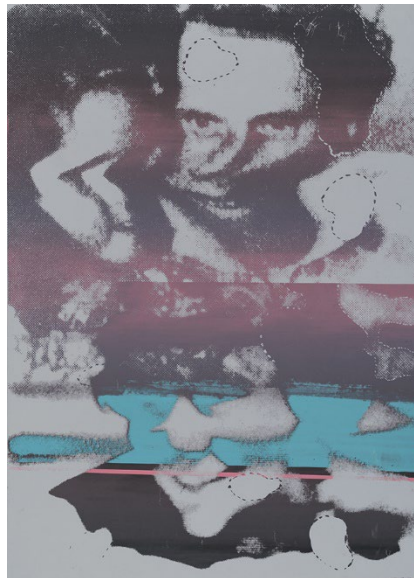


Harvard Art Museums

Fogg Museum
Busch-Reisinger Museum
Arthur M. Sackler Museum

Press Release

Harvard Art Museums Present Works by Fluxus Artist Wolf Vostell in Winter 2024 Exhibition



Wolf Vostell, German, *TV Blur*, 1966. Screenprint on off-white wove paper. Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of The Wolf Vostell Estate, [2022.289](#). © The Wolf Vostell Estate.

Cambridge, MA
February 16, 2024

In *Wolf Vostell: Dé-coll/age Is Your Life*, the Harvard Art Museums are presenting works by German Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell, whose aesthetic philosophy of “dé-coll/age” employed the use of destruction in art to generate consciousness of destruction in life. The exhibition includes prints, films, multiples, sculptures, artist publications, and performance ephemera drawn primarily from the Busch-Reisinger Museum’s collection, the largest repository of the artist’s work in the Americas. Works by Vostell’s Fluxus collaborators and other peers who employed destructive methods in their work—including Joseph Beuys, Alberto Burri, Hy Hirsh, Nam June Paik, Benjamin Patterson, and Gerhard Richter—are also part of the exhibition. The exhibition is on display through May 5, 2024, in the University Research Gallery, located on Level 3 of the Harvard Art Museums.

Wolf Vostell: Dé-coll/age Is Your Life was curated by Kyle Stephan, the 2021–23 Hakuta Family Nam June Paik Curatorial Fellow in the Division of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Harvard Art

Museums. Loans have generously been provided by the LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur, Münster, as well as Harvard University's Fine Arts Library and Houghton Library.

"Art shall remind us that we must remember." —Wolf Vostell

A child of a Sephardic Jew who witnessed the brutality of World War II and its aftermath in Germany, Wolf Vostell (1932–1998) committed his artistic practice to remembering the atrocities of war, violence, and genocide. Confrontational and unsettling, his art resists the cultural erasure of human suffering and cultivates collective awareness of and resistance to the violence of past and present. Nuclear warfare, Cold War aggression, technological disaster, environmental devastation, and above all, the genocidal acts of the Nazi regime shaped his understanding of aesthetics. One of the first German artists to address the Holocaust after World War II, Vostell felt an urgency to prevent future catastrophe. Working in a variety of mediums, he jolted spectators from complacency, dismantling mechanisms of mass media and consumerism that numbed individuals to violence and human suffering.

"One of the most uncompromising and formally innovative artists of his generation, Wolf Vostell perceived art as an ethical act. His lifelong practice of *dé-coll/age* creatively, and often disturbingly, probed under the surface of media images and everyday behavior to excavate suppressed histories of violence and to scrutinize the social mechanisms that enable collective complicity," said Stephan.

Décollage—meaning "to unglue" or "to take off"—describes the artistic process of ripping layered street posters to reveal poster fragments underneath. Vostell associated torn street posters with war-ravaged landscapes as well as destructive events and technologies of the 20th century. He appropriated the term as a comprehensive concept for his art, stylizing it as "*dé-coll/age*" to emphasize destruction as a creative process.

Vostell initially lacerated posters to excavate references to the Nazi regime and postwar German society. Adapting techniques of *dé-coll/age* to other media, he manipulated magazines, newspapers, and television images to decry international geopolitical conflict and technological warfare. Central to his practice were *dé-coll/age* happenings, participatory group events that staged symbolic confrontations with destruction to incite spectators to become critical actors in their own lives.

In 1962, Vostell cofounded Fluxus, an international collective of artists that innovated intermedia art, or art that falls between traditional genres of performance, music, poetry, painting, and sculpture. Exalting process over object, Fluxus artists proposed actions that used confrontation, humor, chance, and audience participation to disrupt routine social behavior and undermine the elitism of high art.

"As its title suggests, *Wolf Vostell: Dé-coll/age Is Your Life* not only introduces the intermedial practice of this major 20th-century German artist to U.S. audiences, but also speaks to our own time, *our* lives. Vostell's strategies of critical disruption offer a model for us to attend to the conflicts as well as the technologies and media of our day," said Lynette Roth, the Daimler Curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, one of the Harvard Art Museums' three constituent museums.

The installation features a wide range of works by Vostell, the majority of which were gifted by or purchased from The Wolf Vostell Estate in 2022. The first gallery introduces Vostell's beginnings in Paris and Germany and includes *Fall and Rise and Fall* (1954), one of the artist's first poster artworks, on loan from the LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur, Münster. For this work, Vostell assembled thick fragments of tattered posters from the war-ravaged streets of Cologne into an altered readymade composition. With torn fragments revealing National Socialist posters from 1938, the assemblage signals the violent past lurking just under the surface of postwar German society.

