







Conservation specialists work on the underside of Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, Chicago, April 5, 2016. Photo: Stephen Murphy.

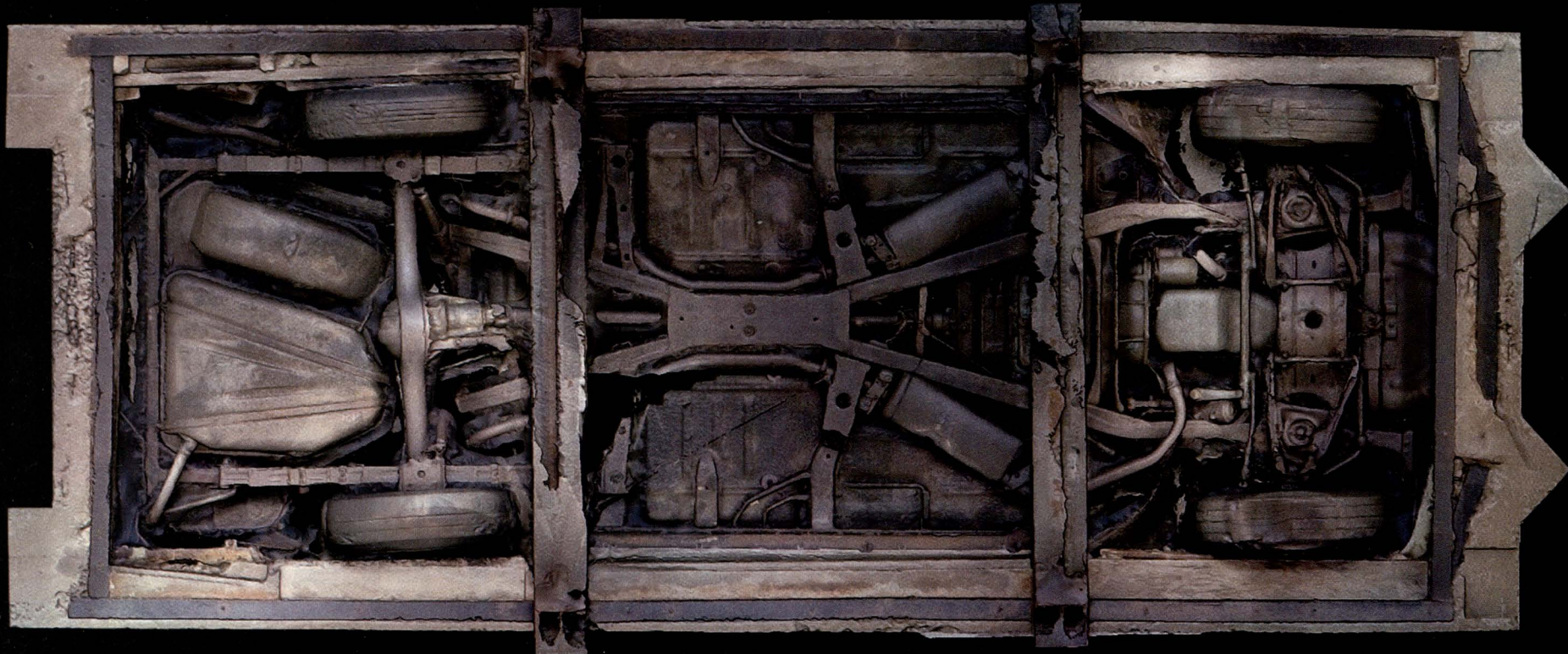
# CAR CULTURE

CHRISTINE MEHRING ON WOLF VOSTELL'S *CONCRETE TRAFFIC*

I'VE NEVER FELT such a rush of excitement as when I first saw Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, one summer day in 2011. There it was: a vintage Cadillac encased in a massive shell of concrete, sitting in an industrial wasteland on Chicago's West Side, ceding its precarious nature as art even further to dirt and moss built up along the passenger and driver sides, patches obtrusively mismatched and I-beam crutches crudely pushed underneath its chassis—irredeemable, one imagines, even to the entropic vision of Robert Smithson. And yet this was unquestionably a twin of the German Fluxus artist's *Rubender Verkehr* (Stationary Traffic), 1969, a public sculpture parked since 1989 on Hohenzollernring in downtown Cologne, which I had grown fond of during pilgrimages to Walther König's nearby bookstore. It's what I hoped I might find when, a few weeks prior, as part of a campus planning committee at the University of Chicago, I inquired about public art, and facilities staff mentioned a "concrete car" in storage that no one knew much about.

It was the discovery of a lifetime for me, as a specialist in postwar German art. But my thrill quickly turned to a sobering realization: that resurrecting Vostell's work was a responsibility I didn't know how to live up to, a devastating recognition





Above: 3-D scan of the undercarriage of Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, April 15, 2016. Photo: Anna Weiss-Pfau.

Below: Wolf Vostell, *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, 1957 Cadillac DeVille, concrete, steel. Installation view, Chicago, January 1970. Photo: David Katzive.

of my own limitations as a scholar, more at home at my desk than with a forklift. Of all the questions immediately swirling in my head, the most central was: How would I persuade anyone to help me save the work, let alone welcome it back to our campus? But if I did not take on the rescue mission, who would? It was that sense of responsibility—fueled first by equal parts aesthetic fervor, art-historical expertise, and Germanic stubbornness, and then by the power of teamwork and the resources of a great American research university—that would drive the “car,” as it came to be known, back into the urban environment it needed to become “art” again.

When it returned, it did so with a bang. On September 30, 2016, *Concrete Traffic* paraded on a flatbed truck along twenty miles of Chicago streets, accompanied by fellow vintage Caddies, a cement mixer, and VIP trolleys, traveling from Methods & Materials, an art-rigging company in Humboldt Park that had moved the sculpture from campus in 2009, stored it since, and today was moving it again to its new home at the entrance of the university’s main parking garage. The procession stopped for a lunch conversation in the plaza of the Museum of Contemporary Art, which had commissioned *Concrete Traffic* in the fall of 1969, and was greeted along the way by puzzled pedestrians and mainstream media; by Vostell’s fellow Fluxist Dick Higgins’s *Danger Music Number Seventeen*, 1962, at the Arts Club of Chicago, with performers interpreting the score “Scream!! Scream!! Scream!!”; and by an impromptu performance by School of the Art Institute students in the Loop. Once back on campus, the phalanx delivered the sculpture’s old I beams to their former location near the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, the construction of which had necessitated the work’s move from its home of thirty-nine years, and then halted at the garage, the sculpture’s chosen site.



