

WOLF VOSTELL DESTRUCTION IS LIFE

curated by Davide di Maggio
in cooperation with the Wolf Vostell Estate

25 April - 23 July 2022

CARDI GALLERY

LONDON - MILAN

22 Grafton Street, London W1S 4EX
(Open Monday - Friday 10am - 6pm & Saturday 11am - 6pm)



Wolf Vostell, The dead man who is thirsty, 1978; Camera, bird, acrylic, coal on canvas; 190 x 290 x 10 cm

“The great German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno stated that after Auschwitz, art was no longer possible. Instead, I believe art is absolutely necessary, precisely because of Auschwitz” (Wolf Vostell, 1990).

Cardi Gallery is proud to present its first retrospective dedicated to the work of Wolf Vostell (Leverkusen, 1932 - Berlin, 1998). German by birth, the artist was deeply influenced by his native culture and several other historical European ones, particularly those of Spain and Italy. Shaping his practice through an honest, uncontaminated cultural fusion, they contributed to making him a key figure in the development of the artistic discourse across Europe over the second half of the Twentieth century.

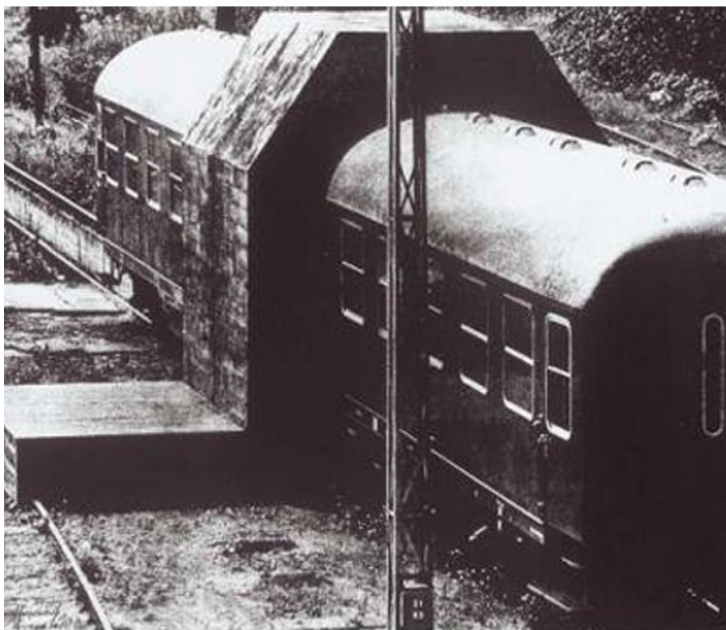
One of the founders of Fluxus, Vostell, was an eclectic pioneer engaged with a variety of media. He was among the first artists to adopt video and installation as essential linguistic tools in his practice and the first to include a television within an artwork in 1958. Through a selection of videos, paintings, sculptures and installations spanning from 1967 to 1998, the exhibition *Wolf Vostell | Destruction is Life* takes the viewer on a journey unfolding over three floors of the Mayfair townhouse space, examining some of the many facets underpinning Vostell's oeuvre, always with humanity at the centre. Moving beyond the Fluxus attitude of considering life as a work of art, the artist asserted that "every man is a work of art" and how by discovering one's inner life, one can be a work of art.



Wolf Vostell, *Jesus with TV heart*, 1995;

Photo, acrylic on wood, with TV; 75 x 60 x 30 cm

From early installations such as *Radar Alarm F*, 1969, where a racing bike sports a bag full of alarms and a functioning TV set on its back rack, to his final work *Ritz*, 1998, a wall-based mixed media piece featuring a mini-TV embedded in a shop window dummy wearing female underwear, the television features heavily throughout Vostell's practice. At times, it is a technology apparatus displaying video art, the documentation of performances, or simply interference signals. In others, a sculptural element stripped of its function. When on, the images it transmits are ephemeral, momentaneous impressions fixed in the absurdity of time, highlighting a stark, unexpected contrast against the stillness of their surroundings.



