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## Concrete Violence – Wolf Vostell’s Disasters of War

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Wolf Vostell is best known for the intermedial interactive events he staged on the streets of West Germany throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Berlin/100 Ereignisse (Berlin/100 events, 1965) exemplifies his work from the period, which he preferred to call ‘events’, ‘happenings’, ‘actions’, and ‘demonstrations’, thus blurring the boundary between art and life while affiliating artistic practice with political activism.<sup>1</sup> Berlin/100 Ereignisse involved driving around the Western sector of the city in a car and making one hundred stops: to bury a clock in the rubble of Goerlitzer train station, meet a naked woman wearing a gas mask, confront a sign prohibiting loitering with ‘der realita“t einer straÙe’ (the reality of a street) by wielding posters with current headlines as lowercase slogans – ‘weinender U.S.-soldat im vietnamkrieg!’ (crying US soldier in the Vietnam War), ‘straÙenkampf in rhodesien!’ (rioting in Rhodesia), ‘rocker mit motorra“dern!’ (bikers with motorcycles) – pour out a bag of sugar near the Berlin Wall, and perform an array of other more ordinary activities like eating and waiting, all for a ‘Zufallspublikum’ (chance public).<sup>2</sup> These ‘events’ indicate the ambivalent politics and site-specificity of Vostell’s work, which often explored the topography of post-war Germany.<sup>3</sup>

Like Joseph Beuys, Vostell was an internationally recognised German affiliate of Fluxus and was represented by Galerie Rene’ Block in West Berlin. Of the two artists, Vostell is arguably less well known. Unlike Beuys, he did not hold an official professorship in Germany, nor has his work been exhibited in an international retrospective.<sup>4</sup> Vostell’s art-historical reception has been written primarily in German and has tended to focus on action-based events like Berlin/ 100 Ereignisse and to position Vostell at the apex of an avant-garde trajectory of the politicisation of art originating in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps for this reason, and the artist’s own insistence on the vocabulary of action, that Vostell’s apparently more conventional visual material works have long remained out of sight.

This essay offers a new perspective, not only on the form of Vostell’s artistic practice, but also on its main concerns. In the same years that Vostell was exploring the

contours of artistic action, he also developed the distinctive artistic technique of ‘Betonierung’ (concreting). In several series of little-known works, Vostell used concrete to accentuate the violence of contemporary history, from the Vietnam War to consumer capitalism and climate change. Attention to Vostell’s concrete works reframes the impetus of actions like Berlin/100 Ereignisse by drawing out his long-standing preoccupation with structural violence. Taking up Francisco Goya’s artistic concern with the representation of the violence of war, Vostell’s technique of Betonierung operates in two ways to make violence ‘concrete’: by emphasising the production of structural violence and the precarity to which it gives rise, and by arresting the shock of graphic violence.

1. See Vostell’s anthologies: Wolf Vostell and Jürgen Becker (eds), *Happenings*. Fluxus. Pop art. Nouveau réalisme. Eine Dokumentation (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965); Wolf Vostell, *Vostell: Happening & Leben* (Neuweid, Berlin: Luchterhand, 1970); Wolf Vostell, *Aktionen: Happenings und Demonstrationen seit 1965* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1970).

2. For documentation of Berlin / 100 Ereignisse, see the exhibition catalogue Jürgen Merkert (ed.), *Vostell: Retrospektive 1958–1974*, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in collaboration with the Nationalgalerie Berlin Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1975), pp. 154–63, as well as a selection in the smaller related exhibition catalogue, Suzanne Page (ed.), *Vostell: Environnements / Happenings, 1958–1974* (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1974). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German into English are mine.

3. See Claudia Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall: Demarcating Culture in the Cold War Generation*

(London: Tauris, 2008) and Claudia Mesch, ‘Vostell’s Ruins: De-collage and the Mnemotechnic Space of the Postwar City’, *Art History*, vol. 23, no. 1, March 2000, pp. 88–115. Mesch reads events like Berlin / 100 Ereignisse as commemorative performances, meant to encourage remembrance of the destruction of war.

4. The 1974 retrospective in West Berlin (see footnote 2) was followed by another in 1992 which also did not travel outside of Germany. See Rolf Wedewer (ed.), *Vostell* (Bonn: Edition Braus, 1992).

5. German art historian Jürgen Schilling, Vostell’s good friend and frequent collaborator, initiated this framework. See Jürgen Schilling, *Aktionskunst: Identität von Kunst und Leben? Eine Dokumentation* (Luzern: C.J. Bucher, 1978). It has been compellingly taken up by Christoph Zeller. See in particular ‘Aktionen. Wolf Vostells Happenings’, in Christoph Zeller, *Ästhetik des*

*Authentischen: Literatur und Kunst um 1970* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 134–80. This framework is also exemplified in the artist’s exhibition history, most significantly in the recent show and catalogue, Fritz Emslander (ed.), *Das Theater ist auf der Straße: die Happenings von Wolf Vostell ¼ El*

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teatro esta´ en la calle: los Happenings de Wolf Vostell, Museo Vostell, Malpartida; and Sta¨dtisches Museum Leverkusen, Morsbroich (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2010).

6. The article ran under the headline, ‘B-52 bombardieren laotische Hochebene – Nordvietnamesen in Laos erfolgreich – US-Senatoren fordern Aufkla¨rung’, in the section

‘Zeitgeschichten unserer Zeit’, *Die Zeit*, 27 February 1970, p. 12 (this section of the newspaper was not individually authored).

7. Advertisement pictured in *Die Zeit*, 27 February 1970, p. 11.

8. On what he proposes to call the ‘society of

security’, see Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory,*

*Population: Lectures at the Coll`ege de France, 1977–*

*78*, Francois Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and

Michel Senellart (eds), (New York: Palgrave

Macmillan, 2007). See also Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society – Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).

9. See Vostell’s comments in Jo¨rn Merkert, ‘Pre-

Fluxus Vostell’, *Art and Artists*, vol. 8, no. 2, May

1973, pp. 32–7; or Wolf Vostell and Ju¨rgen Schilling, *Vostell, das plastische Werk, 1953–87* (Milano: Mult(h)ipla, 1988), p. 12.

10. ‘B-52 bombardieren laotische Hochebene’, p.12.

11. Theo Lo¨bsack, ‘Dreck, den wir atmen –Zwanzig Millionen Tonnen Giftstoffe in der Luft’, *Die Zeit*, 27 February 1970, pp. 51–2, and announced on cover.

### Vehicles of Violence

Pasted into the artist’s book *Leben gleich Kunst* (Life equals Art, 1964–1974), an archive of images, excerpts, schedules, and notes that Vostell drew upon throughout the decade, is a newsprint image of two military aircraft dropping bombs while

cruising above a blanket of clouds (Fig. 1). The image caption indicates that they are B-52s on a mission over Laos, and the surrounding text, which has been torn through, suggests a recent controversial American assault. Like many of the materials in *Leben gleich Kunst*, Vostell carefully folded the excerpt before pasting it into the book, allowing the reader to turn the image over (Fig. 2). On the other side of the B-52s, another vehicle can be seen: a car glittering in the rain, identified in the torn-through mise-en-page as ‘B-1-17’ and advertised with the words ‘comfort’ and ‘classy’. The reversible juxtaposition of the B-52 and the B-1-17 was not, I propose, just incidental for Vostell. It configures the underlying intersection of the violence of war and the violence of consumer capitalism that informs much of his work from the period and which he seeks to emphasise through his use of concrete as a material supplemental form.