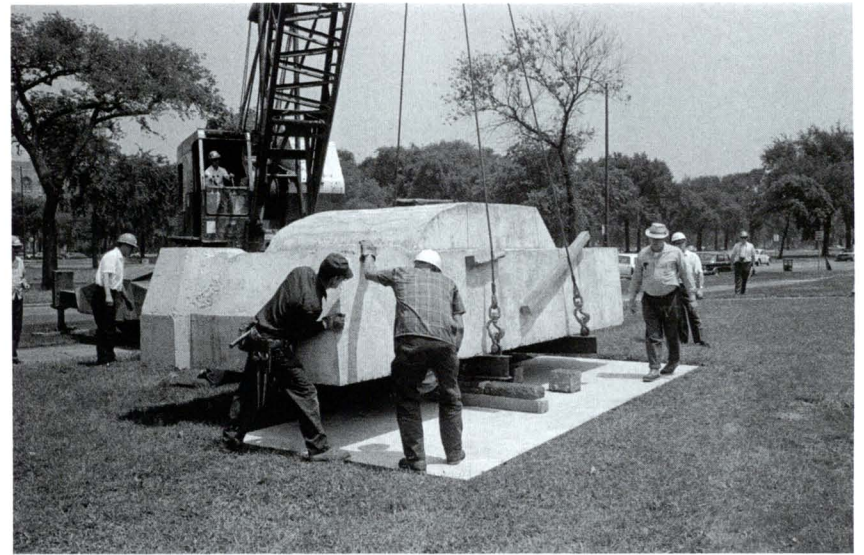




Left: Procession of Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, from storage to the University of Chicago's Campus North Parking Garage, September 30, 2016. Photo: Eddie Quinones.

Right, top: Installation of Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, in front of Midway Studios, University of Chicago, June 13, 1970. Photo: Jean-Claude Le Jeune.

Right, bottom: Procession of Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, to the University of Chicago, June 13, 1970.



The act of putting art in storage to make room for a university art center may not be without irony, and yet in hindsight it was for the best. *Concrete Traffic* was completed on January 22, 1970; half a year later, its siting on a patch of grass outside the university's Midway Studios on the southern edge of Frederick Law Olmsted's Midway Plaisance amounted to a bit of a compromise. Similar to *Ruhender Verkehr's* first home on Cologne's narrow and busy Domstraße, *Concrete Traffic* was produced, as we learned from *Artforum's* 1970 coverage of the making and moving of the sculpture, on and for a dense urban site: close to the original location of the MCA, in a gritty downtown area full of commuting and shopping passersby, in an active parking lot next to other cars and framed by traffic on Ontario and St. Clair Streets. No one, it seems, had given any thought to what would happen after the MCA's rental of the spot expired.

**VOSTELL WAS KNOWN FOR** the tireless promotion of his own art and that of his Fluxus peers, and he was eager for any foothold in the country that had stolen not only the idea of, but the market for, modern art. Yet beyond his ambitions for showing art in the US, he did not think much about its afterlife, a mind-set all too common among young artists to this day. Enter Jan van der Marck, a pioneering stateside advocate for the transatlantic Fluxus movement, who was the founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, which, kunsthalle style, was not yet a collecting institution. During a visit to Germany, he cooked up the idea for *Concrete Traffic* with Vostell. Looking for sponsors or buyers, Van der Marck tried dealers, including John Gibson, a New York-based gallerist promoting European Conceptual and body art, and local university faculty, such as Jack Burnham, the artist turned writer on art and technology who later chaired Northwestern's art department. In the end, Harold Haydon—an artist, faculty member, and the director of Midway Studios—arranged to have it placed, on June 13, 1970, in the "Sculpture Garden of the University of Chicago," as Vostell later put it.<sup>1</sup>

If one detects a hint of pride in this phrasing (using the English term *Sculpture Garden* as a proper name) and overstatement (*Concrete Traffic* actually sat outside a chain-link fence that cordoned off a space for sculptures produced inside the teaching studios), it betrays the way Vostell's artistic ambition sometimes got away from his artistic intent. A high-minded critic today might easily dismiss as artistic compromise the move from downtown parking lot to campus lawn. In fact, this displacement captured a bitter historical reality for many postwar European artists, carrying a sense of awkwardness and struggle, of impotence, even, that itself bears artistic value and art-historical meaning. And such meaning is materially inscribed in the sculpture, as our research and conservation project would reveal.

Even for someone a little skeptical (as I remain despite directing this conservation effort over the past five years) of the symbolically overloaded assemblages Vostell produced following his early Fluxus performances and until his death in 1998, *Concrete Traffic* also prompts a reconsideration of the artist's reputation in

the US as a belated German Pop and video artist, creating "dé-collages" and televisual distortions in the shadow of Robert Rauschenberg's transfers and Nam June Paik's electronic television. Indeed, while Vostell was reportedly inspired to work with concrete by Bruce Nauman's *Tape Recorder with a Tape Loop of a Scream Wrapped in a Plastic Bag and Cast into the Center of a Block of Concrete*, 1968,<sup>2</sup> the ensuing body of work—which Vostell pursued over the next four years, through 1973—is unique. His experiments with concrete are a formally stunning exploration of the signifying potentials of a material that defined the shape of the twentieth century—its everyday urban experience—like few others. *Concrete Traffic's* recent rediscovery underscores how much we still have to learn about the transformations and transpositions of neo-avant-garde strategies across vastly disparate sites and, indeed, the world.

**FROM THE OUTSET**, Vostell's well-known affiliations with Fluxus—which programmatically privileged performance over object, process over product, happenstance over control, ephemerality over permanence, and time-based "intermedia" over modernist sculpture—raised a fundamental question: Should *Concrete Traffic* be conserved? Or should it be left alone? Given the postwar rise of performance-based





Clockwise, from top left: 1957 Cadillac DeVille for Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, in used-car lot, Chicago, January 1970. Three views of concrete being poured and cast into the mold for Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, Chicago, January 16, 1970. Photos: David Katzive.

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practices and the explosion of art made from nontraditional materials, that question is frequently asked today by curators and conservators, artists and art historians. There's the sensitivity of Eva Hesse's fiberglass to light and of Matthew Barney's petroleum jelly to elevated temperatures; there's the entropic force of the Great Salt Lake transforming Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and of bugs consuming Dieter Roth's chocolate busts. In all these cases, as in *Concrete Traffic*, the decision whether or not to conserve can only be specific, informed by careful consideration of artistic intent and exact circumstances of a given work.