Wolf Vostell, *Desastres*, 1972; The train car cuffed with concrete in Halensee, Germany featured in Vostell's film *Desastres*, 1972

Crude still images, often depicting trauma, death, and war horrors, populate Vostell's practice. From gasmask-clad figures (*The dead man who is thirsty*, 1978 and *Archai*, 1981) to fighter planes fading in and out of sight amid unescapably piercing sound (*Starfighters*, 1967), to a US Army dinghy laden with casts of body parts (*Kafka's Boat*, 1990), advancing tanks (*Le Choc*, 1990). Scenes of war also populate the *House of Deaf*, 1977, a large environment the artist created for *documenta 6*, a

model of which is included in the exhibition. Consisting of a black-tiled indoor swimming pool surrounded by fourteen large scale panels, each depicting a different scene from the Vietnam war and each with an embedded monitor playing another TV channel, *The House of Deaf* is one of several homages by Vostell to Spanish master Francisco Goya.

The tension between the West and the Eastern Block was another recurring motif. Between 1989 and 1998, Vostell produced over fifty *Fall of the Berlin Wall* works commemorating the historical event. The current war in Ukraine - the heart of geographical Europe - pushes us to reopen a problematic chapter of this history that continues spreading fear and insecurity into the fabric of the present. There is no certainty that even a peace process could reap a stable resolution. Vostell, a political activist and an artist, spoke of "Peace as the primary work of art", a concept actualised only through culture and art as the only forces capable of generating real peace rather than control, violence, or death. For the German artist, art was first and foremost ethical, a moral act rather than an aesthetic exercise.

Vostell saw destruction as the most potent aspect of change and, in his *décollages*, found a signifier for the destructive process of life and its contradictions. Through their characteristic interplay and juxtaposition of often dissonant items and images, interwoven in intricate webs of transcultural, transnational and multidisciplinary connections, often crude yet somewhat absurd and humorous, his works are constantly confronting and unsettling. They force the audience back to a disturbing reality, with all its disorienting fragments, challenging them to reflect critically on its intricacies and their relationship with it. Imbued with memory, they aim not to entertain, forget or distract as that could lead to the rise of other conflict and intolerance.

Wolf Vostell | Destruction is Life is a testimony to the everyday and its dichotomies through works where memory, war, and humanity reverberate on the stage of world history. In Vostell's words, *art shall remind us that we must remember.*



Wolf Vostell, *Berlin Fieber*, 1973; Acrylic on photo-canvas and objects; 190 x 140 x 20 cm

Wolf Vostell

Wolf Vostell was born in Leverkusen, Germany, in 1932. A refugee with his family, in 1939 he escaped to Czechoslovakia, where he lived until 1945. At the war's end, thirteen-year-old Vostell travelled with his sister and Sephardic mother to Cologne on foot, a three-month trip that presented him with the utter devastation of his country. After an early training (1950-53) as a photo-lithographer, in 1954, he started studying Painting and Experimental Typography at the School of Arts and Crafts in Wuppertal. In 1955-56 he attended the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris and in 1957 the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf.

Deeply impressed by a trip to Paris in 1954, Vostell created his first "dé-collage", a term used in *Le Figaro* to describe an airliner's simultaneous takeoff and crash. Dividing the word into syllables to emphasize both the difference and continuity of creative and destructive processes, Vostell employed the term as a symbol of Western epistemology's destructive/creative dialectic, making it the foundational theoretical principle of his practice.



Wolf Vostell, Portrait

In his over-painted photographs and object pictures, he combined the tatters of poster-covered walls with traces and fragments of events, later expanding them into the realm of electronic and performative space. By the late '50s, in response to Germany's post-war attitude towards the Shoah and its many victims, which often took the form of blind denial, Vostell started incorporating references to the history of the Third Reich (Auschwitz, Treblinka) in his works.

In 1958, Vostell took part in the first *European Happening* in Paris (*The theater is on the street I*); his happenings always involved onlookers and sometimes entire cities. In the same year, he produced his first objects with TV sets and car components, their omnipresence in the everyday life of an industrialized society becoming his primary subjects. The artist moved to Cologne in 1959.