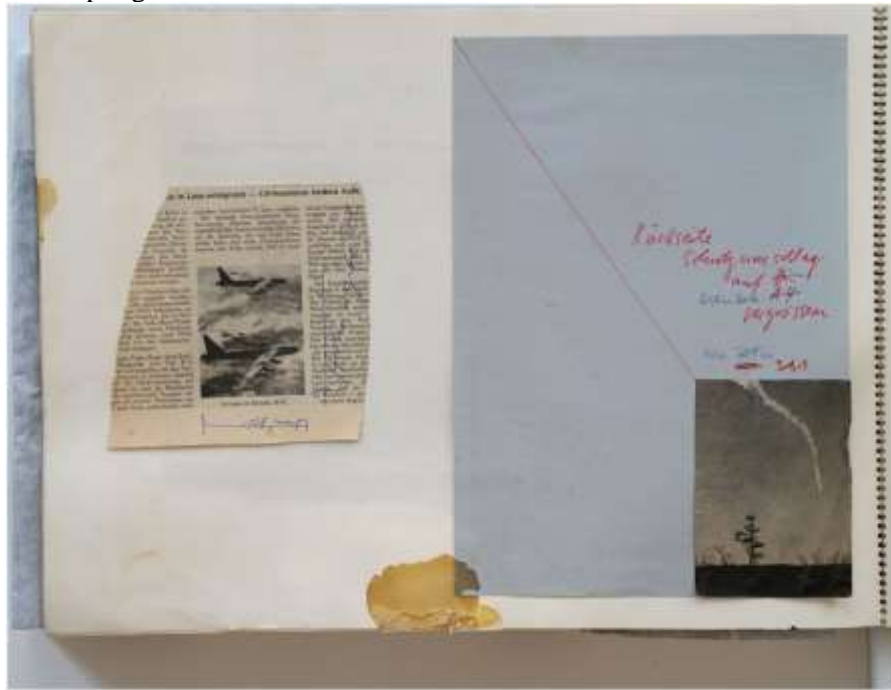
Vostell tore the image of the B-52s out of the issue of the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* published on 27 February 1970. The article it illustrates reports on the ‘dangerous stage’ the crisis in Laos had reached as American pilots in B-52s sought to hinder anticipated attacks on Vientiane by the North Vietnamese Army, which was said to have recaptured areas on the outskirts of the capital.<sup>6</sup> On the reverse of the newspaper page, ‘B-1-17’ refers to the new German Audi 100 LS ‘Sport-Komfortklasse’ edition, which is showcased for its extreme speed and especially secure brake system: ‘brake in seconds instead of seconds of terror’ touts the byline.<sup>7</sup> Epitomising the logic of security, the advertisement for the car explicitly invokes fear and a calculus of risk, promoting brand-new brakes with the implicit threat of a crash.<sup>8</sup> This logic interested Vostell, who would often remark that buying a car was equivalent to buying an accident.<sup>9</sup> And it is with the same logic of security that the article on the B-52s frames the pre-emptive airstrikes, justifying the bombings as a way ‘to put a brake on the enemy’s advance’.<sup>10</sup> By excerpting and mounting the B52s and the B-1-17 in *Leben gleich Kunst* as he does, Vostell emphasises these often-overlooked connections, insisting on the relation between the two vehicles, as well as the activities they enable – military strikes on a neutral country and high-speed joy-riding – and the violent consequences to which they are designed, accidentally or intentionally, to give rise, whether in distant lands or close to home.

The cover story of the same issue of *Die Zeit*, ‘Filth, that we breathe’, indicates a further connection.<sup>11</sup> In an issue punctuated heavily by ads for European cars, the article highlights direct, yet systematically overlooked, links between motor vehicle emissions and climate change, lung cancer, and environmental damage. It shows that the life-threatening increase of carbon monoxide and other poisonous gases in the atmosphere is generated primarily by cars and the automobile industry. Vostell’s excerpt from *Die Zeit* in *Leben gleich Kunst* foregrounds these perfidious implications and the far-reaching

hypocrisies and paradoxes that interpolate everyday life by cutting them out and inserting them into a work of art, where they can be made explicit. It was in the process of attempting to

address such violent coincidences that, I suggest, Vostell came up with his artistic technique of *Betonierung*.

Just two weeks after its publication in *Die Zeit*, the image of the B-52s appeared in Vostell's work *B 52 in Laos im Einsatz* (*B 52 in Laos on a Mission*,



Figs 1–2. Wolf Vostell, *Leben gleich Kunst* (Life equals Art), page opening, 1964–74, mixed-media spiral-bound *Objektbuch* (*Skizzenbuch*) (object-book, sketch-book) in a wooden box, 36 x 50 x 40 cm. Land NRW (North Rhine-Westphalia), on long-term loan to Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen. (Photo: Jochen Mueller/Museum Morsbroich; courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate.)

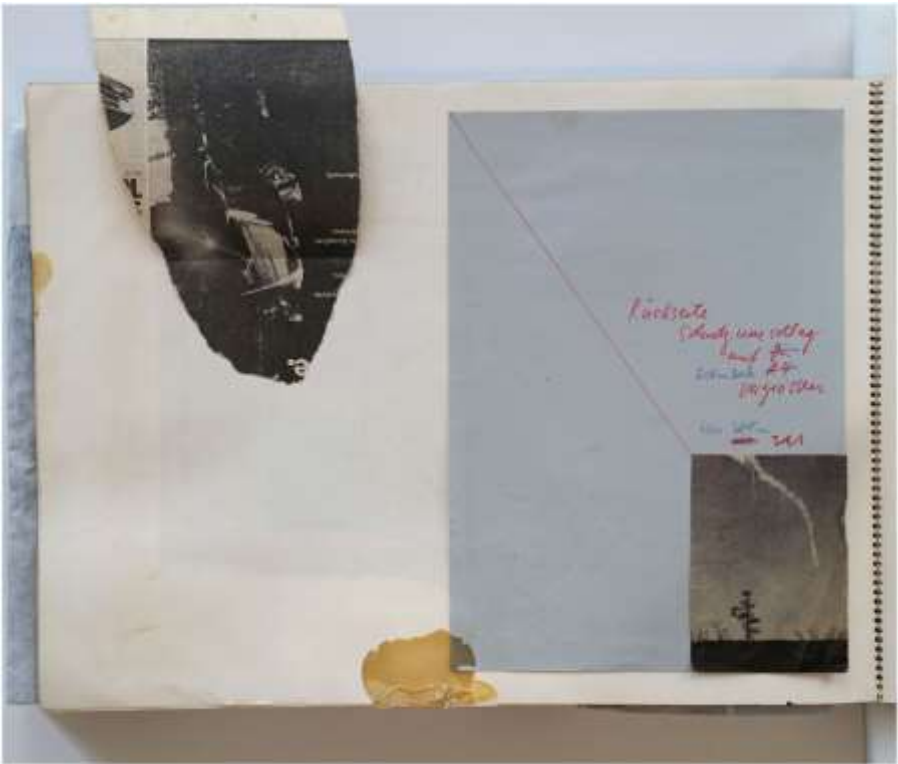


Fig. 2.

12. Until the recent exhibition *Vostell Concrete, 1969–1973* at The Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago (January 17–June 11, 2017), which I co-curated with Christine Mehring and Diane Miliotes, these works had rarely been seen since the 1970s.

1970) (Fig. 3). It was one of six image-based concrete works included in his exhibition *Utopische Betonierungen* (utopian concretings) from 14 March through 15 April 1970 at Helmut Rywelski's gallery, art intermedia, in Cologne.<sup>12</sup> The title of the work is taken directly from the image caption in the source article. As his blue pen annotations around the B-52s in *Leben gleich Kunst* indicate, Vostell cropped the surrounding text and increased the scale of the newspaper image

dramatically, translating its three-centimetre width to 108 centimetres in an enormous silver gelatin print. The bombs pixilate in the clouds, transformed into vague coagulations of ink. More than five centimetres of plaster, coated with particulate and grey acrylic to look like concrete, is carefully placed to cover the B-52 in the foreground, articulating and accentuating its intricate contours. Vostell's application of 'concrete' to the bomber in this way emphasises its physical structure, crystalising within the vague blurred photographic image a concrete material form. This concreting also shifts the narrative of the bombers' mission. It suggests a refiguration of the abstract notion of the pre-emptive,



g. 3. Wolf Vostell, *B 52 in Laos im Einsatz* (B 52 in Laos on a Mission), 1970, plaster with acrylic, graphite, and lithographic crayon on gelatin silver print on chipboard, 139 x 109 x 8.4 cm. Collection of Dr. Bernard Descamps, France. (Photo: Wolfgang Gu'nzel; courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate.)



supposedly protective strike in terms of its concrete consequence – which is to say, the decisive material outcome – of the bombing itself. The concreted bomber articulates a different perspective on the security logic for which the entire image stands. It sets into petrified relief the precarious condition of those people and environments, concealed beneath the diffuse layer of clouds, immediately and catastrophically affected by the bombs being dropped. Finally, in the concreted form of the B-52, B 52 in Laos im Einsatz captures the attrition of agency at the core of techno-scientific warfare.

Vostell further elaborates the tension between responsible, autonomous agency or agents, and automatic, anonymous deployment in the short text he inscribes on the work. It suggests that concreted American bombers fly together in formation over Laos and Vietnam, without pilots, controlled electronically, and that ‘flying concrete clouds’ would also be welcome.<sup>13</sup> Like the unpiloted concreted bombers, these concrete clouds pose an uncertain yet manifold threat. Both ironic and macabre, the use of concrete in B 52 in Laos im Einsatz investigates the paradoxes of the attribution of responsibility that had concerned Theodor Adorno when he wrote, ‘In the

abstract idea of universal wrong, all concrete responsibility is wiped out’.<sup>14</sup> Vostell’s critique of violence by means of concrete emphasises the very perplexity Adorno points to: it is neither sufficient to abstractly denounce injustice in general, nor to seek out specific responsible individuals. Such concrete individuals can no longer be easily identified insofar as they are inserted into broader structures which they can claim neither to control nor independently to resist. Two names for such structures in regular use by the end of the 1960s had already been established circa 1961: ‘The military–industrial complex’<sup>15</sup> and what Hannah Arendt called ‘the banality of evil’.<sup>16</sup>

B 52 in Laos im Einsatz unfolds the relation of the B-52 to the B-1-17, which can be seen as a point of departure for Vostell’s corpus of image-based concrete works. Concealed behind the military bomber is the consumer’s fast, noxious car. And concealed behind the direct violence of a distant war is the tacit violence effected across the globe by Western consumerism. These interrelated forms of violence are each driven by false promises of the secure and comfortable life these vehicles are supposed to ensure, at home and abroad. Vostell’s use of concrete stresses violence that is concealed, abstract, impersonal, unspectacular, and, as I will argue, structural. The technique of Betonierung makes such abstract violence tangible in a concrete way.