The "Fluxus and *Dé-coll/age* Happenings" section of the exhibition features copies of *dé-coll/age: Bulletin aktueller Ideen* (*dé-coll/age: Bulletin of Current Thinking*), the first Fluxus-affiliated publication,

which Vostell designed and edited; and Coca-Cola 2 (1964), which exemplifies Vostell's innovative "blurring" technique. For the latter, Vostell wiped solvent across the front and back of an issue of *LIFE* magazine to selectively blur images and highlight relationships between war and capitalism in the 20th century. This section also presents announcement cards, posters, scores, and multiples related to Vostell's performances and de-coll/age happenings, such as *Kleenex* (1962), *9 No-dé-coll/ages* (1963), *YOU* (1964), and *Salad* (1970–71), as well as photographic documentation of these events, which are on display throughout the exhibition.

The "TV Dé-coll/age" section highlights Vostell's adaptation of dé-coll/age techniques to television. Two films by Vostell play on a loop in a darkened nook outfitted with beanbag chairs: *Sun in Your Head* (1963)—his first dé-coll/age film—features distorted broadcast images of a military parade, international political figures, and a bomber pilot commanding an air raid edited with other live footage to amplify glitches and repetitions, while *Starfighter* (1967) captures the disintegration of a broadcast image of a squadron combat-ready supersonic Lockheed F-104 Starfighter jets on a U.S. Air Force base in Germany. *TV Blur* (1966), a screenprint conceived on the eve of the introduction of color TV in Germany, alerts viewers to the ideological manipulation of images encountered in the commercial media landscape.

Vostell's dé-coll/age experiments with concrete include *Endogene Depression V* (1980), a concrete cast of a television on a wooden table created for an environmental installation at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art in 1980–81. It is displayed in front of a mural-size archival image of the immersive installation, which included 30 broadcasting televisions dipped in concrete and a flock of live turkeys. An edition of Vostell's artist book *Betonierungen* (Concretifications) (1971), a loose-leaf publication featuring photographs of his completed concrete artworks and his proposals for "concretifications" of postwar consumer goods, appears alongside *Concrete Book* (1971), a version of *Betonierungen* that the artist encased in concrete as a critique of the commercial art world. Other screenprints by Vostell include *Concreted B-52* (1970), which decries the bombing of Laos during the Vietnam War and the automation of warfare; and *Olympiade I–IV* (1972), a series of four prints that appropriate photojournalistic images of civilian casualties during the Vietnam War and cover the figures in concrete-like restraints to signify the deadening of life force through war, tyranny, and technological progress.

Public Programming

A range of public programs held in conjunction with the exhibition will further examine the work of Wolf Vostell. The events listed below are free and held in-person at the Harvard Art Museums, 32 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. Admission to visit our galleries is free. For updates, full details, and to register, please click the links below or see our calendar: harvardartmuseums.org/calendar. Questions? Call 617-495-9400.

Gallery Talk — Wolf Vostell's *Treblinka*

Wednesday, February 28, 2024, 11:30am–12pm

A closer look at Wolf Vostell's *Treblinka* (1967), a screenprint on paper that examines the circulation of photographs from Nazi death camps in film, television, and books. Led by: Peter Murphy, Stefan Engelhorn Curatorial Fellow in the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard Art Museums.

Gallery Talk — Wolf Vostell's Experiments with Concrete

Wednesday, March 27, 2024, 12:30–1pm

A discussion of Wolf Vostell's concrete sculptures, including concrete casts of television sets and a concrete book. Led by: Briana J. Smith, Associate Director of Studies, Committee on Degrees in History & Literature, Harvard University.

Gallery Talk — Wolf Vostell's *Salad*

Thursday, April 18, 2024, 12:30–1pm

A discussion of the 1970 “happening” titled *Salad* that Wolf Vostell and numerous participants performed in a train car between Cologne and Aachen, Germany. Led by: Lynette Roth, Daimler Curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard Art Museums.

Leventritt Lecture — *Wolf Vostell: Dé-coll/age Is Your Life*

Wednesday, April 10, 2024, 6–7:15pm

Speaker: Kyle Stephan, Exhibition Curator, and the 2021–23 Hakuta Family Nam June Paik Curatorial Fellow in the Division of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Harvard Art Museums. The exhibition gallery will be open to visitors after the lecture.

Credits

Support for *Wolf Vostell: Dé-coll/age Is Your Life* is provided by the Ernst A. Teves Memorial Fund and the Care of the Busch-Reisinger Museum Collection Endowment. Related programming is supported by the M. Victor Leventritt Lecture Series Endowment Fund. In addition, modern and contemporary art programs at the Harvard Art Museums are made possible in part by generous support from the Emily Rauh Pulitzer and Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., Fund for Modern and Contemporary Art.

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Exhibition Webpage

harvardartmuseums.org/wolfvostell

About the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums house one of the largest and most renowned art collections in the United States, comprising three museums (the Fogg, Busch-Reisinger, and Arthur M. Sackler Museums) and three research centers (the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, the Harvard Art Museums Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis). The Fogg Museum includes Western art from the Middle Ages to the present; the Busch-Reisinger Museum, unique among North American museums, is dedicated to the study of all modes and periods of art from central and northern Europe, with an emphasis on German-speaking countries; and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum is focused on art from Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Together, the collections include over 255,000 objects in all media. The Harvard Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. Integral to Harvard University and the wider community, the museums and research centers serve as resources for students, scholars, and the public. For more than a century they have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and are renowned for their seminal role in developing the discipline of art history in the United States. The Harvard Art Museums have a rich tradition of considering the history of objects as an integral part of the teaching and study of art history, focusing on conservation and preservation concerns as well as technical studies. harvardartmuseums.org

The Harvard Art Museums receive support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Hours and Admission

Open Tuesday–Sunday, 10am–5pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission is free to all visitors. For further information about visiting, including general policies, see harvardartmuseums.org/visit.

For more information, please contact

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