

Condition Issues & Restoration History of Wolf Vostell Concrete Car Works

Of Wolf Vostell's four works involving cars encased in concrete, only one – the Berlin work *Two Cadillacs in the Form of the Naked Maja* (1987) – has been the focus of an intensive restoration project. However, it is likely that the Chicago artwork, *Concrete Traffic* (1970), received touch-ups within weeks of its initial fabrication, before it was moved to the University of Chicago campus.

Concrete Traffic (1970), Chicago

A letter of February 5, 1970, written from Museum of Contemporary Art curator Jan van der Marck to Wolf Vostell (see archival document B, Figure 11) states:

Finally, here is a set of photographs [not found in the archive] of the various stages of “Concrete Traffic.” The weather has been consistently sub-zero, so it has been impossible so far the *mend the edges, smooth the abrasive part and clean the underside*. Next week, I'm sure, we will be able to get to this. [emphasis added]

Presumably, this touch-up work occurred sometime between this letter, written February 5, and the car's move to the University of Chicago campus in June 1970, since images from the day of the move show sections of concrete that look to have been added post-fabrication.



Figure 1: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, installed at Ontario and St. Clair, Chicago, IL (photograph taken June 1970)
This photograph can be dated to June 1970 because the two children atop the car are also present in a photograph showing the car being lifted by a crane, along with workers depicted at the car's removal from this corner near the MCA and its installation on the University of Chicago campus. Note the concrete patching, circled in red.



Figure 2: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, Ontario and St. Clair, June 1970



Figure 3: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, Ontario and St. Clair, June 1970



Figure 4: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, move from Ontario and St. Clair, June 1970



Figure 5: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, installation outside Midway Studios, University of Chicago, June 1970



Figure 6: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, installation outside Midway Studios, University of Chicago, June 1970
Note the concrete patching, in the red box.



Figure 7: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, in storage at Methods & Materials, Chicago IL, January 2012, showing the state of the concrete patching in 2012, the same enclosed in red in previous image



Figure 8: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, in storage at Methods & Materials, Chicago IL, January 2012, showing the state of the concrete patching on back top of car, enclosed in red in the following image

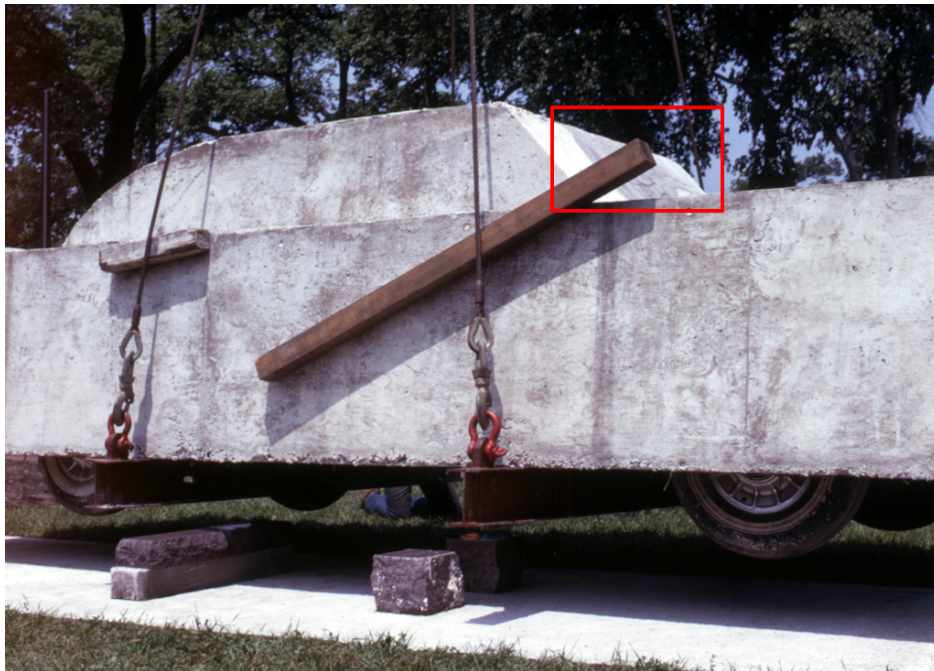


Figure 9: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, installation outside Midway Studios, University of Chicago, June 1970, showing concrete patching in the red box.