#### The Violence of Zeitgeschichte

At first, Vostell thought of his new concrete works in terms of an artistic technique he had previously explored, characterising them as ‘Verwischungen’ (blurrings or obliterations). In a letter written to Jan van der Marck on 14 March 1970, the eve of his Utopische Betonierungen exhibition in Cologne, Vostell described the concrete works in the show as ‘Beton-Verwischungen’ (concreteblurrings).<sup>17</sup> His own adaptation of the French word ‘effacement’ (effacement), the term ‘Verwischung’ describes a destructive technique that Vostell developed in 1959 and throughout the early 1960s to obscure and – however impotently – negate the violence of what he referred to as ‘Zeitgeschichte’ (contemporary history, or history of our time).<sup>18</sup> As a technique of representation, Verwischung is commensurate with erasure. Vostell applied corrosive photographic emulsion to found-images or full-page spreads from current magazines and newspapers, which he typically photomechanically transferred to photographic paper, enhancing the destructive effect of the emulsion. Like the

13. Vostell writes four lines in black lithographic crayon on the work: ‘Projekt B 52 für die USA in Laos & Vietnam / Einbetonierte B52 fliegen im Verband mit / ohne Pilot elektronisch gesteuert / Auch fliegende Zementwolken sind willkommen’.

14. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia – Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1951), p. 27: ‘In der abstrakten Vorstellung des universalen Unrechts geht jede konkrete Verantwortung unter’.

15. American President Dwight Eisenhower used the phrase in his farewell speech delivered 17 January 1961. See James Ledbetter, *Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military Industrial Complex* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).



16. After periodically publishing her reports on the trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann in 1961 and 1962, she collected and revised them in a book. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963).

17. Wolf Vostell, Letter to Jan van der Marck, 14 March 1970, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archives, I.1182, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

18. See Vostell's comments in an interview by Jürgen Schilling, 'Gespräch mit Wolf Vostell', in Jürgen Schilling (ed.), *Wolf Vostell: dé-collagen, Verwischungen, Schichtenbilder, Bleibilder, Objektbilder, 1955–1979* (Braunschweig: Kunstverein Braunschweig, 1980), pp. 10–14.



Fig. 4. Wolf Vostell, *Miss America*, 1968, photograph, silkscreen, and coloured varnish on canvas, 200 x 120 cm. Museum Ludwig, Cologne. (Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, rba\_c004388; courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate.)

19. For the most extensive documentation of

Vostell's *Verwischungen*, see René Block, *Wolf Vostell: Dé-collagen: 1954–69: Plakate, Verwischungen, Objekte, Happening Partituren, Happening Fall Outs, Elektronische Verwischungen, Elektronische Objekte*, Galerie Block Edition 17 (Berlin: Galerie René Block, 1969).

20. American photojournalist Edward Adam took the widely circulated execution photograph, first printed in newspapers on 2 February 1968. For a discussion of this photograph in German contexts, see Gerhard Paul, *Bilder des Krieges – Krieg der Bilder: die Visualisierung des modernen Krieges* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004), pp. 327–8. On the execution itself and the repercussions of the photograph, see Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 218–66. Vostell pasted a cut-out of the fashion advertisement used in *Miss America into Leben gleich Kunst*.

21. A Cologne clothing shop owner's use of a reproduction of *Miss America* in a window showcase in 1971 to display a 'progressive' approach to fashion realises this risk. See Hurra!?: *vom Unsinn des Krieges; sechste Jugendausstellung der Kölner Museen im Wallraf-Richartz-Museum Köln 1971–1972* (Cologne: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 1971), pp. 60, 64.

news clipping of the B-52s, the images subject to *Verwischung* present juxtapositions of news coverage of conflict, catastrophe, and war with ads for mainstream brands.<sup>19</sup>

Vostell's earliest works of *Verwischung* censoriously limit the visibility of the source images, partially shielding the viewer from them. Later works of *Verwischung*, like *Miss America* (1968) (Fig. 4), reveal more than they conceal. In this work, the technique of *Verwischung* is formalised in vibrant washes of blue paint, which evoke Pop Art palettes and Abstract Expressionist gesture. These washes of colour both highlight and suture, provocatively situating the brutally violent image of the execution of a Vietnamese Communist prisoner in Saigon in 1968 between the striding legs of a woman modelling in an American fashion advertisement.<sup>20</sup> The woman is modestly attired, a figure of international exchange. Yet Vostell's placement of the execution image between her legs introduces a grotesque militant eroticism. In the lower register, the executed prisoner's body appears twice more: once in an echo of the fashion model with his bare legs splayed limply apart, and finally in a posture of fatal collapse. Vostell's careful screen-printed over-layering of these images synchronises with his painted application of colour, which draws the printed images together again through visual alliteration. The blots of red evoke make-up as well as wounds. Through these techniques of superimposition, *Miss America* exaggerates the found juxtapositions of luxury advertisements and war photojournalism characteristic of Vostell's works from the 1960s. Nevertheless, as *Miss America* makes clear, despite the use of *Verwischung*, the direct repetition of the graphic war images candidly risks, as Vostell must have been aware, aestheticising and sexualising the violence it sets out to efface.<sup>21</sup>

Vostell's use of concrete continues the intervention in the violence of *Zeitgeschichte* with which his *Verwischungen* of the 1960s were concerned. However, in the technique that he would call 'Betonierung', Vostell ultimately discovered a more precise critical practice, one that neither reproduced – nor simply effaced – the duplicitous mode of

image production employed by the news media. As the case of B 52 in Laos im Einsatz exemplifies, the technique of Betonierung is an additive procedure whose primary effect is neither repetition nor negation, but rather a supplementary stress or emphasis generated by the application of concrete to a distinct zone of an image, an object, or a body. Indeed, the word 'Betonierung' resounds with the German noun 'Betonung', which means 'accent' or 'stress' in a linguistic or poetic sense and, simply, 'emphasis'. The artistic technique of Betonierung also works in this way, accentuating, rather than erasing or blurring, something in the image that it treats. And it achieves this emphasis, coincidentally – for the words are not etymologically related – through the addition of 'Beton' (concrete), as the material is called in German.<sup>22</sup>

With his use of Beton in his concrete works Vostell emphasises structural violence, which he seeks to make concrete, which is to say 'konkret' in the German adjectival sense.<sup>23</sup> Concrete in this sense of 'konkret' rather than 'Beton', belongs to a philosophical tradition that analyses the dialectic between the general and the singular, the theoretical and the empirical, 'the abstract' (das Abstrakte) and 'the concrete' (das Konkrete).<sup>24</sup> While he would have been

exposed to this use of 'concrete' in the thought of Adorno and other Marxist writers and activists popular in the period, Vostell would also have been familiar with such questions as they were explored in the contemporary artistic movement known as 'konkrete Poesie'.<sup>25</sup> Concrete poetry plays on the tension between what a poem looks like and how it means. Instead of devices like narration, metaphor, or allegory, concrete poetry favours a visually self-evident presentation of the structuring forms and graphemes of language. Its task, as Eugen Gomringer, one of its earliest theorists and practitioners, describes it, is to produce a 'material, concrete presence' rather than generate external reference or significance.<sup>26</sup> Concrete poetry often looks, consequently, quite abstract.<sup>27</sup>

This concrete (konkret) idiom is the one in which Vostell's concrete (Beton) speaks. By introducing emphatic concrete forms, the technique of Betonierung foregrounds latent structure rather than narrative reference. This is what makes the technique, and the material it deploys, so compelling as a means to reframe the representation of violence. What I propose to call the 'concrete violence' of Vostell's work stresses the evident yet so often obfuscated structures that interlink the violence of capitalist consumer society and technological warfare, exposing the very operations that produce this link.