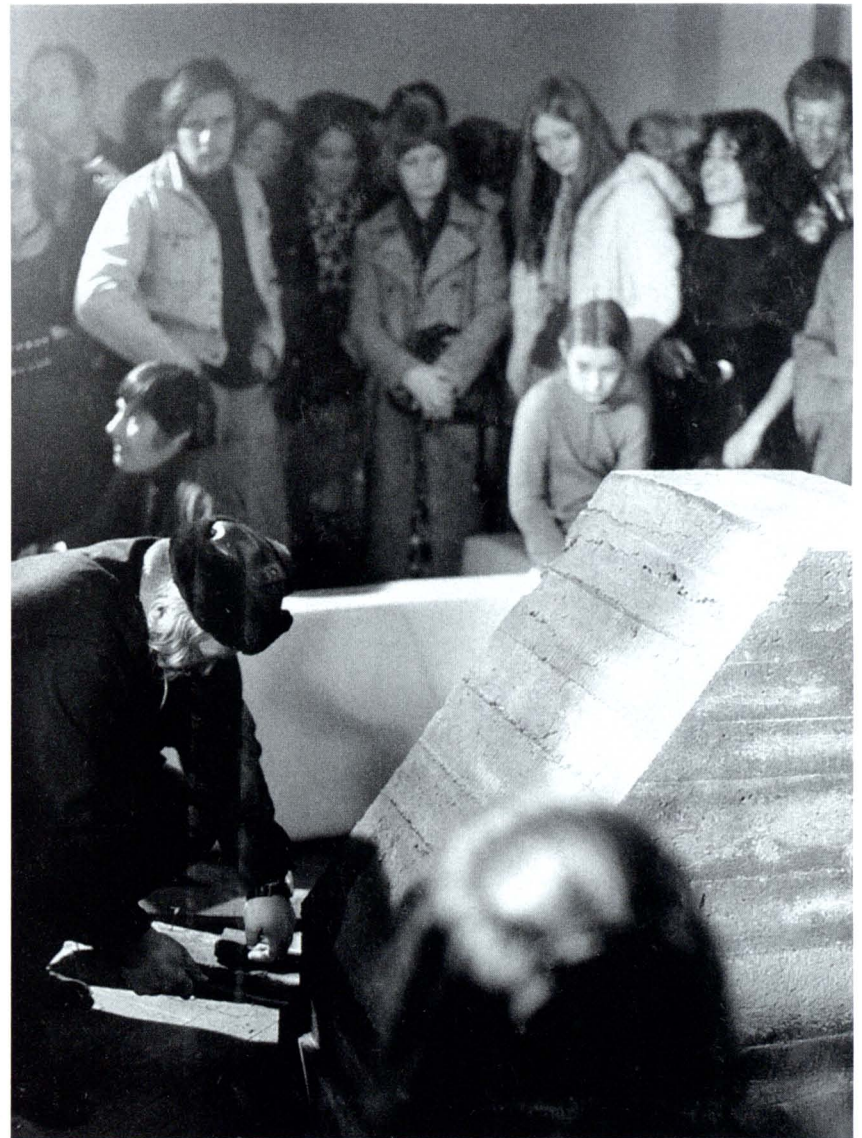
Throughout the 1960s, Vostell had orchestrated Happenings for urban spaces involving audience participation. In his 1961 *Cityrama*, the artist declared certain ruins of buildings and walls in downtown Cologne "realistic demonstrations,"<sup>3</sup> i.e., highly suggestive ready-made sets for an itinerant audience instructed by a mailer to move from one place to the next and perform certain actions, such as waiting for an accident to happen. *Ruhender Verkehr* and *Concrete Traffic* were planned as a new form of an "instant Happening," defined in the MCA's press release as distinct from the "older Happenings" in that it "isolates an object or action and, by concentrating our full attention on it, forces us to question the whys and wherefores behind it. Suddenly the man on the street is unexpectedly



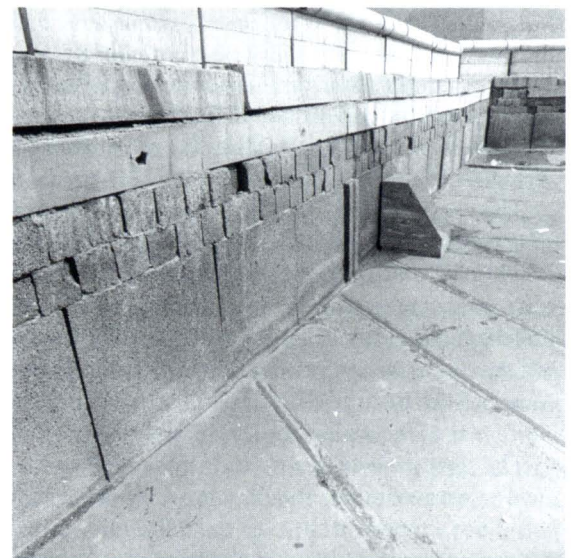


Left: Wolf Vostell, *Ruhender Verkehr* (Stationary Traffic), 1969, Opel Kapitän, concrete, steel. Installation view, Hohenzollernring, Cologne, ca. 2009.

Right: Wolf Vostell removing the mold from *Betonstuhl* (Concrete Chair), 1971, Modus furniture store, Berlin, January 29, 1971.



Right: Wolf Vostell, *Betonstuhl* (Concrete Chair), 1971, Bofinger chair BA 1171 (fiberglass-reinforced polyester resin), concrete. Installation view, Berlin Wall, 1972. Photo: Jürgen Müller-Schneck.



confronted with something ordinary that is not quite right.”<sup>4</sup> Constructing a wooden mold in situ over Vostell’s own Opel Kapitän in Cologne and over a 1957 Cadillac DeVille in Chicago, pouring concrete from a cement mixer into that formwork, letting it cure while fully wrapped in plastic, and then removing the mold: This constituted a Happening for the “man on the street,” each captured in respective documentaries that Vostell appropriated as artist’s films. In Cologne, he was able to orchestrate and fine-tune the entire process on the ground, announcing the exact dates for each step over the course of twelve days, scattering magazines inside the car and leaving its radio running, projecting over loudspeakers the sound of the artist hammering away at the wooden mold, inspecting the sculptural surface with his hands, installing a parking meter as a prop.