Zwei Beton-Cadillacs in Form der Nackten Maja (1987), Berlin



Figure 10: *Zwei Beton-Cadillacs in Form der Nackten Maja* (1987), Berlin, shown after 2006 restoration

From August to November 2006, the Berlin work *Zwei Beton-Cadillacs in Form der Nackten Maja* [2 Concrete-Cadillacs in the Form of the Nude Maja] (1987) was restored and given updated lighting by a team including architect Christian Neeße, civil engineer Steffen Dworok, lighting designer Andreas Boehlke, and the artist's son Rafael Vostell.

This restoration project cost €100,000.00 - but this sum also includes a fee for 'using public roads for advertising purposes,' as well as Boehlke's ambitious new lighting design. The restoration project was sponsored by the municipal improvement association Verein Pro City West e.V., with financial support from the advertising company Limes. In exchange for partially funding the project, Limes was allowed to erect a giant billboard in front of the sculpture as it was being restored. The restoration seems to have been seen as a contribution to the public good in exchange for permitting new private development in the area.

A description of the restoration process, roughly translated from *Deutsches Architektenblatt*:
(see German original below)

When the sculptor Wolf Vostell presented his contribution to the 750th anniversary of Berlin in 1987, his sculpture was one of the most provocative in post-war Berlin. The "Two Concrete Cadillacs in the Form of the Naked Maja" was intended to give a critical commentary on the *Zeitgeist*. The statement and aesthetics of Vostell's sculpture – two roadworthy American cruisers embedded in concrete – are debatable. Undisputed, however, are the structural defects. Through the visible joining of steel and concrete, these defects were present practically from the work's inception, and the sculpture was soon gnawed by the ravages of time. A renovation in the 1990s was not sufficient against weathering and environmental effects.

In 2006, the Berlin firm Tarkus carried out a fundamental repair. The measures were coordinated closely with the family of the late artist, along with [financial] sponsors and a mechanic with expertise in car body repair. With good results, because the condition of the artwork even met the guidelines of the VOB [standard contract rules for German public works projects]. Through these repairs, many weaknesses of the initial craftsmanship were corrected: in particular, the [problematic] coverage of parts of the car body with mortar, which contained gypsum. This mortar broke down the galvanized steel frame and caused it to develop crumbling on its surface, due to the hygroscopic property [of the mortar]. Further deficiencies resulted from the design and construction of the sculpture. Normally, with reinforced concrete, the metal is embedded in the concrete, protecting it from corrosion. However, Vostell merely placed the two materials together. The bonding sites in particular were therefore attacked by the weather. In addition, the mortar (concrete with smaller aggregates) was applied piecemeal by hand on highly inclined surfaces, rather than sprayed on or poured into molds. This process leads inevitably to an open-pore structure into which moisture penetrates, thereby corroding the metal, and – due to the expansion of frozen water during cold weather – resulting in the crumbling of the mortar. Permanent damage of the surface concrete monolith could, however, not be completely eliminated for reasons of cost: plank structures were not restored after the repair, such that a non-uniform surface appearance is the result. In spite of the otherwise expert work, aesthetic shortcomings remain.

How the sculpture was repaired:

- ⤴ Photographic and plastic [3D?] documentation and protection of the extant structure
- ⤴ Dismantling of rusted body surfaces and structures
- ⤴ Thorough repair of rusted body panels
- ⤴ Preparation of the "body coating" with reinforced injection concrete
- ⤴ Conventional concrete repair with a PCC system on concrete monoliths
- ⤴ Carbonized protective coating
- ⤴ Restoration of the Cadillac fragments with new paint job

Mr. Wolf Vostell
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5 Cologne, West Germany

Dear Wolf:

Finally, here is a set of photographs of the various stages of "Concrete Traffic." The weather has been consistently sub-zero, so it has been impossible so far to mend the edges, smoothen the abrasive parts and clean the underside. Next week, I'm sure, we will be able to get to this.

I have not yet found a sponsor or buyer, but I have sent photographs to John G. Wilson and Gordon Locksley. Meanwhile, I am entertaining a proposal by the University of Illinois to place the car somewhere on its Chicago campus. Of course, I will keep you advised and will be glad to follow any suggestions you may have. Once the car is in optimum shape, we will send you a number of prints of the best photograph of the car we can produce.

May I take this opportunity to once more thank you for so generously contributing your time and genius to the Museum of Contemporary Art. It has been a good experience for all of us, and the vibrations will be felt for a long time.

With best regards, and hoping that we see each other soon, perhaps in Europe,

Cordially,

JvdM:nrr
Encl.

5 February 1970

Figure 11: Document B, from the archives of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago