

Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic* (1970)

Wolf Vostell

Wolf Vostell (1932-1998) was a German artist best known for happenings, video art, and installations involving televisions and automobiles. Vostell was involved Fluxus, an international movement characterized by collaborative work processes, artwork in a variety of media or 'intermedia,' and a rejection of art's preciousness in favor of anti-commercial performances, publications, multiples, ephemera, and events.

A key mode for Vostell was the happening, an art event or situation that often includes audience participation and some measure of improvisation or chance. A happening is not usually planned from start to finish, but opens onto everyday life.

Concrete Traffic, Chicago (1970)

On January 8, 1970, in a parking lot near Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), a 'happening' by German artist Wolf Vostell took place. Sponsored by the MCA, this event resulted in the artwork *Concrete Traffic*, consisting of a 1957 Cadillac encased in concrete. Though *Concrete Traffic* was initiated by the MCA as a happening, scholarship on Vostell typically classifies the work as an "Event Sculpture," which foregrounds both the process of production and the resulting physical art object.¹



Figure 1: Wolf Vostell. *Concrete Traffic*, 1970
1957 Cadillac encased in concrete, installed at Ontario and St. Clair, Chicago, IL

¹ The German term is Ereignisskulpturen. Wolf Vostell and Ulrike Rüdiger, *Vostell: Leben=Kunst=Leben: Werke 1953-1993* [Vostell: Life=Art=Life: Works 1953-1993] (Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1993), 246. Wolf Vostell, *Wolf Vostell: mon art est la résistance éternelle à la mort / my art is the eternal resistance to death* (Nîmes: Carré d'Art-Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes, 2008), 142.

Production



Figure 2: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970
Photo of production, *Chicago Sun Times* (1/17/70)



Figure 3: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970
Chicago Sun Times (1/17/70)

Donation & Move to University of Chicago (June 1970)

In June 1970, *Concrete Traffic* was moved to the campus of the University of Chicago. The University received this artwork as a gift jointly donated by Wolf Vostell and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. The work was installed outside the University's Midway Studios (on the southern side of 60th St. near Ingleside) for almost forty years, before being placed in storage in 2008, in preparation for the construction of the new Logan Arts Center.



Figure 4: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970
Installation outside Midway Studios, University of Chicago, June 1970

Placement of Vostell's Concrete Cars

Ruhender Verkehr (1969)

Concrete Traffic is one of only two Vostell works consisting of a single car encased in a concrete shell that follows the contours of the car. The earlier artwork, *Ruhender Verkehr* [Stationary Traffic], consisting of a 1964 Opel-Kapitän L, was constructed in Cologne, Germany, in 1969. It was originally located on the street at Galerie *art intermedia*, and was positioned as if it were a car parallel parked. In keeping with the intention to have the concrete car take up space normally occupied by an operational car, Vostell made sure it was associated with a parking meter.²



Figure 5: *Ruhender Verkehr* [Stationary Traffic], 1969
Opel in concrete, *art intermedia*, Cologne, Germany



Figure 6: *Ruhender Verkehr*, Cologne, 1969

² See the event's press release. *Vostell: Automobile*, 76.

Ruhender Verkehr (1969)

In 1974 and 1975, *Ruhender Verkehr* was displayed in exhibitions at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and the Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. In both cases, the car was placed on a city street or in a parking lot as if it were an operational car temporarily parked.



Figure 7: *Ruhender Verkehr* [Stationary Traffic], 1969
Installed at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris



Figure 8: *Ruhender Verkehr* [Stationary Traffic], 1969
Installed at Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

In 1986, *Ruhender Verkehr* was moved to a parking lot at Cologne Kunsthalle, and then in 1989 to the median of the busy urban thoroughfare Hohenzollernringstraße, where it remains today.



Figure 9: *Ruhender Verkehr* [Stationary Traffic], 1969
Installed on street median in Cologne, photo taken in 2007

V.O.A.EX. (1976)

V.O.A.EX./Viaje de (H)ormigon por la Alta Extremadura [Concrete Voyage around North Extremadura] is the only concrete car work to be placed in a natural setting, at the Vostell Museum in Malpartida de Cáceres, in Spain's Extremadura region. It is distinct from earlier concrete cars, since its form does not follow the car's contours, and the title refers not to the urban phenomenon of traffic but to driving around a rural region of Spain.



Figure 10: *V.O.A.EX. / Viaje de (H)ormigon por la Alta Extremadura*, 1976

2 Beton Cadillacs in Form der nackten Maja (1987)

Like the earlier Cologne and Chicago concrete cars, Vostell's 1987 work was placed in an urban setting. *2 Beton Cadillacs in Form der nackten Maja* [2 Concrete Cadillacs in the form of the Naked Maja] is located in the center of a busy traffic circle at the Rathenauplatz Berlin.



Figure 11: *2 Cadillacs in Form der nackten Maja*, 1987
Rathenauplatz Berlin

Placement of *Concrete Traffic*, Chicago (1970)

In 1970, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (MCA), was located at 237 E. Ontario St., between St. Clair St. and Fairbanks Ct. The MCA initially wanted to place *Concrete Traffic* on the sidewalk, but the City of Chicago denied permission (see archival document A). They then decided to place *Concrete Traffic* in a nearby parking lot on the corner of Ontario and St. Clair.