One of the best-known members of the Fluxus movement, Vostell was one of its founding fathers in the early 1960s. In 1961, he directed *Cityrama I*, the first environmental event in twenty-six locations across Cologne. In 1962 with Nam June Paik, George Maciunas and others, he staged the first *Fluxus International Festival for New Music* in Wiesbaden. He subsequently organised several large-scale happenings (Wuppertal, Aix-la Chapelle, Ulm, etc.). Vostell has worked with video since the early 1960s.

In 1969, the artist began incorporating concrete in his practice, casting or embedding objects such as cars and televisions, using it in conjunction with

live figures or creating monumental works for the public realm. In 1971, he moved to Berlin and, five years later, founded a museum dedicated to his work and the Fluxus movement in Malpartida de Cáceres (Spain). He died in Berlin in 1998.

Wolf Vostell took part in documenta 6, 1977; San Paulo Biennale, 1983; Venice Biennale, 1990; 3. Biennale de Lyon. Museums and institutions around the world have widely exhibited his work. Amongst them are Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Eli & Edythe Broad Art Museum, East Lansing; Nam June Paik Art Center, Gyeongju; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Les Abattoirs, Toulouse; Neue Nationalgalerie, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum of Contemporary Art and Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; ZKM | Center for Art & Media, Karlsruhe; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Museum Tinguely, Basel; Museion, Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Bolzano; Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest; MOCAK, Krakow; MUMOK, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna; Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Madrid; Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona; Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.

Works by Wolf Vostell are included in significant museum collections, especially across the United States and Europe, such as MOMA, New York; SFMOMA, San Francisco; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Art Institute, Chicago; Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid; MACBA, Barcelona; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.



Wolf Vostell, Radar Alarm F, 1969; Racing bike, TV, bag with alarm sirens and cables; 170 x 100 x 90 cm

Cardi Gallery

The Cardi Gallery was founded in Milan, Italy in April 1972 by Renato Cardi with a focus on fostering the work of contemporary Italian artists. In the late 1960's Renato Cardi started to collect works by artists like Cy Twombly, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Michelangelo Pistoletto, who were all relatively unknown at the time. Over the subsequent years Renato built a distinguished collection that spanned from Arte Povera to Spatialism. Through both his inextinguishable passion for art and the subsequent success of the Galleria Cardi, Renato earned the reputation as a critically engaged champion of developing artists, one who made major contributions to launching many of their careers. Now led by Renato's son Nicolo, the Cardi Gallery continues to shape the cultural landscape in Milan and abroad.

In 2015, the Cardi Gallery opened its first overseas venue, expanding its presence to London's Mayfair district where it is housed in a magnificent 17th century Georgian townhouse on Grafton Street boasting six storeys and over 10,000 sq feet of exhibition space. Both Cardi London and Cardi Milan host regular museum-quality exhibitions that are accompanied by a scholarly catalogue or an artist monograph often featuring texts by eminent critics such as Germano Celant, Francesco Bonami and Achille Bonito Oliva.

The Cardi Gallery's unique specialist expertise in Italian Modern, Post-War and Contemporary art – specifically in Arte Povera, Minimalism and Zero Group – has contributed to building some of the finest and most historically important private collections across the Europe, the Americas and the Far East. The Gallery also regularly lends works for museum exhibitions internationally.

"I am thrilled to present a solo show dedicated to German artist Wolf Vostell, a pioneering voice in developing the language of art throughout the second half of the Twentieth century.

His work puts forth a contemporary voice, one that equips us of those tools so necessary to critically understand the world, today. It is timely, to be speaking of art as an instrument for peace. " Nicolo Cardi

Wolf Vostell | Destruction is Life

runs between 25 April and 23 July, 2022.

Open Monday - Friday 10am - 6pm; Saturday 11am - 6pm, with extended opening hours during London Art Gallery Weekend and Mayfair Art Weekend.

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