#### Structural Violence

It is not by chance that the phrase 'structural violence' was established in the 1960s in the context of the Vietnam War, independence struggles in former European colonies, civil rights and women's rights movements, and burgeoning anxieties about the relation of pollution and consumer waste to disease, famine, and environmental devastation. Anticipating what would soon be called biopolitics, Johan Galtung opposed 'structural or indirect violence' to 'personal or direct violence' in 1969.<sup>28</sup> In contrast with personal violence, structural violence confounds attribution of guilt, lacking what Galtung calls 'concrete persons as actors' who can be held accountable for decisive actions.<sup>29</sup> Resistant to analysis and unspectacular in nature, structural violence is often invisible, habitual, normalised. It eludes representation and is difficult to oppose; as Galtung writes, it 'does not show'.<sup>30</sup> Instead, it blends into the habits and banality of everyday life, accommodating naturalised abstractions, such as Galtung's disturbing metaphor, 'structural violence may be seen as about as natural as the air around us'.<sup>31</sup>

No work of art better presents this anti-image of structural violence in concrete terms than Vostell's serenely ominous Betonwolke u'ber Chicago (Concrete Cloud over Chicago, 1970) (Fig. 5). Suspended in the centre of a silver gelatin print of cumulus clouds, a bulky moulded clod of cement is paradoxically weightless. Air is made 'to show' concretely – and it is gritty, filthy, sharply edged. When it was first exhibited, Vostell titled his concretecloud not Betonwolke u'ber Chicago, but rather Chicago Concrete Traffic.<sup>32</sup> The contours of the moulded cement 'cloud' distinctly reiterate the Cadillac silhouette of

Vostell's Chicago event-sculpture made earlier that year, *Concrete Traffic* (1970), thus linking cloud to car, and the air and environment to urban traffic and the automobile industry. A further indication of such coincidences, on 16 January 1970, the day the concrete for the event-sculpture *Concrete Traffic* was poured over the Cadillac car in Chicago,<sup>33</sup> a headline in the *Chicago Tribune* read, 'Filthy air blankets Chicago – Relief is due'.<sup>34</sup> The article cites a path-breaking environmental health specialist, Dr Bertram Carnow, who urged doctors to consider environmental factors like pollution when diagnosing and treating illness. Carnow also happened to treat Vostell as a patient that January, when he fell ill with pneumonia while making *Concrete Traffic*. Vostell would integrate a Wallgreens pharmacy prescription bottle bearing Carnow's name into a later work.<sup>35</sup>

Betonwolke über Chicago should be seen as an inflection of all of these incidences. It foregrounds insidious structural violence. 'The air around us'

22. The German 'Beton' is from the French 'be'ton', and not etymologically linked to 'Betonung'.

23. This duality of concrete – 'Beton' / 'konkret' – does not, as Vostell knew, exist in English, where the word 'concrete' is polysemantic, serving both nominal and adjectival meanings, as exemplified in Vostell's shrewd title for his only site-specific concrete work

based in an English-speaking country, *Concrete Traffic* (1970) in Chicago.

24. On the philosophical notion of 'theconcrete', influentially taken up by Adorno amongst others in the 1960s, see Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 'Begriff des Konkreten', in Eva Moldenhauer (ed.), *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), xviii, pp. 42–6; and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 'Wer denkt abstrakt?' in Eva Moldenhauer (ed.), *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ii, pp. 575–81.

25. Vostell himself experimented with concretepoetry, and also published it in his journal *d'e-coll/ age* (Cologne, 1962–1969). See also Christoph Zeller, 'Wolf Vostell und die experimentelle Literatur', in Anne-Rose Meyer-Eisenhut and Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek (eds), *Fluxus und/als Literatur: zum Werk Jürgen Beckers* (Munich: Edition Text & Kritik, 2014), pp. 15–34.

26. Eugen Gomringer describes *konstellationen* (constellations) as a 'materielle, konkrete anwesenheit' in Daniel Spoerri (ed.), *material 1* (Darmstadt: D. Spoerri, 1957), n.p. It was typical for concrete poets to abandon standard German capitalization.

27. See, for example, the works included in the foremost publication for concrete poetry and art, Eugen Gomringer, Dieter Roth, Marcel Wyss (eds), *Spirale* (Bern, 1953–1964). Wyss defines concrete poetry as 'der nicht abbildenden, neues, konkretes erschaffenden kunst' (the nonrepresentational art that generates the new and the concrete) and its aims in terms of 'absoluter abstraktion' (absolute abstraction), *Spirale*, vol. 3, 1953, n.p.

28. Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and PeaceResearch', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1969, pp. 167–91.

29. Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and PeaceResearch', pp. 170–1.

30. Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and PeaceResearch', p. 173.

31. Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and PeaceResearch', p. 173.

32. See the catalogue *Wolf Vostell: environments, pintura, happenings, dibujos, video de 1958 a 1978* (Barcelona: Fundació Joan Miró, 1979), pp. 57, 107.



Fig. 5. Wolf Vostell, *Betonwolke ueber Chicago* (Concrete Cloud over Chicago), 1970, cement on gelatin silver print on chipboard in a Plexiglas box, 71 x 109.1 x 12.5 cm. The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. Purchased by a donation from Amy L. Gold and funds from The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions. (Photo: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago;

courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate.)

University of Chicago (January 17–June 11, 2017).

33. On the event-sculpture *Concrete Traffic*, see Christine Mehring, 'Car Culture', *Artforum*, January 2017, pp. 164–75.

34. Casey Banas, 'Filthy air blankets Chicago –Relief is due', *Chicago Tribune*, 16 January 1970. My thanks to Lisa Zaher for calling my attention to this article.

35. See Wolf Vostell, *Zyklus Mania: Fliegen* (Cycle Mania: Flying, 1973), a mixed-media work housed in the collection of the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

36. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

37. Exceptions include three works from the early 1970s that address police violence and racial violence in the context of civil rights protests in the USA. See Mehring, 'Car Culture', p. 173;

and the exhibition *Vostell Concrete, 1969–1973*, The Smart Museum of Art,

materialises as a site where difficult-to-perceive, airborne threats lurk – from vehicle emissions to viruses to bombs. It presciently brings to mind what Rob Nixon has more recently called 'slow violence', which refers to the all but indiscernible creep of pollution and ecological damage, as well as to the deferred violence of war and the slow-motion execution of survivors, and their future children, by landmines, unexploded bombs, and the long-term effects of airborne chemical warfare like the use of napalm and Agent Orange in the Vietnam War.<sup>36</sup> Structural in nature, 'slow violence' disproportionately affects the very impoverished populations that already habitually suffer political invisibility and neglect. *Betonwolke ueber Chicago* accentuates the connections between slow structural violence and personal violence. It evokes the inscription on *B 52 in Laos im Einsatz* – which welcomes concrete clouds to join the action – and can be read as the flipside to that work, linking the personal violence of war with the banal ubiquity and indirect violence concealed in the air around us.

#### Precarity

In contrast with his *Verwischungen*, direct representations of the human body are strikingly absent from Vostell's early *Betonierungen*.<sup>37</sup> In this respect, the structural violence exposed in the early concrete works remains arguably abstract – even as works like *B 52 in Laos im Einsatz* and *Betonwolke ueber Chicago* begin to indicate the concrete

experience of violence that such structures perpetuate and conceal. Yet as Vostell was exploring the technique of *Betonierung* as a way to stress structural violence, he also began to uncover the peculiar potential of concrete to reframe graphic violence. For structural violence is not only violence that ‘does not show’, as Galtung observed, it is also the occlusion and anaesthetisation of personal violence.

In recent writings on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Judith Butler performs a related gesture in her critique of violence. Instead of investigating the missing place of the agent, as Galtung had done, Butler addresses structural violence from the perspective of embodiment, vulnerability, and what she calls ‘precariousness’: the susceptibility of all life to being ‘expunged at will or by accident’.<sup>38</sup> While all life is precarious, the differential distribution of precariousness produces the related condition of ‘precarity’, which is the experience of structural violence as what Butler calls the ‘politically induced condition of maximized precariousness’.<sup>39</sup> Deprived of forms of social and institutional support, populations in precarity are ‘differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death’.<sup>40</sup> This distinction is complicated in Butler’s account by the question of

representation, for arguably the first injury that populations in precarity suffer is structural invisibility: they may be seen, but are not recognised in any politically consequential sense. At the limit, and this is Butler’s main concern, life in precarity is not grievable.

In December of 1969, as Vostell arrived in the United States to make the event-sculpture *Concrete Traffic*, the influx of photographs of the Vietnam War showing violated human bodies reached an unprecedented extreme around the massacre at My Lai. Whereas previous photojournalism documenting the violence of the Vietnam War had focused on apparent confrontations between ‘heroic’ American soldiers or pilots and their enemies, whether ‘guerrillas’, ‘communists’, or ‘the jungle’ in which they were hiding, the victims of the My Lai massacre represented an indubitably different component of the population.<sup>41</sup> On 5 December 1969, *Life* magazine published colour photographs by war correspondent Ronald Haeberle with the report ‘The Massacre at Mylai [sic]: Exclusive Pictures, Eye Witness Accounts’. It described ‘an indisputable horror – the deliberate slaughter of old men, women, children and babies’.<sup>42</sup> The problem of the politics and ethics of representing violence, as well as the question of whom to hold accountable, was laid bare in Haeberle’s unflinching photographs of scores of unarmed civilians who were tortured, raped, and killed, their denigrated bodies heaped together in mass graves – and then shot again by the camera.<sup>43</sup> While these images sparked intensified anti-Vietnam political sentiment in Europe and the USA as well as debates in the public sphere about responsibility and war crimes, evidence and journalism,<sup>44</sup> the question remained of what to do – from ethical, legal, and artistic perspectives – with the unbearably violent images now circulating in mass culture. This question would persist in and propel Vostell’s use of concrete.