Following the logic of the “instant Happening,” the durational process was subsequently captured “instantly” in the “object” that was revealed. Vostell notably referred to that object as an “action sculpture,” a term first coined in the context of *Ruhender Verkehr*, and later as an “event sculpture,”<sup>5</sup> used to describe the two car-based sculptures as well as his *Betonstuhl* (Concrete Chair). The latter piece was a concretization of a ’60s design icon, the *Bofinger* chair, first a performance-as-making for René Block’s 1971 exhibition “*Bilder als Möbel—Möbel als Bilder*” (Images as Furniture—Furniture as Images) in Berlin’s Modus furniture store, followed a year later by a performance-as-display of the resulting object set against the Berlin Wall. That is to say, while the ruins featured in *Cityrama* were never meant to be preserved and were instead absorbed into the urban reconstruction of the German economic miracle, the cars and chair encased in concrete amounted to forms of “sculpture,” suggesting an afterlife as art beyond the mere artifacts of a performance. Indeed, the artist appeared invested enough in these objects that he tried to locate new homes for them. *Betonstuhl* ended up in the Berlinische Galerie, while *Ruhender Verkehr* was eventually accessioned into the collection of Cologne’s Museum Ludwig (though it remains on the street). And then there’s *Concrete Traffic*, which, it became clear, should likewise be conserved—not pristinely for eternity, but by slowing its deterioration, perhaps for another decade or two, suspending the work somewhere between event and sculpture.

**WHO, I WONDERED, COULD HELP?** No one better than New York-based conservator Christian Scheidemann, a fellow German expat whose thoughtful work on art made from nontraditional materials had long inspired my interest in the meanings of materials. Following my fan mail, Scheidemann flew out, and within minutes we were lying under 32,400 pounds of art, arguing over the deteriorating muffler. “We can do this,” he insisted. Numerous experts signed on to our motley crew over the years: art historian Lisa Zaher; conservator Amanda Trienens, who had worked on Donald Judd’s and the Met Breuer’s concrete; vintage-car expert





Wolf Vostell, *Concrete Traffic*, 1970. 1957 Cadillac DeVille, concrete, steel. Installation view, Campus North Parking Garage, University of Chicago, 2016. Photo: Michael Tropea.

Stephen Murphy; structural engineers Chris Rockey and Stephen Kelley, respectively specializing in art and historic structures; artist James O'Hara, who had fabricated the sculpture to Vostell's specifications in 1970; and fellow scholars, archivists, curators, conservators, and current and former students.

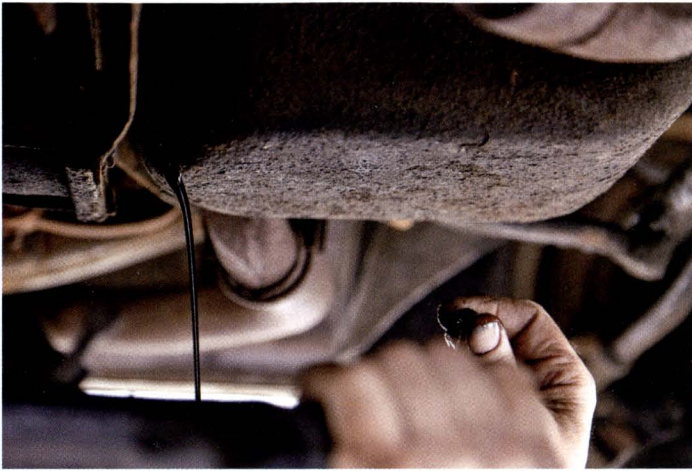
The most existentially challenging aspect of the conservation of *Concrete Traffic* concerned its literal support. Two I beams, originally used as bars with which to lift and lower the sculpture during its first move, had been cut off diagonally and left as part of the work, haphazardly supporting the sculpture. Not only was there no evidence that the artist had ever been consulted about this addition, but the beams were obtrusive, rusting, and focused the weight distribution of the concrete such that they caused spalling and a large crack that wrapped around the entire rear of the sculpture. They had to go.

The structural engineers and vintage-car specialist, along with pretty much anyone we ever talked to about the sculpture, maintained that *Concrete Traffic* could not support itself; even the finest midcentury American engineering of a 2.3-ton automobile could not prevent its collapse under the weight of 13.9 tons

of concrete. Yet no one involved in the fabrication of the sculpture recalled anything supporting the sculpture on its original site. Neither the handful of photographs of that first installation nor an entire film of the work's making revealed any conclusive evidence—merely a surrounding mess of dirt, rocks, and snow, coupled with a hulking mass so low off the ground it was impossible to see underneath.

Rather than impeding a solution, all these contradictions actually added up to one: a support that would be nearly invisible and removable. That answer also made sense for extending the life-span of this hybrid “event sculpture.” While one might devise all sorts of armatures to preserve the artifact of an event, adding anything substantive to a sculpture is art-historically suspect. Rockey, with Kelley's input, constructed a hash-mark-shaped design that grabbed the concrete at the perimeter of the sculpture but hit the ground on eight “feet” recessed underneath the car. Unfortunately, as far as the engineers were concerned, the new site we eventually settled on for *Concrete Traffic* was “about the worst possible.” The multistory parking garage was not built for cars weighing some sixteen tons.





Left: Conservation specialists drain oil from Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, Chicago, April 5, 2016. Photo: Stephen Murphy.

Right: Concrete conservator Amanda Trienens examines the surface of Wolf Vostell's *Concrete Traffic*, 1970, Chicago, November 5, 2014. Photo: Alice Kain.



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The framework's feet would have to distribute the weight evenly and meet the ground exactly in the locations of four precast concrete beams.

Why stick with this site? Returning Vostell's public art to the "man on the street" was as essential to conserving the sculpture as finding a support for it. Any artwork wants to be experienced and may be fully art only in being experienced; some part of art withers when stored, whether on sliding racks in a museum's basement or in an industrial back lot. However, unlike a large-scale sculpture that happens to be placed in a public space but would function just as well behind museum walls, *Concrete Traffic* was truly conceived as "public art," whether in its identity as object or as event. Its life as art was put on hold the moment it was put in storage in 2008. Beyond returning the sculpture into the world, the art-historical mandate was simple.

"It has to be where a real car can be!" So I informed everyone on campus who had a say in where a car cast in concrete might be parked for the foreseeable future. As if reaching agreement among an exceptionally opinionated bunch of academics weren't hard enough, finding a site where *Concrete Traffic* could be parked next to other cars and near moving cars, passed by pedestrians and bicyclists amid the hustle and bustle of urban life, was difficult on pristine neo-Gothic campus grounds undergoing an ambitious building campaign that left even the smallest parking lot spoken for. Chicago's streets, never mind daunting negotiations with the city, proved prohibitive, since snowplowing and salting would pose undue risks to both concrete shell and whitewall tires.

