For nearly forty years Wolf Vostell’s sculpture, *Concrete Traffic*, slept unmoved. The grey of the poured concrete had a camouflage effect. It concealed a 1957 Cadillac even as it blended seamlessly with the gothic architecture on the University of Chicago campus. Wolf Vostell (1932-1998) is one of the most important artists to emerge from postwar Germany. Unbeknownst to many in Chicago, since 1970 this sculpture hid in plain sight in front of the Midway Studios, on the south corner of Ingleside and 60th Street, until it was displaced by the construction of the Logan Center for the Arts. Its significance was overlooked until Christine Mehring, Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago and an expert on postwar German art, was startled to discover that the University was the steward of this rare work. It is one of only four concrete car sculptures in Vostell’s oeuvre and the only one in the United States.

A one-day workshop on June 6, 2012, organized by Mehring, was crucial in re-introducing the sculpture to Chicago. On a warm sunny day, the workshop participants—including students from both Art History and from DOVA, a conservator and two engineers—caravanned to see the sculpture, temporarily stored at Methods and Materials in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood, where it awaits conservation. What everyone recognized as the most apparent conservation issue on the sculpture’s exterior—a large concrete patch on the concrete covering the rear window—was taken both as evidence of a prior conservation mishap and as a warning on the importance of thoughtful conservation.

The monumental object seemed to magnetically draw the visitors to the sculpture, and beneath the sculpture, challenging them to discover what can and cannot be seen. Not satisfied with assessing just the exterior condition of the work, participants eagerly slid on their backs to peer under the car, making note of the condition of the whitewall tires and the rusty disrepair of the Cadillac’s transmission. Should the transmission be replaced to restore the integrity of the car, some wondered, or should it merely be preserved in its present state? The sculpture currently rests on a metal truss, which may or may not be a later addition. If it is original, then it must be preserved. But what steps should be taken for its preservation if it was indeed added after its original construction? Might there be a better way to support the sculpture? Such questions assume particular importance and poignance not just because of Vostell’s stature in postwar art, but also because of his relation to the U.S.

He was among the first postwar German artists to come to Chicago, fascinated, like many Germans of his generation, with the United States. Vostell is best known for his happenings – ephemeral performance-based events that included his audience as participants –, which he developed, in close contact with American artists Dick Higgins and Allan Kaprow. *Concrete Traffic* is what Vostell termed an *Ereignisskulptur* or “event sculpture,” the product of a happening. The event, in the case of *Concrete Traffic*, was the public act of pouring sixteen tons of concrete into a wood frame built around the car. In
this way *Concrete Traffic* was both a fluid event and a permanent concrete sculpture, nearly impossible to move.

*Concrete Traffic* is a monument to the disasters of the twentieth century, as much as it is a monument to promises of progress. Seen in this way, concrete has a dual function in the work. It preserves and monumentalizes the Cadillac, but also has a destructive effect, making the car appear as a tank, a machine of war. This two-pronged ambivalence defines *Concrete Traffic* and Vostell’s relationship to the US. The promise of mobility and prosperity in the US, epitomized by the Cadillac, attracted Vostell. But he was an ardent critic of the political events of his time, including events in the US, especially racism and the Vietnam War. Chicago’s brutal riots in Grant Park had taken place just two years before his 1970 visit.

Vostell’s happenings often explored and even created scenarios of disaster. The Cold War and division of Germany was a calamity Vostell doggedly pursued in his work. While the Cold War is often associated with the Iron Curtain, in numerous sculptures and happenings, Vostell consciously linked Germany’s division with the ubiquitous material of concrete, the material of the Berlin Wall. Concrete not only divided East Berlin from West, it also paved Hitler’s *Autobahn*, formed wartime Nazi bunkers, and was used in the reconstruction of Germany’s postwar housing stock. After WW II, some German concrete was made from recycled wartime rubble. As Vostell wrote of the material in 1982, “In our reality CONCRETE is no longer a value free material. Concrete isolates and hides, and concrete is a symbol of a PETRIFIED and hopeless condition. The concrete of the Berlin Wall weighs invisibly, but all the heavier, on all people who face this phenomenon, or who are met by disaster.”