These very debates about the politics of photography and the Vietnam War also inform Butler’s approach to contemporary questions of the representation of precarity. At the end of her book *Precarious Life*, she argues, ‘it was the pictures of children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief’. For Butler, the political effect of these photographs resides not in the graphic violence they show, but rather in the way in which ‘they disrupted the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field’.<sup>45</sup> Butler is implicitly in dialogue here with Susan Sontag, who, writing throughout the times of the Vietnam War, was much more circumspect about the political potential of photography. Sontag argues that images such as Haeberle’s provoke only a ‘negative epiphany’.<sup>46</sup> At first, graphic images of violence

38. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 25.

39. Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 26.

40. Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 25.

41. See Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War” – The Media and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Gerhard Paul characterises the exceptional character of the images of the My Lai massacre in terms of a new ‘Ta”ter–Opfer–Diskurs’ (perpetrator–victim–discourse) in Paul, *Bilder des Krieges*, p. 329.

42. Hal Wingo, 'The Massacre at Mylai [sic]: Exclusive Pictures, Eye Witness Accounts', *Life*, vol. 67, no. 23, 5 December 1969, pp. 36–45, esp. p. 36. The My Lai massacre is thus a paradigmatic example of 'horrorism'. See Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
43. Haeberle recounts, 'Guys were about to shoot these people. I yelled, "Hold it," and shot my picture. As I walked away, I heard M16s open up. From the corner of my eye I saw bodies falling, but I didn't turn to look', in Wingo, 'The Massacre at Mylai [sic]', p. 36.
44. See Michael Arlen, *Living-Room War* (New York: Penguin, 1982); Hallin, 'The "Uncensored War"'; and on differences between the USA and Germany, see Paul, *Bilder des Krieges*, pp. 311–46.
45. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 150.
46. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), p. 14.
47. Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 15.
48. Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 71.
49. Butler's dialogue with Sontag in *Frames of War* does not involve the question of precarity, but rather counters Sontag's claim that photographs no longer have the power, in visual culture after the Second World War, 'to communicate the suffering of others in such a way that viewers might be prompted to alter their political assessment of war', p. 68. Sontag makes this claim most forcefully in *Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003).
50. Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 150.
51. For a thorough account of the politics of this poster, see Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 160–208.

52. A copy of Vostell's schedule for that week in New York is housed in the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (890164).

53. See Vostell, *Aktionen*, n.p.

'transfix' viewers, making the atrocity of the events represented 'more real' and shocking. Yet their mass circulation and continued viewing ultimately 'anesthetizes' the viewer, depleting the sense of realness at first evoked, and assimilating graphic violence to contemporary visual culture.<sup>47</sup> While Sontag finds graphic war photography to be politically suspect and ultimately depoliticising, Butler, by contrast, insists that all war photography has a political potential on account of the structural instability of what she calls 'framing': 'The question for war photography ... concerns not only what it shows, but also how it shows what it shows'.<sup>48</sup> This tension between Sontag and Butler illuminates the complexity of politicising precarity.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, Sontag is worried that the ubiquity of images of graphic violence in visual culture perpetuates the structures of precarity they were meant to expose. For Butler, such images are not reducible to the graphic violence they depict because there is something about them that always exceeds and so unsettles the frame: 'Despite their graphic effectivity, the images pointed somewhere else, beyond themselves, to a life and to a precariousness that they could not show'.<sup>50</sup> When Vostell turned his attention to the structural violence of precarity, his practice of concreting served to accentuate precisely this precarious remainder.

On 26 December 1969 in New York City, the Art Workers' Coalition distributed fifty thousand copies of the anti-war poster *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* (1969) to be plastered up in public spaces.<sup>51</sup> The poster adapts one of Haeberle's photographs of the My Lai massacre, massively enlarging it and excerpting a statement from a televised interview with an army private in order to demand accountability for the horror of what it represents. Vostell, en route from Cologne to Chicago, was in New York at the time and met Jean Toche, an influential member of the Art Workers' Coalition, the following day.<sup>52</sup> He would paste a black-and-white Polaroid of the Coalition's poster into his artist's book *Leben gleich Kunst* and include the poster, along with the Coalition's 'Guerrilla Art' actions, in the anthology *Aktionen: Happenings und Demonstrationen seit 1965* (Actions: happenings and demonstrations since 1965) that he published the following year.<sup>53</sup> The Coalition's inflationary militant aesthetic tactics stood, however, in stark contrast to Vostell's current artistic approach to the problem of representing violence. He would address the question of how to politicise images of violence through art not by directly representing them, but through his indirect yet emphatic artistic technique of *Betonierung*. First indicated in his *B 52 in Laos im Einsatz*, which he made just two months after the Coalition circulated its protest poster, the whole of Vostell's concrete production presents itself as a working through of the challenge of how to represent violence, without repeating it. And how to acknowledge precarity without perpetuating it.





Following his exhibition *Utopische Betonierungen* in the spring of 1970, and still dwelling on the circulation of images from the massacre at My Lai, Vostell embarked on a multifaceted concrete work dedicated to the Vietnam War, *Vietnam*

*Sinfonie oder Desastres de la Guerra* (Vietnam Symphony or Disasters of War, 1971–1972) (Figs 6–8). In contrast to his first structural concrete works, *Vietnam Sinfonie oder Desastres de la Guerra* attends to the vulnerable human body exposed in the continued dissemination of violent images. Vostell, too, extracts and repositions Haerberle's notorious photograph. Yet by looking to art history, Vostell made at this moment a notable reappraisal of how to intervene with his artistic practice in the violence and politics of contemporary history, turning to the work of Goya as precedent and paradigm.

Fig. 6. Wolf Vostell, *Vietnam Sinfonie Desastres de la Guerra – 2*, 1971, mixed-media (grasshopper, cigarettes in a transparent bag, photo collage, pencil and coloured pencil on card paper in an object box), 100 x 130 x 10 cm. Land NRW, on long-term loan at Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen. (Photo: Jochen Mueller/Museum Morsbroich; courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate.)



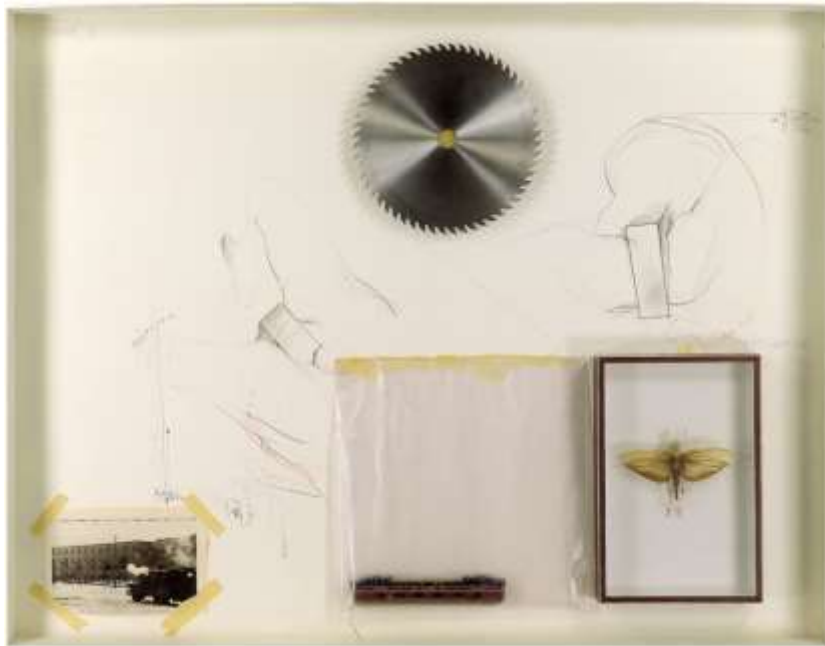


Fig. 7. Wolf Vostell, Vietnam Sinfonie Desastres de la Guerra – 6 – Si, 1971, mixed-media, 102 x 131.7 x 12.2 cm. Private Collection. (Photo: Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co KG; courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate.)



Fig. 8. Wolf Vostell, Vietnam Sinfonie Desastres de la Guerra – 8, 1972, mixed-media assemblage, 102.5 x 130 x 12 cm. Private Collection, Germany. (Photo: Kai-Annett Becker/Berlinische Galerie; courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate.)

54. Victor I. Stoichita and Anna Maria Coderch, Goya: The Last Carnival (London: Reaktion, 1999), p. 90.

55. Sontag finds in Goya's Desastres the art historical precedent for representing atrocity, specifically 'the suffering endured by a civilian population' at the hands of 'soldiers run amok'. See Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, pp. 42–3.

56. For an orientation of Goya's work, and specifically of *Desastres*, in Spanish history, see Jörg Traeger, *Goya: die Kunst der Freiheit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000), pp. 114–67; and Werner

Hofmann, *Goya: To Every Story There Belongs Another* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003). On Goya in a broader context of the representation of war, see Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 286–387.