The parking garage, a prosaic contemporary building marking the north end of campus, seemed to yield the sculpture to those stakeholders with questions about its very identity as art. But the skeptics, too, were part of the public this artwork wanted, their questions the very ones that Fluxus had provocatively and aggressively courted in the '60s. Fluxus was still very much alive! On second thought, the garage proved perfect in many more ways. *Concrete Traffic* would

be the last in a line of parked cars, at the entrance with vehicles coming and going, open to the sidewalk, adjacent to the Smart Museum of Art and our department's art-history classes, across from a new Jeanne Gang–designed dorm housing eight hundred college students who would pass the sculpture on their way to the gym. The aesthetically unremarkable environment made for a contemporary equivalent of the grit originally surrounding the work, the building's smooth, highly refined concrete foregrounding a decidedly midcentury compound full of heavy aggregate. The fragile sculpture would have a roof to boot, and thus be shielded from the elements: no snow, no salt, no rain, no falling leaves.

This siting instantly redressed the "self-destructive impulse" of the sculpture's concrete, as Trienens put it with a mixture of the matter-of-factness, despair, and affection that makes art conservators like her tick. While the sculpture's concrete was properly reinforced with rebar, as ground-penetrating radar tests had shown, contractors had added a hefty dose of calcium chloride to the mix to promote curing in temperatures ranging from 37 to -11.9 degrees Fahrenheit during the first five days after the pour. Ongoing exposure to water would have continued the destabilizing force of the salt and accelerated rusting of the steel angle running along the perimeter of the concrete shell, placed there to hold rebar and mold in place and painstakingly cleaned by Trienens with less than an inch of space to maneuver. Cleaning the concrete of its organic growth proved comparatively easy, though what the procedure revealed was as unexpected as it was fitting for this "event sculpture": sculptural fossils of the process of the work's making, ranging from impressions of a domed head bolt and trowel marks to seams in the formwork scaffolding to chips of the wood from which that formwork was made.

Until we seized on the covered site, it seemed the three unseemly patches that had disturbed me from day one had to be redone, if only to prevent water from entering through their severe cracks. With that prospect no longer compromising their structural integrity, the future of the patches had to be negotiated on purely





Left: Wolf Vostell, *Berliner Mauer und Brandenburger Tor (Berlin Wall and Brandenburg Gate)*, 1972, concrete and pencil on print, 48 1/4 x 48 1/4 x 3 3/8".

Right: Wolf Vostell, *Ruhender Verkehr (Einbetonierung)* (Stationary Traffic [Concretization]), 1970, painted plaster on print, 29 1/2 x 32 1/2 x 3 3/8".



### Vostell granted concrete a complexity verging on contradiction: as protector and preserver, but also violator and veil.

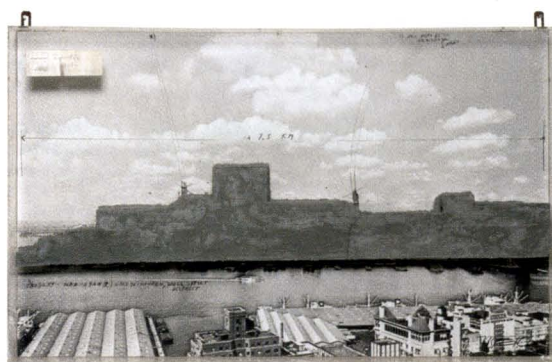
art-historical and formal terms. They looked all wrong, with their differences—dark shade, missing aggregate—catching the gaze and visually detracting from the sculptural form. And in keeping with Fluxus's embrace of chance and accident, of works that never looked like they were "fixed," Vostell himself had patched the concrete of *Ruhender Verkehr* to match, just three months prior to *Concrete Traffic*. Although he fell ill and left Chicago before the mold was removed, our research showed that the artist was informed of, and likely approved, the patching of front and rear windshields, which had caved under the weight of the pour. While we never identified who had patched the sculpture just prior to its move to the University of Chicago, O'Hara's first words on reunion with "his" sculpture a few years ago were "Those patches have to go." But the team remained intensely divided, with some reluctant to remove historic material, until an archival find brought us as close as we would ever come to proof of artistic intent. Approving patching in the conservation of *Ruhender Verkehr* in 1993, Vostell instructed that "it should . . . be the same *Betonton* [concrete shade], so no *Flecken* [stains or patches] develop."<sup>6</sup> And so Trienens proceeded to create a concrete that would meet that criterion as much as possible, incorporating stones sourced from the same McCook quarry used in 1970, artificially aged in an acid bath.

The Cadillac itself was the subject of conservation conversations, too. Unlike *Ruhender Verkehr*, for which the Opel Kapitän was driven onto a concrete baseplate to become fully encased in concrete, *Concrete Traffic* left the car's underside and half of each of its four tires exposed, raising questions about the automobile's treatment. While that exposure, as well as the revelation of decorative features like the Dagmar bumpers, had likely been O'Hara's decision (or the result of miscommunication about Vostell's instructions), Vostell embraced it after his delayed arrival in Chicago, later referring to the concrete as an "archaeological dress."<sup>7</sup>

The Cadillac, which the MCA purchased for eighty-nine dollars via a car ad, was already thirteen years old by the time it was subjected to Vostell's "mummification." "Instead of concrete one must once use the word *mummification*," the artist noted. "I mummify a condition that once was, an object that belonged to the high culture of civilization."<sup>8</sup> That condition included the "nightmare" Vostell associated with being "on the highway in a traffic jam,"<sup>9</sup> captured in the titles of *Stationary* and *Concrete Traffic*. For German youth of Vostell's generation who had come of age during reconstruction and the Cold War, Cadillacs were icons of American prosperity and expansiveness; as critical as he had been of US consumerism and the Vietnam War, Vostell would soon drive one through the streets of '70s West Berlin. The deep ambivalence encapsulated in the concretization of this object of twentieth-century industrialization would only remain readable, we decided, if Murphy treated the Cadillac not as he would for a classic car show but as a vintage car collectible—not restoring but conserving it; not replacing but stabilizing the two mufflers, with the same makeshift household wiring used before 1970; removing rust, but only the loose and flaky parts; and draining oil, coolant, and transmission fluids.