After discovering that the University of Chicago owned one of the artist’s most important works, Mehring threw her boundless energy toward building support for the sculpture’s conservation, forging a broad alliance of administrators, scholars, artists, and graduate students. Some of the sculpture’s biggest advocates at the University of Chicago include Blair Archambeau, Associate Provost for Planning; Jessica Stockholder, Chair of the Department of Visual Arts; and Bill Brown, Karla Scherer Distinguished Service Professor in American Culture, Department of English. The goal of this alliance is not only to raise awareness about the sculpture, but also to conserve it, and to find a new and suitable site for the work. The Provost’s Office allocated an initial $40,000 to kick-start a conservation assessment. The rediscovery of this sculpture also spurred a new program, administered by Alice Kain, the new Campus Art Coordinator, to account and care for all works of art on the University of Chicago Campus, beyond those accessioned by the Smart Museum of Art.

The day-long workshop made it clear that what the concrete of Vostell’s sculpture conceals is not only a challenge to the viewer; it is also a major hurdle for conservation. While concrete extended the life of this now historic car, both the frame and the concrete it supports are in a raw state of disrepair. Changes in humidity and temperature cause the concrete to expand and contract, and over the years moisture has made its way through cracks and crevices, corroding the metal and mesh frame onto which the concrete tenously clings. Yet it is impossible to assess the frame and the car with the naked eye. According to Alice Kain, who is responsible for overseeing the sculpture’s care and upkeep, one proposed method to assess the sculpture’s internal condition is through a costly microwave radar survey. This would provide a detailed picture of what lies inside
the sculpture. Another test that could gauge the extent of the corrosion is the half-cell potential test, which would run an electric current through the steel. This test, however, is problematic, for if the frame is composed of materials other than steel, it can prompt inaccurate results. Finally, another test could potentially determine the make up of concrete, to aid in repairs and possibly fix the botched patches on the rear window.

Christian Scheidemann, who runs Contemporary Conservation Ltd. in New York City, helped lead the Vostell Workshop and a fascinating discussion of possible conservation approaches. Observations of the car’s state raised one of the central issues of conservation: is it best to preserve the current state of the car, fortifying it so it can exist for future generations to enjoy? Or, should it be completely restored, making it appear brand new? Both approaches have been taken in the care of Vostell’s other car sculptures. For instance, his car sculpture in Cologne has undergone careful conservation, but does not appear overly precious. On the other hand, a 100,000 Euro restoration project of a Berlin car sculpture gave it a glossy veneer, erasing the passage of time. Scheidemann adamantly opposes a plan that would return the car to such a brand new state, but certainly supports a plan that would conserve and fortify the sculpture against Chicago’s capricious weather. Whatever steps are taken towards caring for the sculpture, Scheidemann noted that one basic guideline underpins them all: the methods must be documented, and they must be reversible.

After members of the caravan returned from Methods and Materials to the University, they heard talks about Vostell, his use of concrete and the sculpture itself. Adrian Anagnost, PhD Candidate in Art History, explained that the University of Chicago accepted Concrete Traffic as a gift from Vostell and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Chicago, in 1970. As part of the MCA’s groundbreaking programming, it commissioned Vostell to create the sculpture. In January 1970, after acquiring a used 1957 Cadillac, Vostell built a frame of metal and mesh around the car. A wooden frame was formed around the mesh and sixteen tons of concrete were poured in. Thus, the car, a symbol of mobility, was nearly impossible to move. In June 1970, after Chicago’s heavy winter snow melted, the behemoth sculpture was hauled from downtown Chicago (a parking lot on Ontario St. between St. Clair St. and Fairbanks Ct.) to the location near Midway Studios, now the site of the Logan Center for the Arts.

Conserving the sculpture is inseparable from finding a new long-term site for it, one in accordance with the artist’s original intent. Vostell envisioned that Concrete Traffic would be sited in a parking spot, like any other car. As anyone who lives in Chicago can attest, finding a parking space is not such an easy task. Finding a permanent parking spot for a 37,500-pound sculpture is perhaps the ultimate challenge. The workshop concluded by inspecting several possible sites for Concrete Traffic, where it could be more accessible and visible to the Hyde Park community. Ideally, the sculpture should be sited on the street at a parking meter, near a steady stream of passersby. The challenge remains to find a spot that is not earmarked for future projects, is structurally sound, and can support its immense weight. Plans for its placement are still under discussion, yet the rediscovery of this sculpture has already brought overdue attention to Vostell and reinvigorated the University of Chicago’s care of the works of art on its campus.