57. Vostell in 'Wolfgang Becker: Interview mit

Wolf Vostell', in 6. Wolf Vostell: Elektronisch: Neue Galerie im Alten Kurhaus, Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule Aachen (Aachen: Neue Galerie, 1970), p. 8. He states that like Goya, 'Ich gehe an destruktiven Vorgängen und geschichtsexemplarischen Ereignissen des Lebens nicht vorbei'.

58. At the height of the USA's offensive operations over Southeast Asia, Goya's *Los Desastres de la Guerra* were reproduced in book form and exhibited repeatedly throughout Western Europe and in the USA. Of the

*Disasters of War, 1807–1814 / 1955–1975*

Goya's corpus has been described as revolving 'time and again, either directly or indirectly', around a common theme: 'that of the almost unbearably violent image, the image that, instead of attracting the spectator, drives him away'.<sup>54</sup> In particular, his series of eighty-two etchings, *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (*The Disasters of War, 1810–1820*), have been called upon in the history of art to serve as a key point of reference for the representation of secular violence and its vulgarities.<sup>55</sup> Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra* address his own *Zeitgeschichte*: the Peninsular War, in which the colonising Napoleonic army occupying

Spain faced a partisan insurgency in one of the first 'guerrilla wars'.<sup>56</sup> The etchings show rampant acts of torture, assault, vast civilian casualties, years of attrition warfare, and environmental destruction leading to mass-displacement and starvation. Viewed from the vantage point of 1970, these images must have seemed to represent Vietnam.

Goya was particularly important to Vostell, who had studied his work as a student in Paris at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, and had been travelling regularly since 1958 to Spain, where, especially in museums in Madrid, Goya's work was permanently on view. In an interview from 1970, Vostell reflects on the violent associations of his own work by invoking Goya, whose *Desastres de la Guerra*, he suggests, supply the example of how an artist can approach 'destructive incidents and the exemplary historical events of life'.<sup>57</sup> Goya's broader resonance in the 1960s and 1970s is furthermore attested to by the numerous exhibitions and reproductions of his *Desastres de la Guerra* series.<sup>58</sup> The etchings were heralded as realist, if not documentary, condemnations of war based on Goya's eyewitness experiences.<sup>59</sup> It was not, however, simply to invoke his name and the images of war with which his name was synonymous that Vostell turned to Goya. Rather, I propose, Vostell was interested in returning to Goya's central artistic and political problem: the presentation of 'almost unbearably violent' images.

Although compared frequently to war photographs,<sup>60</sup> Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra* are neither documentary nor realist in any conventional sense. They hinge, rather, on disturbances within a decidedly pictorial space that trouble viewership. While revisiting her 1970s texts on war photography, Sontag would suggest that Goya's prints – as opposed to photographs – position the viewer 'close to the horror' by eliminating 'the trappings of the spectacular' with which photography is so often bound up.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, Victor Stoichita and Anna Coderch claim, as cited above, that the defining characteristic of Goya's 'almost unbearably violent' images is how they 'drive [the viewer] away'. The disconcerting framing of distance and proximity, the sense of being brought near to or repelled by Goya's etchings has to do, I would argue, with how the representation of the graphic violence of war is achieved not through direct means, but by exhibiting instead how the very attempt to artistically represent violence does violence to the apparatus of representation.

*Los Desastres de la Guerra* generate tensions and torsions that, in ways unsettling for the viewer, defy the reality of bodies and spaces. In the one etching that Vostell selected from Goya's series for reproduction in the catalogue for *Vietnam Sinfonie oder Desastres de la Guerra*, these tensions are particularly evident (Fig. 9).<sup>62</sup> *Estragos de la Guerra* (*Ravages of War*) suggests a cramped interior in a state of pictorial disintegration. Bodies barely clothed in crumpled garments conceal the floor; limbs break at hard angles and press against loose boards; furniture levitates. Assaults on the figured bodies are represented as an assault on representational space. The collapsing walls serve

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countless examples, I will mention only two that were particularly significant to Vostell. First, Vostell's Miss America was included in the transhistorical, anti-war exhibition at the WallrafRichartz-Museum in Cologne, Hurra!?: vom Unsinn des Krieges, which ran from September 1971 through May 1972. The show positioned works by contemporary artists in a historical lineage with figures including The 'odore Ge'ricault, James Ensor, Kathe Kollwitz, Otto Dix, and Pablo Picasso, and featured Goya's Los Desastres de la Guerra. Second, Goya's complete prints were exhibited at the Stadtmuseum Oldenburg in 1972. See Goya – Druckgrafik des Oldenburger Stadtmuseums (Oldenburg: Verlag Isensee, 1972). A schedule including Vostell's travel dates for spring and summer of that year refers to 'Oldenburg / Desastres de la Guerra', indicating Vostell's plan to visit in September. The schedule is housed in the Zentralarchiv des internationalen Kunsthandels (ZADIK), Cologne, Inge Baecker Files.

59. On Goya as eyewitness, see Hofmann, Goya; and Jan Bialostocki, 'The Firing

Squad – Paul Revere to Goya: Formation of a New Pictorial Theme in America, Russia, and Spain', in Moshe Barasch and Lucy Freeman Sandler (eds) with Patricia Egan, Art the Ape of Nature: Studies in



Fig. 9. Francisco de Goya, Page from The Disasters of War (Los Desastres de la Guerra), "Los Estragos de la Guerra," 1810–20 (plates, published 1863), Intaglio plate (etching, engraving, and aquatint), Album (oblong quarto), 24.8 x 33.3 x 2.9 cm. The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. Purchase: The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions. (Photo: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago).

Honor of H. W. Janson, (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1981), pp. 549–58.

60. Fred Licht, for example, writes, ‘In many ways, Goya, in *Disasters*, resembles more the few photographic news reporters of genius and dedication of the twentieth century than he does any of his contemporaries or predecessors’, in

Fred Licht, *Goya, the Origins of Modern Temper in Art* (London: John Murray, 1980), p. 130.

61. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, pp. 44–5.

62. Vostell included Goya’s *Estragos de la Guerra* on the back inside cover of the catalogue for his exhibition, *Vostell: VS/DDLG; Vietnam Sinfonie oder Desastres de la guerra*. 14 *Objektzeichnungen als Partituren 1971/72 en homenaje a Goya* (Munich: Galerie van de Loo, 1972).

63. Stoichita and Coderch, *Goya*, p. 42.

as a perverse scaffolding for a room that threatens to fall further inwards around the central figure suspended upside-down, apparently mid-air, as though hurled into the space by an obscene force. Other bodies succumb to a pictorial gravity, slipping, like the prone woman and child in the foreground, beyond the

image frame. These upheaved, reversed, contorted, and constrained postures test the limits of realist representation, physical composition, and visual apprehension alike. The viewer is brought near to the ‘ravages’ and repelled by the image insofar as the devastation depicted is always also the devastation of realist representation.

This dialectic of distance and proximity is complemented by the juxtaposition that Stoichita and Coderch insist upon, ‘of the concrete (clothes) and the abstract (space)’.<sup>63</sup> It is the concrete, historically specific representation of banal everyday realia that paradoxically lends Goya’s prints an unfamiliarity. And while they testify to a distinct historical locality, his *Desastres de la Guerra* nonetheless unfold in an uncertain, abstract place. Clothes, weapons, walls, tools, and furnishings all figure perilously in the disjointed space of representation, the destruction of which they, too, contribute to. While lending themselves to allegorisation as depictions of ‘disasters of war’ in general, Goya’s prints exhibit the same suspicion with which he regarded the realist tradition of painting. For they resist the tendency to represent violence in universal terms. It is a matter, to cite the title of another of Goya’s etchings from the series, of *Lo mismo en otras partes*, the same elsewhere (Fig. 10). Heaped one upon the other, the decaying contours of the figures in *Lo mismo en otras partes* echo in the barren, crushed horizon line. Terse hatch-marks and scoring offer the only shelter for displaced figures whose plight is, lamentably, all too familiar to late twentieth and early twenty-first century viewers. Nonetheless, these images are concerned neither with timelessness nor universality. They insist rather on the question of historical and political locality: the same elsewhere. It is in this way that Goya’s *Desastres de la Guerra* represent violence concretely, without aestheticising or spectacularising it.