Vostell's ambivalence toward the car extended to *Concrete Traffic's* concrete and underscored the need for that concrete to be conserved (not left to decay) and to appear strong (not patched). While he saw it as an agent of mummification, the artist also associated the material with "freezing" and "hardening,"<sup>10</sup> implying inflexibility, isolation, and violence, as captured in his "law of concrete": "Concrete has not remained a value-free material in our reality. Concrete isolates and separates people, concrete hides and harbors something and eventually the material becomes a symbol of the petrified."<sup>11</sup> Concrete was ripe with meaning for Vostell, to a degree that he not only used but represented the material—in watercolor, gouache, and photography-based prints and even, it appears, by means of cement (an ingredient in concrete but lacking concrete's aggregate) and plaster (painted gray to look like concrete). Yet far from resorting to a single iconographic meaning, Vostell granted concrete a complexity verging on contradiction: protector and preserver, but also violator and veil. "Similar to the way humans have their own history," he maintained, "materials shape their own history independent of humanity's development."<sup>12</sup>





Above: Wolf Vostell, *Projekt Manhattan II (Einbetonierung)* (Project Manhattan II [Concretization]), 1970, painted plaster on print, 26 × 43 × 3 1/4".

Left: Wolf Vostell, *Überzementierung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Einbetonierung)* (Overcementing of the Federal Republic of Germany [Concretization]), 1970, painted plaster on print, 66 1/2 × 39 1/2 × 3 3/8".

Right: Two stills from Wolf Vostell's *Desastres (Disasters)*, 1972, 16 mm transferred to digital video, color, sound, 45 minutes.



THE MOST DISTINCTIVE FEATURE of postwar art is also one of the greatest blind spots of modern art history. The explosion of nontraditional materials, along with the many complex ways in which they contribute to making meaning, has been almost exclusively treated from the perspective of the readymade or collage processes of assembly. And yet the story is far more intricate, particularly for European artists on the Continent, where memories of Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism had been very much alive after 1945, where the lack of a market of galleries and collectors fostered a greater inclination to experiment and take risks, and where the postwar transformation from rubble to reconstruction and from need to excess fertilized specific material sensibilities. These artists expanded the materials used for art and made them a signature, whether Alberto Burri's plastic or Joseph Beuys's fat. Vostell's concrete is emblematic of that moment and the artistic weight imparted by such renegade materials.

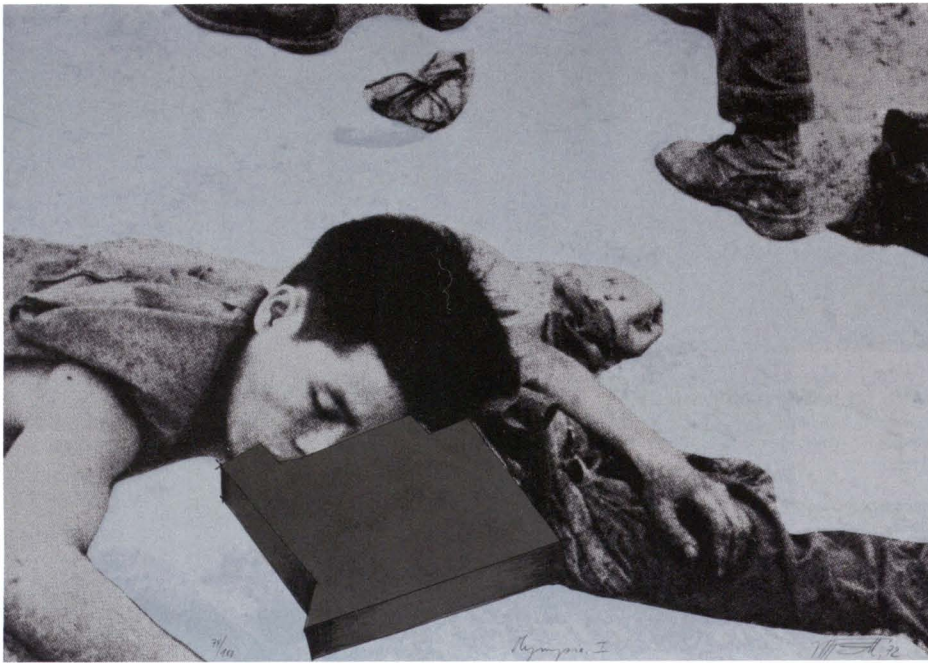
The concerns Vostell tackled through his ambivalent concrete—consumerism, power, and space—were decidedly postwar, too, and they found their way into *Ruhender Verkehr* and *Concrete Traffic* as much as into the focused work with concrete that followed in the next few years, some of it exhibited from March to April 1970 as “*Utopische Betonierungen*” (Utopian Concretizations) at Cologne's art intermedia gallery on Domstraße, where *Ruhender Verkehr* had been made half a year prior. Whether a butcher-shop counter (*Olympia Hymne*, 1972) or a book (*Betonbuch*, 1971), a *Bofinger* chair or a car, immersing an object drawn from consumer culture in concrete effectively assaults its ability to be used and exchanged—resonating as critique not least when a car is halted or, as in *Olympia Hymne*, a cash register is rendered inaccessible. Yet concretizing commodities also preserves them as poignant artifacts of their time, especially when portions of them still show, as in the Caddy's underside and tires in *Concrete Traffic*—a practice

consistent with his collages, in which he covered select objects in blown-up photographic motifs in quick cement, either by smearing the material across the images or by casting reliefs tracing the outlines of a pictured object. Fittingly, Murphy always maintained that the '57 Cadillac DeVille was preserved better under concrete than it would have been just sitting outside for nearly six decades.

Power, as related to violence, war, and protest, comes to the fore even more prominently in the 1972 objects that Vostell referred to as “*Manschetten*” (cuffs). Marrying making and function, the word refers at once to the technical term for the wooden constructions used to cast the quick cement for these objects and to the ends of sleeves or pants suggesting where and how these objects are “worn.” In Vostell's film *Desastres*, 1972, concrete cuffs are worn on bodies, for example, by a nude woman on her vagina, echoing Gustave Courbet's *L'origine du monde* (The Origin of the World), 1866; in a suite of prints titled *Olympia I–IV*, 1972, they are placed on war victims likely fallen in Vietnam. The strength and permanence associated with concrete as a building material since ancient Rome is placed in relief against the organic and vulnerable human body. Yet though violent in its inflexibility and constraint, concrete cannot shed a hint of armorlike protection. By extension, the abstracted shape of *Ruhender Verkehr* appears much like a tank, whereas *Concrete Traffic's* relationship of concrete to car is more like a protective cuff, surrounding its wearer on three sides like a bracelet. That fluctuation between positive and negative echoes in Vostell's collage-based concretizations of cars, functioning as powerful barricades on behalf of leftist causes, in a motif drawn from Paris '68, or rendering powerless the police cars, in another drawn from the 1965 Selma, Alabama, protests.

