of the installation, but the installation did change over the period it was up. So it is not like you were creating necessarily, even within installation, some fixed product. I think a lot of it has to do with the, to use the term, musician or artist concerned. I mean a friend of mine told me about going to see The Doors at the Roundhouse. He was telling me about how much he hated The Doors, he went to see the famous Doors concerts at the Roundhouse, and he went to both shows; so he went to see the first show, thought it was great., went back to the second one and The Doors played exactly the same set it was all rehearsed and identical which he found very boring. Rather than making that distinction over what we could call genres of sound a visual art from my point of view self-effacement might be more social, a recognition of the social within culture might be a preferable term to self-cancellation.

**RB:** I wanted to come back to the initial question of the modification or shift in terminology and what seems to be arising from it, on the one hand, an ethic or ethics of self-cancellation or self-effacement, which is tied into something that you mentioned in relation to knowing what it is you are attempting destroying or to erase, and identifying the enemy in a sense, so one has set up an antagonism with a particular condition, whether in relation to Pete Horobin and capitalism, so that, okay, how is my self constituted in relationship to material practices and consumer goods and therefore I don't have a television, I don't own this, I don't travel, I don't do this, and so identifying one particular violence to assert a counter-violence through self-cancellation. And so it seems to be an ethical/political procedure which is being followed, in that self-cancellation is a prelude to a further, to come back to your phrase [to Gustav] transformation of the world, by identifying the particular conditions, whether it is Art Flights,

identifying the particular conditions and material practices one is resisting though different modes. And the other aspect of it seems to be the philosophical, which comes back to the ambiguity of self-cancellation in the philosophical tradition from Schopenhauer through Nietzsche, but also through someone like Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* articulates Dasein or Being, where the ultimate condition of Being is anticipation, so time is imbedded in Being, but the anticipation of annihilation, the anticipation of Death. So that Dasein or Being is being towards death. And that self-cancellation seems to be simply an affirmation of the condition of being.

You mentioned self-cancellation as a strategy in the Twin Towers, whereby self-cancellation is also a process of self-determination. One chooses to be a suicide-bomber, because suicide-bombing is a political process in relation to the self-determination of a state in the condition of war. So self-cancellation opens up as you said to the political, the ethical, the legal, the medical in a number of ways and it does tie in to me with the strategies of suicide-bombing, etc. Some of those ideologies might be self-cancelling in themselves but maybe there is another way of reading that in relationship to a strategy of self-determination. One of the things I was always drawn to in your practice, Gustav, and also with Stewart's and other artists and maybe related to improvisation in some way was the history of self-publication, of pamphleteering, of asserting one's difference from a particular market place or whatever – and I was struck by the fact that you [Stewart] didn't burn the books you disseminated them for free [laughter] and dissemination is also a modality of self-cancellation, [to LKW] I'm not trying to find some kind of unified logic in relationship to *Radiance* and dissemination, but to think through the ethical, the political, and the philosophical dimensions of the term. The transformation has some articulation...

**MH:** ... You're talking about death?

**RB:** Well to come back to Heidegger, the point was that maybe self-cancellation is politically different from somebody like Heidegger's position in relation to self-affirmation through self-cancellation. Fascism says, I will die on the battlefield gloriously. Perhaps self-cancellation is politically different from that.

**Oliver Metzger:** The materiality which we've talked about a lot already seems quite detached and related to the inanimate but I think you're talking about an aspect of an experience of self-cancellation which can be extreme noise, or no noise and those can physically effect the body and overcome one, to not only cause one to project terminology onto the experience but one is contained by the experience. So that would be the motivational factor for I guess the suicide bombers that decide to go into the Twin Towers, they believed in their conversion and an ideology which motivated them to self-cancel the symbols of capitalism.

**RB:** I think the term I'm looking for is *sacrifice* in relation to self-cancellation, to put it in a nutshell, what's the distance between self-cancellation and sacrifice, because we seem to be discussing sacrificing oneself politely in removing oneself from conditions of control and, in terms of Gustav's work, there is an enormous politeness to your practice in terms of the humility and the openness of it. At the same time that I often feel a rage, it is just that it is tempered, it is not Futurist bellicosity, there is not this kind of violent sacrifice, which as a term self-cancellation seems to announce. Just to bring the term sacrifice into this.

**MH:** But how does that connect up to 'radiance', Louise?

**LKW:** I think I was grappling with the auto-destruction to self-cancellation, and wondering how that could be mapped onto the notion of radiance. It was something to do with [reads] 'was it about disowning a sense of you and embracing a self-nullifying, holistic process, was Metzger calling for the cancellation of the centred subject'. So I think it was the starting point from that. I think I mentioned briefly I was looking at it from a modernist and then from a Postmodernist viewpoint, in that it was very much initially to do with a Romantic view to then embracing much darker connotations, which I suppose point towards sacrifice as you

were saying, but it seems to be a deathly process. One of the images Francis Dyson refers to was the idea of the trace left after the bomb blast, the bodily trace left on the surface and then picking up on Derrida's ideas and seeing this as a more vitalist notion of trace, I was generally scratching around to see if the two can be seen side-by-side.