Whereas for Goya the problem was how to create an unbearably violent image, for Vostell the problem was that unbearably violent images were ubiquitous. Under the media conditions of capitalist



g. 10. Francisco de Goya, Page from *The Disasters of War* (*Los Desastres de la Guerra*), “*Le Mismo en otras partes*,” 1810–20 (plates, published 363), Intaglio plate (etching, engraving, and aquatint), Album (oblong quarto), 24.8 x 33.3 x 2.9 cm. The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions. (Photo: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago).



consumer society and techno-scientific warfare, the problem was thus not just how to represent violence, but what to do with the superfluity of images of violence already circulating in mass culture. Vostell's Vietnam Sinfonie oder Desastres de la Guerra (hereafter VS/DDLG), a series of fourteen 'Objektzeichnungen als Partituren' (object-drawings as scores), takes on this problem. It is also dedicated to Goya. And when Vostell exhibited the series in 1972 at Galerie van de Loo in Munich, a selection of Goya's Desastres de la Guerra etchings was interspersed with Vostell's work.<sup>64</sup>

Evidently following the continuing coverage of the My Lai massacre in Life magazine from Germany, Vostell tore out and saved the same image used in the Art Workers' Coalition protest poster. Haerberle's photograph had been reprinted in an article from 5 March 1971 that documented the prosecution of the only individual ever convicted of war crimes in My Lai, William Calley.<sup>65</sup> Vostell approaches this image in a different way, taping it into the upper-right corner of VS/DDLG – 2 (1971), where it is juxtaposed with bagged cigarette butts, a pinned grasshopper, and handwritten instructions for passengers on a train to participate in an action (Fig. 6).<sup>66</sup> Across the upper register of the object-drawing, three loose figural sketches of the lower half of a torso,

highlighted with soft watercolour, repeat rhythmically. While evocative of a typical posture of vulnerability that recurs throughout Goya's Desastres de la Guerra and that is particularly central to Estragos de la Guerra, Vostell's drawings clearly reiterate the limp splayed legs of a young victim of the My Lai massacre in the middle of the heap of bodies captured in Haerberle's adjacent image. By drawing out the body of this victim, Vostell seems to attempt to make the violence of the image, and the posture of precarity that it captures, even more acute.

At the same time, he translates the immediacy of photojournalistic evidence back into the artistic medium of the draughtsman and repositions it in time.<sup>67</sup> Each of the fourteen object-drawings of VS/DDLG combines pencil drawings, images excerpted from current newspapers or magazines, new electronic and medical instruments as well as age-old agrarian tools (from walkie-talkies to axes), boxed entomological specimens, often an additional organic component (potatoes, a fish, hair, earth), and handwritten annotations.<sup>68</sup> Some of the textual annotations cite titles from Goya's Desastres de la Guerra series in tight poem-like stanzas, while others are score-like instructions indicating what one art critic describes as 'planned yet not further clarified actions'.<sup>69</sup> Over time, the organic elements of the object-drawings decompose, the specimens – although preserved for perpetuity – become brittle and break, the tools and instruments become more dated or defunct, Zeitgeschichte becomes history. VS/DDLG generates a tension similar to the one in Goya's works between concrete realia, and an abstract representational space whose temporality is uncertain.

Art critic and Vostell chronicler Heinz Ohff characterised the works in the VS/DDLG series as 'brutalster Realismus' (the most brutal realism) from which no certain meaning can be derived.<sup>70</sup> This 'most brutal realism' has to do, I would suggest, with the dialectic, also in play in Goya's Desastres de la Guerra, of proximity and distance, the concrete and the abstract, which Vostell's works exhibit in order to attempt to address the structural violence of precarity. In the

64. See Vostell: VS/DDLG.

65. See 'Calley Takes the Stand', Life, vol. 70, no. 8, 5 March 1971, pp. 22–8. Calley is photographed for the article smoking on his sofa below a reindeer pelt and the concluding page of the article is an ad for Marlboro cigarettes. The association of Calley, a 'war hero' in the eyes of many Americans, with the heroic cowboy Marlboro Man is unavoidable.

66. Vostell exhibited this work with the title Vietnam-Sinfonie at the experimenta 4 in Frankfurt in 1971. See Der Frankfurter Kunstverein zur experimenta 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1971).

67. In 'Anmerkungen zu Vietnam Sinfonie / Desastres de la Guerra', Rainer Wick pointedly notes that viewers may be surprised to find the 'Happeningmann' Vostell making drawings. See Vostell: VS/DDLG, n.p.

68. For the only complete documentation of this series, see Vostell: VS/DDLG.

69. See the review by future curator Laszlo Glozer, 'Im Reiche der Heuschrecke', Münchner Kulturbericht, 23 February 1972. Press clipping in the documenta archiv, AA, d05, Mappe 57, fol. 259.

70. Heinz Ohff, 'Vom Happening zum Film',

Tagesspiegel / Feuilleton, 3 October 1972, p. 4. Press clipping in the Archivum Vostell, Museo Vostell Malpartida, Project Box: Desastres.

71. On the systematically overlooked and suppressed violence of sexual assault and rape in the Vietnam War, see Valerie Wieskamp, 'Sexual Assault and the My Lai Massacre: The Erasure of

Sexual Violence from Public Memory of the

Vietnam War', in Jennifer Good, et al. (eds),

Mythologizing the Vietnam War: Visual Culture and Mediated Memory (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), pp. 127–43. On sexual violence, sexuality, and the representation of rape in Goya, see Gerlinde Volland, *Ma'nnernmacht und Frauenopfer: Sexualita't und Gewalt bei Goya* (Berlin: Reimer, 2000).

72. Vostell wrote to Jan van der Marck on 5 February 1972, 'I'm working on 14 drawings with objects. They are scores for my documentahappening, although there are no specifications or more structured plans known from Szeemann yet'. Wolf Vostell, Letter to Jan van der Marck, 5 February 1972, Silverman Fluxus Archives, I.1182, MoMA Archives, NY.

73. Their correspondence, from Vostell to Szeemann on 22 February 1972 and Szeemann to Vostell on 3 March 1972, is housed in the documenta archiv, AA, d05, Mappe 57, fol. 260.

first five object-drawings, Vostell's figural drawings examine, reposition, and uncover, again and again, the exposed lower torso of the victim at the centre of the image of the massacre at My Lai affixed to VS/DDLG – 2. In Haerberle's image, the exposition of the genital zone is concealed by the child's collapsed hands. Vostell's drawings obsessively strip the body of this protective gesture, as though attempting to bring the viewer closer and closer, to expose more violence, or a hidden violence beyond the

frame in order to arrive at a concrete presentation. Each iteration of the drawn figure increasingly focuses on the vulnerable genital zone. Enlivened hands open a wound-like space, and with the application of red pencil marks, the drawings in VS/DDLG – 2 culminate and falter in a transformed figure that repeats throughout the series, at once ambiguously and clearly vaginal.

This vulnerable body functions throughout VS/DDLG as a body structurally exposed to violence, to sexual assault, and to death.<sup>71</sup> In representing this violence, however, Vostell's drawings risk accruing, as he surely knew, a pornographic valence. Attending to this tension, Vostell introduces with VS/DDLG – 6 – Si (1971) a different representational technique (Fig. 7). Rather than attempting to make visible the violation of the vulnerable body by means of graphic representation, he concretes it. Vostell draws an angular slab of concrete over the genital zone, labelling it 'Betonvagina' (concrete-vagina). The concrete slab traces no pre-existent contour and has no referent – neither in the original newsprint image, nor in the world commensurate with the realia in Vostell's object-drawings. This work continues Vostell's exploration of the artistic technique of *Betonierung*. In order to mediate the graphic violence of war and emphasise the structural violence of precarity, Vostell's use of concrete throughout the VS/DDLG series is, paradoxically, abstract.

In the subsequent eight object-drawings, Vostell repeatedly draws out and transforms the body at the centre of the image of the My Lai massacre, concreting its various parts – head, torso, leg, foot (Fig. 8) – and exhibiting 'concrete' in order to stress violence in the very hidden or abstract modes that so insidiously constrain and violate the human body under conditions of precarity. The concrete violence of VS/DDLG captures in the recurring image of a concreted body the graphic personal violence the Vietnam War, and the non-sensational but all the more oppressive character of the structural violence of everyday life. It is no surprise, therefore, that when he came to translate VS/DDLG into a film, this concreted body – in the form of material concrete placed on the body of a living woman – is at its centre.

Desastres, 1972

Initially, Vostell had conceived of his object-drawings as scores for a train action that would take place between Kassel and Munich, thus linking the upcoming documenta 5 with the 1972 Summer Olympics.<sup>72</sup> VS/DDLG – 6 – Si indicates the railway connections between these two cities. Ultimately, however, documenta 5 curator Harald Szeemann declined Vostell's proposal,<sup>73</sup> and it was in West Berlin with the help of Jo'rn Merkert of the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, filmmaker Helmut Wietz, and a woman credited only as 'Sarah Ormigon' (a playful pseudonym, 'hormigo'n', is the Spanish word for concrete) that Vostell would translate his 'disasters of war' series into the forty-five minute, 16mm colour film, *Desastres* (1972).

Filming took place in the late summer of 1972 at two primary sites in the American sector of West Berlin, as images of the refugee crisis

in India following the Bangladesh Liberation War, apartheid violence in South and South West Africa, and the arrests of affiliates of the West-German Red Army Faction circulated in the news.<sup>74</sup> Wietz shot most of the footage in the vicinity of the Berlin Wall, which plays both a specific and a multivalent role in the film. As a geopolitical and architectural locus of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall functions as a perplexing readymade concrete form in Desastres. It appears in the film as a concreting of division in its own right and as a trenchant reminder of the wider significance of concrete as ‘the medium of the Cold War’.<sup>75</sup> The material was used extensively in military contexts – bunkers, missile silos, aircraft hangars, fallout shelters – but also increasingly in the bulky high-rise apartment blocks emblematic of the period not only in the Soviet Union and in East Berlin, but also throughout Western Europe in subsidised precast concrete structures. By 1970, the association of concrete with the new ‘modern’ architecture of the interwar years had lapsed, at least from the perspective of the West, into a new form of architectural brutalism.<sup>76</sup> Beyond its immediate geopolitical significance, the Berlin Wall stood for these material and political transformations in the cultural legibility of concrete.