Almost the entire art intermedia exhibition focused on space, the most prominent theme in Vostell's first four years of working with concrete. The “utopian





Left: Wolf Vostell, *Olympia (I)*, 1972, screen print on cardboard, 19 3/8" x 27 1/4". From the four-part suite *Olympia I-IV*, 1972.

Right: Wolf Vostell, *Concrete Traffic (detail)*, 1970, 1957 Cadillac DeVille, concrete, steel, 5' 4 3/4" x 18' 8" x 7' 3 3/4". Photo: Molly Bauer.

Opposite page: Wolf Vostell, *Fliegende Zementwolke über Chicago (Flying Cement Cloud over Chicago) (detail)*, 1970, cement on print mounted on chipboard, 28 x 43 x 5".



concretizations" proposed models for visions of actual concretizations of entire cities (Paris, Basel, New York, and Chicago) and even an entire country (the Federal Republic of Germany), manifest in concrete cast over portions of aerial views or skylines of these cities and over the map of West Germany. The space that concerned Vostell was the postwar cityscape, with rapid urban growth obliterating itself with its own concrete on the one hand, and urban space preserved beneath a layer of concrete on the other. Concretized cities, through Vostell's eyes, meant both the self-sameness of Western urban space across the Atlantic and the emergence of culturally different reference points—urban renewal stateside and reconstruction abroad, not to mention the highly nationally specific German division literally built in concrete in the form of the Berlin Wall. The latter was quasi-tautologically concretized in Vostell's *Berliner Mauer und Brandenburger Tor*, 1972, featuring cement reliefs placed, cuff-like, over a portion of the Berlin Wall and the adjacent iconic gate. In fact, much in the spirit of the international and transatlantic collaborations of Fluxus, concrete for Vostell also meant a spatial dialogue across borders and continents; besides the implicit connection between two concrete cars set in downtown Cologne and Chicago, a cement cloud flies over Chicago and then arrives over Lake Zurich in two related works from 1970 and 1971, respectively. One does not imagine concrete clouds flying easily. Indeed, back in 1970, unlike today, that transatlantic dialogue was still marred by severe limitations, which gets to the core of Vostell's concrete.

Like all of Vostell's works in that material, *Concrete Traffic* evinces the limitations of transmission and communication through and through: The work's relocation from an urban parking spot to a university sculpture garden, along with the damage inflicted by the I-beam addition, suggests Vostell's ambitions to make it in the US were at once fulfilled and thwarted; its destabilization by high levels of calcium chloride reflects the German artist's utter unfamiliarity with the harsh climate of the American Midwest; its exposed underside was likely a result of Vostell's train from New York arriving late, and its mismatched patches were due to Vostell's leaving early after contracting pneumonia, all the while traveling between continents by ship because of a fear of flying. Inscribing a print he produced of *Concrete Traffic*, Vostell wrote, "Exhibited my pneumonia in the Eastgate

Hotel Jan 70," thereby transforming his illness into an artwork in a way that is consistent not only with Fluxus's declarations of life as art but also with how *Concrete Traffic* embodies the complexities of an emergent transatlantic art world. That is true, too, for *Ruhender Verkehr*, made in reaction to that progenitor of cultural globalism, Cologne's third fair for contemporary art. There, high-profile American galleries kept snatching precious space from offbeat German peers like art intermedia gallery, which were left to attract audiences off-site through performative stunts and provocations.

If the event sculptures *Ruhender Verkehr* and *Concrete Traffic* inaugurated a shift in Vostell's artistic focus from performances to objects, they joined his subsequent work with concrete in marking an even more profound transformation. Concrete—much like Vostell's art of the '60s—assaulted the artist's postwar surroundings, but it also mummified and preserved them. Vostell defined *Betonierung* (concretization) as a "new method of avant-garde archaeological prospection,"<sup>13</sup> offering, it appears, the mere presentation of his present as the past it will be in the future. One might say Vostell's activism became tempered, questioned, even, by a mere documentary impulse. Not coincidentally, the 1970 *Aktionen* anthology he edited, documenting transatlantic Happenings, action, and performance art since 1965, includes a double-page spread from *Life* magazine of photographs of the protests at the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention.<sup>14</sup> That declaration of actual protest as art was a gesture of both megalomania and powerlessness. Vostell's concrete is potent precisely in its international and political impotence, especially at a moment when our global connectedness and progressive pieties can no longer be taken for granted. □

*In conjunction with the conservation of Concrete Traffic, several exhibitions in Chicago explore Vostell's influence: "Fantastic Architecture: Vostell, Fluxus, and the Built Environment," curated by Jacob Proctor at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, Jan. 22–Mar. 17; "Vostell Concrete, 1969–1973," curated by Christine Mehring in collaboration with Diane Miliotes and Caroline Lillian Schopp, at the Smart Museum of Art, Jan. 17–June 11; and "Concrete Poetry, Concrete Book: Artists' Books in German-Speaking Space After 1945," curated by Caroline Lillian Schopp, at the Special Collections Research Center, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Jan. 17–Mar. 17.*

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Visit our archives at [artforum.com/inprint](http://artforum.com/inprint) for a photo-essay on the original making, procession, and placement of *Concrete Traffic* in Chicago (September 1970).

For notes, see page 242.