**RMacD:** Could psycho-dynamic and unconscious processes help link up the notion of sacrifice and psycho-cancellation in a sense of death and the movement towards death and Freudian concepts of the movement towards death?

**BM:** I was intrigued by what Ross was saying in relation to Heidegger and I was hoping to move onto Lacan and pick up that kind of dynamic that Raymond's talking about.

**SH:** Although I don't particularly want to talk about him, Bataille keeps coming into my mind in relation to sacrifice and waste etc.

**RB:** I was thinking more in terms of the exuberance of self-sacrifice and exuberance of self-cancellation so it might tie into this performative modality whereby the very presence of the act of self-cancellation is itself an affirmation which is this music of joy for Nietzsche, this idea that the great yes-sayer is always associated with nihilism, but he is actually the great yes-sayer. So there is this energy which was present in the slide-projections last night, but which I think was less true of the projections in the MOMA Oxford exhibition.<sup>6</sup> And so I wanted to ask if you saw a relation between the slide projections, self-cancellation and Auto-Creative Art.

**GM:** Well in Oxford it was *Liquid Crystal* projections. The Acid nylon slides started in February 1963 Bartlett School of Architecture, part of University College London. And these were acid white nylon. And yesterday and in London a week ago, there were three colours of nylon used, sandwiched one behind the other, which created a completely different effect to the original 63 technique which was with white nylon only. So we had black and white slide and of course once you have three colours it is more like painting and so we saw some say a lyrical element in the acid nylon painting produced here in this context, but just to differentiate between the Oxford work which was liquid crystal which was quite a different thing.

**RB:** But the term?

**GM:** Auto-creative art has a different relationship to art and technique, ie. it isn't literally destructive it is more open and closer, let's say, to the way plants might develop, expanding rather than contracting.

**RB:** But they can also have organic self-cancelling processes enfolding within them.

**GM:** And that makes it so interesting. Liquid crystal projections are intense colour, They are constantly changing literally because the liquid crystal responds to the tiniest change in temperature and so what you see is what you've got, what you actually have, what you see is what is actually happening in the slide with the chemical liquid crystal, which is in the most minute manner interacting with each other, changing, and you can see all that in great detail in front of your eyes. And that means that self-cancellation is a term which would be very apt to describe what is happening when liquid crystal under the effect of heat continues to transform itself, it is continually, that term again, cancelling itself out. One form cancels the other; when one expands, it pushes aside another form. When one moment, and when I mean moment I mean on a molecular level, a visceral level. When one part of this chemical structure connects to the other, as one opens another element will come in, as one recedes another can come in, and that of course is self-cancelling. So there we are, self-cancelling can really be applied to almost any chemical, any biological activity. When butterflies fly they are cancelling out, according to this old, probably false theory that a butterfly in South America affects the

weather in Scotland, maybe not, but certainly when a butterfly flies it is a self-cancelling activity because in its relation to the air, the air is cancelled, it's not scientific but I think you know what I am getting at, there's a change, the butterfly moves and changes the air around it. And this is so fascinating, when butterfly move there is the continuous loss of something, they must be losing something, if you had a biologist here they were tell you what they are losing, but they are obviously losing something, something flaking off, cancelled. How beautiful that we can apply this to almost the whole world.

**MH:** That's a Kamikaze Butterfly, destroying itself by flying.

**BM:** Could I ask a final, looking forward from here kind of question, concepts, philosophical positions, ideologies, whatever you want to call them, procedures have an aptitude to self-cancellation, then Lacan's name, and Lacan's idea of paranoia and joyous self-destruction, self-mutilation, does seem to have a bearing here. One of the things that he was always interested in was just as he colonized other people's thinking, other people's logic, he refused to colonize his own ideas, he really sort of abandoned them almost as soon as he had shaped them. Less obvious in print that in the Seminar, smaller occasions than this but working on a similar kind of very lateral way. And one of the things he was always interested in was leaving every analysis, which were notoriously short, they were not the 55 minute hour, they were very often a 15 minute hour, we've had 90 minutes, so let's at the cusp on that ask what is the next step is. What happens when self-cancellation as a concept is self-cancelled? What is the next step?