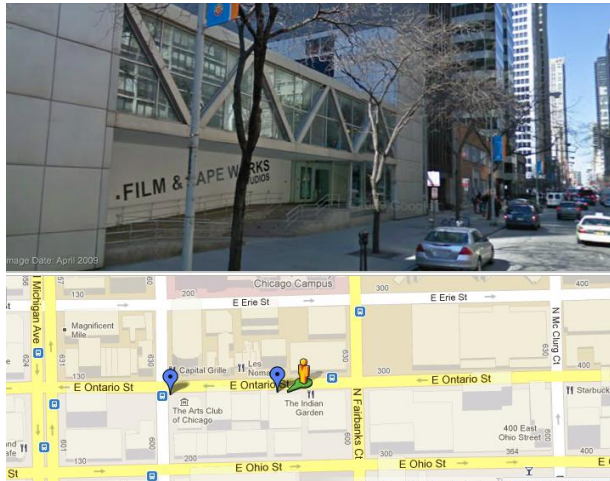


Figure 12: Ontario St., looking west from old MCA building towards St. Clair, Chicago, April 2009

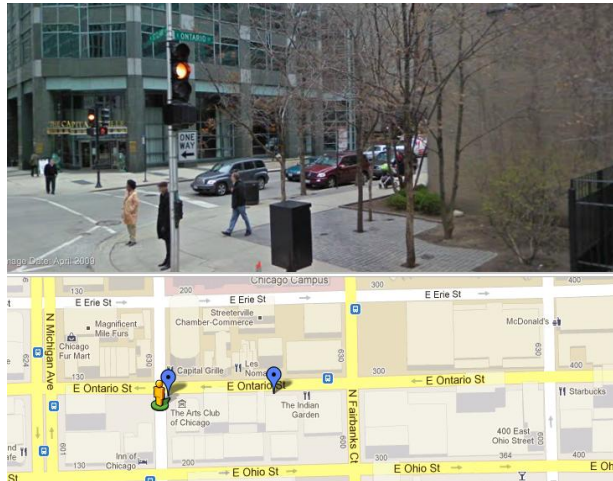


Figure 13: Original site of *Concrete Traffic*, southeast corner of Ontario & St. Clair, Chicago, April 2009



Figure 14: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970 (photograph taken June 1970)
1957 Cadillac encased in concrete, installed at Ontario and St. Clair, Chicago, IL

As with *Ruhender Verkehr*, the placement of *Concrete Traffic* in an urban setting among other, operational cars was a key aspect of installation for Vostell.³ Specifically, Vostell spoke in terms of the de-familiarization provoked by unusual modes of encountering everyday objects:

I show a second reality, a third reality and a fourth reality. I show that there are different realities... I take the TV, the same model that the public has at home, and I defamiliarize it, and this is conceivably shocking... The real disturbance is that their well-known objects, their spoon, their lipstick, their status symbols, their cars are used, and therein lies the content... It is (art)work with familiar objects that causes such disturbances in thinking, in consciousness.⁴

Concrete Traffic arrived on the campus of the University of Chicago in June 1970. It was placed parallel to the southern edge of the Midway Plaisance on the lawn of Midway Studios, which were used by the Committee on Art and Design (CAD), the precursor to the Committee on Visual Arts (COVA) and the Department of Visual Arts (DOVA). While the sculpture was not located on a street or in a parking lot, it was still quite near to a busy roadway, maintaining Vostell's desire that it be proximate to operational cars.



Figure 15: *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, installed outside Midway Studios, University of Chicago, photographed from a car driving on 60th St.

- 3 In describing the installation, Vostell wrote that, "Before this sculpture [*Concrete Traffic*] landed in the Sculpture Garden of the University of Chicago, it spent more than 3 months *parked among many other large cars* in Chicago in 1970, next to the Institute of Contemporary Art [emphasis added]." "Bevor diese Skulptur im Sculpture Garden der Chicago Universität landete, stand sie mehr als 3 Monate zwischen vielen anderen geparkten großwagen im Chicago 1970, neben dem Institut of Contemporary Art." *Vostell: Automobile*, 102.
- 4 "Ich zeige eine zweite Realität, eine dritte Realität und eine vierte Realität. Ich zeige, daß verschiedene Realitäten existieren... Ich nehme das Fernsehgerät, dasselbe Modell, das auch das Publikum zu Hause hat, und diese Modell verfremde ich, und das ist unter Umständen der Schock... Die eigentliche Störung ist, daß ihr bekanntes Objekt, ihr Löffel, ihre Lippenstifte, ihre Statussymbole, ihre Autos verwendet werden, und darin liegt der Inhalt... Es ist das Arbeit mit den bekannten Objekten, das die Störung im Nachdenken, im Bewußtsein verursacht." Vostell, 1970, quoted in *Vostell: Automobile*, 104.

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January 7, 1970

Mr. Jan Van der Marck, Director
Museum of Contemporary Art
237 E. Ontario Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611

Dear Mr. Van der Marck:

This letter confirms our recent telephone conversation in which we regretted to inform you that the Department of Streets and Sanitation would not issue a permit for the location of the sculpture upon the public walk adjacent to the Museum premises, without an order of the City Council granting such permission.

The next meeting of the City Council will be held on January 23, which is after the exhibit of said sculpture will be ended. In view of this situation, we cannot recommend to you that the sculpture be exhibited without a permit.

Should you decide, in any event, to exhibit it, the Museum might then be amenable to enforcement of City ordinances prohibiting the use of public ways without a permit.

Very truly yours,

ARVEY HODES & MANTYNBAND

By

Walter V. Lesak
Walter V. Lesak

WVL:saf

Figure 16: Document A, from the archives of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

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