FLIEGENDE ZEMENTWOLKE  
UEBER CHICAGO



11.5 KM



## NOTES

1. Wolf Vostell, handwritten note reproduced in *Vostell: Das Plastische Werk, 1953–87* (Milan: Multhipla, 1987), 131.
2. As reported by Ansgar Nierhoff, who helped Vostell build *Rubender Verkehr*, in conversation with Karsten Arnold, June 30, 2005. Quoted in Arnold, “Wolf Vostell: Auf Straßen und Plätzen . . . durch die Galerien,” *Sediment*, no. 14 (October 2007): 29.
3. Alain Jouffroy, “Für den Mann von der Straße,” in *Vostell: Mauern und Abrisse (décollagen) in Köln gefunden und ausgewählt von Vostell, 1958–1961* (Milan: Galerie Schwarz, 1961), n.p.
4. “Museum of Contemporary Art Takes Concrete Stand Against Pollution,” press release, January 23, 1970, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives.
5. Wolf Vostell, *Einzelheiten: Rubender Verkehr, Aktionsplastik von Wolf Vostell. Fotodokumentation* (Cologne: art intermedia, 1970); Wolf Vostell and Ulrike Rüdiger, eds. *Wolf Vostell: Leben = Kunst = Leben; Werke 1953–1993* (Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1993), 246.
6. Wolf Vostell to Gerhard Kolberg, August 27, 1993, Museum Ludwig Archive, Cologne. This and all following translations from German by the author.
7. Vostell, handwritten note, 131.
8. Wolf Vostell in conversation with Manfred Chobot, 1992, [http://www.galerie-baecker.de/Vostell\\_texte.html](http://www.galerie-baecker.de/Vostell_texte.html), accessed May 30, 2014.
9. Wolf Vostell in Paul Karalus’s film *Vostell und Andere, oder Lippenstifte für Vietnam* (1969).
10. Inge Baecker, phone conversation with the author, June 21, 2014; Jörn Merkt, “Vostell—Chronologie 1954–1974,” in *Vostell: Retrospektive 1958–1974*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein and Nationalgalerie, 1975), 64.
11. Wolf Vostell, “Gesetz des Betons” (1980), in *Wolf Vostell: Dé-collage als Manifest—Manifest als dé-collage; Manifeste, Aktionsvorträge, Essays* (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2014), 144.
12. Wolf Vostell, “Gespräch mit Wolf Vostell,” in *Wolf Vostell: dé-collagen, Verwischungen, Schichtenbilder, Bleibilder, Objektbilder; 1955–1979*, ed. Klaus Gereon Beuckers and Hans-Edwin Friedrich, exh. cat. (Braunschweig, Germany: Kunstverein Braunschweig, 1980), 9.
13. Wolf Vostell’s inscription on the cover of a copy of his artist’s book *Vostell: Betonierungen* (Hinwil, Switzerland: Edition Howeg, 1971), reproduced in Brigitte Jacobs van Renswou, “Dokumentation,” *Sediment*, no. 14 (October 2007): 103.
14. Wolf Vostell, ed., *Aktionen: Happenings und Demonstrationen seit 1965. Eine Dokumentation* (Reinbek, Germany: Rowohlt, 1970), n.p.

## OSTERWEIL/ANGER continued from page 197

## NOTES

1. Anger has always claimed that he was seventeen at the time. Other sources, including biographer Bill Landis, suggest he may have been older. In his *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), Landis gives Anger’s birthday as February 3, 1927, which would have made the filmmaker twenty when *Fireworks* was completed.
2. Landis disputes this fact, insisting that it was Anger’s grandmother’s same-sex partner, rather than his actual grandmother, who did costumes for Hollywood. Landis, *Anger*, 7–9.
3. *Ibid.*, 11, 17.
4. Kenneth Anger in conversation with Kate Haug, *Wide Angle* 18, no. 4 (October 1996): 90.
5. Tony Rayns, “Lucifer: A Kenneth Anger Compendium,” *Cinema*, no. 4 (October 1969): 23.
6. Kenneth Anger, audio commentary, *Fireworks* (1947), from *The Films of Kenneth Anger*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Fantoma, 2007), DVD.

7. Alice L. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger: A Demonic Visionary* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2011), 31.
8. Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 38.
9. According to Scott MacDonald, *Fireworks* was shown twice at Cinema 16 in New York, in 1952 and 1953. See his *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 171, 195. Also see David E. James and Adam Hyman, eds., *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945–1980* (London: John Libbey, 2015), 132.
10. Mick Brown, “Kenneth Anger: Where the Bodies Are Buried,” *Esquire*, January 3, 2014, <http://esquire.co.uk/culture/news/a5483/kenneth-anger>. Anger also mentions this in the audio commentary for *Fireworks* on the *Films of Kenneth Anger* DVD, although he doesn’t give a year for the Coronet screening.
11. Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 38.
12. *Ibid.*, 38–40.
13. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 35.
14. Curtis Harrington, oral-history interview with Kenneth Anger and Larry Jordan, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, November 8, 2003.
15. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 8. According to Stockton, these forces work violence on the concept of childhood by imposing a fetishistic fantasy of privileged, presumably white, innocence over the actual queerness of children.
16. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 95.
17. Jaimey Fisher, “On the Ruins of Masculinity: The Figure of the Child in Italian Neorealism and the German Rubble-Film,” in *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, ed. Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 28.
18. Stockton theorizes the queer child’s propensity for growing astray, or “sideways,” rather than straight, in order to avoid achieving heteronormative benchmarks of adulthood.
19. This phrase is borrowed from Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
20. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 222.
21. Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 129.
22. Anger, audio commentary, *Fireworks*.
23. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 33.
24. Donald Vining, *A Gay Diary 1933–1946* (New York: Pepys Press, 1979), 324–25, 344–45.
25. Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, & Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
26. “Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen: Gangs Stay Off Streets After Dark,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1943, A1.
27. “People & Events: The Zoot Suit Riots of 1943,” PBS, accessed December 5, 2016, [http://pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zoot/eng\\_peopleevents/e\\_riots.html](http://pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zoot/eng_peopleevents/e_riots.html).
28. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 33–35.
29. *Ibid.*, 33.
30. Landis, *Anger*, 37. According to Landis, Anger was the victim of police entrapment in or near the camera obscura in Palisades Park.
31. Stockton, *Queer Child*, 61.
32. Tony Rayns, “Inflammable Desires,” *Sight & Sound* 19, no. 7 (July 2009): 34.
33. Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 24.

world in which the Egyptian Surrealist movement and elite culture thrived. It is quite apt, then, that it took a lead curator from Sudan (Hassan) and collaboration between the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, the American University in Cairo, and the Sharjah Art Foundation to realize this historic exhibition about the Egyptian version of Surrealism in a Cairo cultural institution.

And while it’s easy to understand why Surrealism, with its rhetoric of boundless freedom, offered Egyptians a counterargument against midcentury fascism and nationalism, I left “When Art Becomes Liberty” wondering why the country’s leading artists, decades later, still saw in Surrealism a vocabulary for rethinking representation. Perhaps, as this exhibition suggested, given Egypt’s multiple Pharaonic, Coptic, and Islamic heritages, its competing Arabic and Ottoman traditions, and its fraught French and British colonial legacies, Surrealism’s aesthetic of radically illogical juxtapositions was the natural choice for Egyptian modernists of equally radical diversity. □

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## Caption acknowledgments

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