In Vostell’s *Desastres*, the Berlin Wall stands for itself, which is to say, for the

divisions it articulates in the city of Berlin and more generally in Germany. Yet, framed as it is in *Desastres*, the Berlin Wall figures, in its very ‘concreting’, for the structural violence that differentiates and divides people even, or especially, where boundaries are invisible. Wietz’s footage from around the Berlin Wall captures everyday movements as well as the system of weaponised surveillance encompassing them. Guards train dogs, eyes peep through the embrasure of a watchtower, civilians meander near a Western boundary and look over the wall to the East from viewing platforms. The film itself works by means of a series of cuts and repetitions of this footage, to produce coincidences and overlaps that highlight the interrelationship of explicit state violence with the indirect violence of consumer capitalism, much like the coincidences Vostell had been tracing in his artist’s book *Leben gleich Kunst*. Still images of newspaper clippings showing victims of violence ranging from car crashes to allied bombings, from the Vietnam War to domestic terror organisations, persistently interrupt the sequence of moving images drawn from Wietz’s footage, making the Berlin Wall the material but also pictorial site of violent separations close to home, and in distant countries.

At the first filming site for *Desastres*, in Kreuzberg near Luckauerstraße, Vostell provocatively placed his work *Berliner Stuhl* (Berlin chair, 1971), a concreted Bofinger chair, directly against the Berlin Wall for twelve hours on 20 July 1972 (Fig. 11). At the second site, in the main marshalling yard of the Deutsche Bundesbahn station at Halensee, Merkert helped Vostell organise the temporary placement of a massive concrete ‘Manschette’ (cuff) over a train-car (Fig. 12).<sup>77</sup> While the concreted chair suggests the pervasive structural violence in everyday domestic life to which mass production and consumerism give rise, the Betonierung of the train-car evokes violent associations of the deportation and mass genocide of victims of Nazism in Germany. While both of these concretings near the Berlin Wall call attention to the immediate boundaries dividing post-war Germany, the train-car in Halensee also served as an interior, an ‘abstract space’ in which historically-specific bodies and everyday realia become uncannily concrete.

In *Desastres*, it is here, within the cramped space of the train cabin, that the figure at the centre of the film, through and against which divisions encapsulated in the Berlin Wall are framed, appears: a woman whose naked body is stressed and accentuated by angular concrete cuffs. As such, the body of the woman presents the coincidence of two particular and historically-localised

74. Vostell collected news clippings in his artist’s book *Leben gleich Kunst* and in the series *VS/DDLG*. In *VS/DDLG – 12 – Los* (1972) he places a full opening from an issue of *Life* magazine from 4 February 1972 showing white police officers with leashed German Shepherd dogs intimidating Black protesters in then Gwelo, then Rhodesia.

75. Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (London: Reaktion, 2012), p. 157, italics original.



76. Forty, *Concrete and Culture*, pp. 149–64. On the history of the use of concrete in architecture more broadly, see Peter Collins, *Concrete: The Vision of a New Architecture* (Montreal: McGillQueens University Press, 2004).

77. The removable cuff was constructed of wooden scaffolding and foam, with a thin layer of concrete as veneer. Vostell gives the following material description: ‘Lappen, Gips, Leisten, Sperrholz, Styropor’ (cloth, plaster, scaffolding, plywood, Styrofoam). Handwritten document in the Archivo Vostell, Museo Vostell Malpartida, Project Box: Desastres.



Figs 11–17. Wolf Vostell, *Desastres*, 1972, 16 mm film. (Film: Helmut Wietz; courtesy of The Wolf Vostell Estate.)



Fig. 12.

figures in Vostell's work: 'Miss America', the beautiful woman beloved by consumer capitalist culture, and the prostrate civilian victim of the

My Lai massacre. In the film, the woman is first encountered with a heavy concrete

78. Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 128. slab pressing into her belly and around her genital flesh (Fig. 13), the embodiment of Vostell's drawing 'Betonvagina' in VS/DDLG – 6 – Si. As the filmic sequences repeat and unfold, various body-part concretings – face, arm, thigh (Figs 14 and 15) – are superimposed with the footage from the Berlin Wall, and with the still images of disasters documented in the news. Filmic superimposition serves to draw out incidences and locate the embeddedness of the concreted body within both local and distant structures. A frame of the concrete-cuff placed on the woman's genital zone is overlaid with a frame of a panting German Shepherd dog, and again with a frame of the watchtower overlooking the Berlin Wall (Figs 16 and 17). In its carefully composed sequences, *Desastres* presents a political anatomy, emphasising the mechanisms that differentially manipulate precariousness, the 'permeability that traverses all corporeal life',<sup>78</sup> in order to demonstrate how the political condition of precarity is produced in and through image making.

The concrete cuffs, most striking as the woman's body inhales against their evident weight, extend and delimit the body's contingency. They appear unfamiliar, at once threatening and protective, yet neither are they clearly instruments of torture nor defence or adornment. In contrast with the familiar image of the Berlin Wall and the excerpts of contemporary *Zeitgeschichte*, the concrete cuffs are split from any site of reference. They articulate a mere 'material, concrete presence', to recall Eugen Gomringer's description of concrete poetry, and appear as nothing other than disturbingly abstract concrete forms, bringing concrete violence into view.

Fig. 13.



Fig. 14.

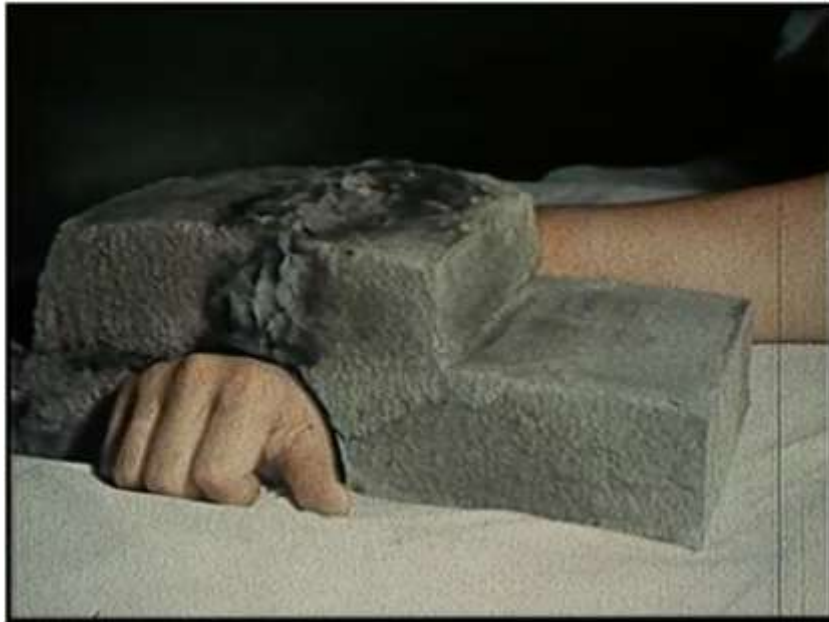


Fig. 15.

Fig. 16.



Fig. 17.

79. See Lucie Schauer, 'Unter  
ha'mmerndem  
Herzschlag: Wolf Vostells Film  
"Desastres" zur  
Ero'ffnung der Berliner Videothek', *Die  
Welt*, 5  
October 1972, p. 22. Press clipping in  
the Archivo Vostell, Museo Vostell  
Malpartida, Project Box: Desastres.

When first screened at the  
inauguration of the Neuer  
Berliner Kunstverein  
Videothek on 1 October 1972,  
contemporary viewers  
described *Desastres* as tedious  
and too long, referring to the  
lulling repetition of motifs,  
wide camera angles, and slow  
camera movements.<sup>79</sup> Yet  
Vostell's deliberate, unhurried  
structuring of frames in  
*Desastres* inflects the crucial  
temporal dimension that  
underlies the concrete  
violence stressed by his  
artistic technique of  
*Betonierung*. The film  
articulates the slow pace and

difficult artistic rendering of structural violence and precarity. Even the  
soundtrack, which is composed of the constant, pulsing throb of a heart  
beating, the anxious bleeping of an EEG, and punctuated by erratic  
screams, insists on this slow pace. *Desastres* supplies Vostell's  
technique of concreting with its temporal key and attests to the problem  
of concrete violence in his work more widely. For any critique of  
violence risks becoming implicated in the violence it would delimit.  
This, however, is the very ambivalence inherent in the problem of the  
'concrete' that Vostell so painstakingly explores.

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