**RB:** That's to enter into a negation of the negation. One of the terms that is pertinent in this context to bring in from Lacan is *misrecognition*, that it is impossible to cancel the self because one can never find oneself because one is always misrecognizing what constitutes oneself, that kind of *meconnaissance*, when one looks in the mirror one is looking at a kind of narrative fiction of a self in relationship to language, where one is separated from the self through language, and that leads obviously to people who have not been mentioned like Roland Barthes 'Death of the Author' is a prime text in this context, and that whole question of the way the subject is constituted through language and self-cancellation would seem to be a continuation of that debate. But one thing that would maybe be interesting in relationship to here is not that trajectory, but a different tinker like Theodor Adorno in his *Negative Dialectics* says 'that if thinking is to be true today it must be a thinking against itself' and I've always seen Gustav's practice and also the practice of other artists associated with him, as some sort of manifestation of that concept, if thinking is to be true it is to be thinking against itself. And self-cancellation seems to chime and resonate with that proposition and so self-cancellation has to do a double enfolding to be true to itself, has to just accelerate that self-cancellation. TO bring back the theme of violence, the conclusion to Zizek's new book *Violence* is that mass murderers of Totalitarian regimes, it is not that they were violent that is the problem but that they weren't violent enough and that kind of sabotage of liberalism in the conclusion has some bearing upon a sense of double self-cancellation.

**BM:** One of the states that Lacan was very interested in was a radical form misrecognition, where one did not recognise oneself, I don't necessarily mean in the mirror where you don't know what you are looking at, you have no sense of your own self, you may have a sense of a sense of self, but it is not the self that you are actually dealing with. And it seems to me that one of the most common and familiar and obvious and in some ways the most troubling aspects of self-cancellation is the thing that almost all artist experience at some point or other, this is maybe the opposite of the Francis Bacon anecdote, is that thing of not recognising your own work as your own work. I mean, anyone who writes finds a bit of paper in their drawer sooner or later and thinks 'that's really beautiful, who wrote that?' And you discover you wrote it yourself fifteen years before, or John Cage being played a piece of his own music at a dinner party and asking who it was, because he doesn't recognise it. And these stories are always told I think in slightly misleading contexts, I mean that was told as a slightly mischievous story about Cage and the implication was that he was a bit of a charlatan, that he

doesn't really in some way engage with his music enough to recognize it when he meets it in the street, almost as if he's a kind of errant father whose abandoned his progeny. But it seemed to me that in all the different ways that practitioners have been talking about this, that's the aspect that is the most interesting and most profound and possibly the most radical in terms of future agenda, that moment where the work doesn't in some way belong to you, you're not acknowledging your work in the moment, which takes us back to what George Lewis was talking about earlier in the evening.

**GM:** I'd like to come in with another memory of the 30s and my childhood and talking of migrating butterflies losing momentum and losing substance, it occurs to me that as a child I would watch tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Nazis in variegated uniforms, either the SR, the SS, or the Army, or the Landworkers marching every year in Nuremberg, the town where I was born and where I lived until the age of 12, nearly the age of 13 at the beginning of 1939 when I left and came to this country. And so year after year there would be the annual Nuremberg Rallies, the most important meetings of National Socialism, year by year from 1933 I would watch these armies, these endless columns of marching people for one or two weeks and we lived just off the main road, the biggest road in Nuremberg, leading from Nuremberg to Fürth which is miles and miles and miles, marching, marching. And then I came across with my brother, who sadly died in a car accident, he was killed by a car a few years ago in Strasbourg, and we would hear about the marching soldiers in Belgium, in France, in Italy, wherever, marching, marching, marching to Russia and of course it was a self-cancelling march, as I said we can use it for everything. I can now for the first time in my life use this concept, this area, to relate to my childhood of the German army marching to what, to the point where they were literally rubbed out, snuffed out, yes, through marching. If they hadn't marched, Europe could have been saved and millions and millions of Germans could have been saved but for this march to self-cancellation. I'm sorry to say that but it is relevant, I do believe it, things moving apart, falling apart, marching apart.

**BM:** I think that's an incredibly poignant moment at which to bring this to a close.

**END**

- <sup>1</sup> Greenwashing. Environment, Perils, Promises and Perplexities (Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy, 29 February – 18 May 2008). <http://www.greenwashing.ltds.org/>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.reduceartflights.ltds.org/> See also 'Protest and Survive' an interview with Gustav Metzger by Mark Godfrey, frieze, Issue 108 Jun-Aug 2007 [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/protest\\_and\\_survive/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/protest_and_survive/)
- <sup>3</sup> Self-Cancellation, Beaconsfield, London, 2-9 February 2008.  
<http://www.beaconsfield.ltd.uk/projects/selfcancellation/selfcancellation.html>
- <sup>4</sup> "I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but, more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have." Alvin Lucier's "I am sitting in a room" was first performed at the Electronic Music Studio, Brandeis University, 1969. The original recording can be heard at Ubu web: <http://www.ubu.com/sound/lucier.html>
- <sup>5</sup> Inaugurated by Bill Drummond in 2005, 'No Music Day' takes place annually on 21 November. <http://www.nomusicday.com>
- <sup>6</sup> Gustav Metzger, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 25 October 1998 – 10 January 1999.