

W(AL)KING THROUGH TRAUMA

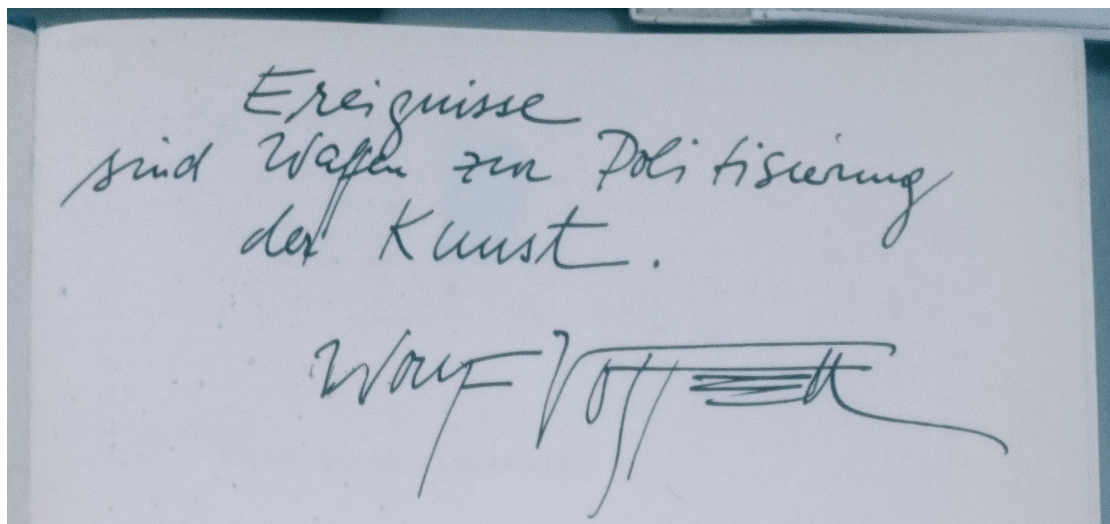
WOLF VOSTELL AND POST-WAR WEST BERLIN

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'I think the most important thing...is to have shown to the public that art is discovering yourself.' (Vostell 1981: 51)

Self-reflection dominated the 1960s and West Berlin was identified as a 'city of realists' which, combined with its position between two competing world systems, sensitised the critical consciousness to social reality (Roters 1982: 48). The urban landscape of the post-war city underwent rapid change, with the destruction of tenements during and after the war, and the erection of modernist satellite housing settlements as evidence of a new 'democratic' ideology which visibly distanced the city from its recent past. These developments were imbued with fundamental concepts regarding Germany's past present and future, and artistic practices used the city as a site for self-exploration through the altered cityscape.



[HAPPENINGS ARE WEAPONS IN THE POLITICISATION OF ART] SIGNED 'WOLF VOSTELL'

Wolf Vostell (1932-98) used the spaces of West Berlin as a vehicle for a critical analysis of the political and social stagnation masked by the post-war economic miracle (Schröder 2012: 228). To achieve this, Vostell questioned how art could penetrate concrete reality and rediscover the complexity of existence (Korte-Beuckers 1999: 127) with the aim of reconnecting people with the world on a fundamental level. He held the happening *Berlin 100 Events: 100 minutes-100 points for a random audience* at the Block Galerie in 1964. Although the actions were based at the gallery, they extended out into the city itself, emphasising a desire to connect the materiality of place and the objects of daily life to the post-war landscape (Mesch 2009: 176). The spaces of the city therefore became part of the medium as a carrier of information (Korte-Beuckers 1999: 194) and a site which instigated both engagement and reflection. In this way Vostell was focused on developing a form of urban intervention which intended to alter well-known places in the city to allow the participant to experience 'actual life' bound up in both space and time (Heinzelmann 2010: 138). His interest in the social implications of urban living led him to directly connect his work to the streets of Berlin where everyday life was taking place. For example, participants were asked to do such things as:

91 driving to wilhelm strasse

92 looking for a parking place

93 walking to the wall

94 strewing twenty pounds of sugar on western soil bordering the wall

(Vostell 1966: 9)

The function of Vostell's intervention was to open up critical spaces within the city in which inhabitants could contemplate the cities destruction, reconstruction, and traces of memory and trauma (Mesch 2000: 96). Vostell said of his intention:

"I consciously make individual ACTIONS and THOUGHTS into an aesthetic process and thus into an artwork. Nonviolent action and thinking in space and time are psycho aesthetic works, sculptures that pass from human energies, - important for every individual's development of self-realization."
(Vostell in Bosbach 2012: 1)



Vostell developed a means to express the processes of thought and action in aesthetics in order to re-examine a person's relationship with the world. He believed that his audience learned to 'live again' (Bosbach 2012: 2) by reconnecting with the essence of the city and incorporating it into their identity. The intention was to make the participant/observer an objective viewer of the world they operating within by decontextualizing everyday events, thus reflecting the '68 mantra that the personal became the political and from this a greater analysis of the city and society would occur.

Vostell coined the term *dé-coll/age* which reflected his ideas of breakdown and disjuncture but also re-assemblage which aspired to the 'remembrance of daily life' through phenomenological relationships with objects (Mesch 2009: 57). The urban spaces of the city were areas where both destruction and renewal were in constant conflict; there was a desire both to salvage the city from the destruction of war but also to create a table rasa for modernisation. Through his concept of *dé-coll/age* the known was dissected and assembled with the new, in order to decode and re-appropriate the spaces of the city (Bosbach 2012: 5) to engender an analysis of the relationship between people and the world. The objects of *dé-coll/age* were linked to a particular place in the city and through their re-appropriation the former function of the object was removed from the object itself and the perception of the object and its function were altered (Mesch 2000: 93). This, in a neo-dada vein, meant that the objects of the city were critically considered, and by connection, the memory of the events that occurred within the city were also subject to contemplation. Consciousness itself

was employed as an artistic device (Roters 1982: 49). The materiality of the *dé-coll/age* object also retained a link to the 'real world' whilst also encapsulating the modernist tendency to refuse points of reference, akin to the modernist housing estates which showed their link to the present but refused to refer to place (Mesch 2000: 96). This link to the real allowed participants to face the trauma of the past whilst also retaining an objective distance. The gathering of found objects also became a performance between artist and audience allowing for a collective working through of past issues. The participants were both compelled to confront previously neglected or repressed places, but also to interact with them, in a collective pursuit.



The rallying call of the '68 protesters to fundamentally critique every aspect of existence was combined by Vostell with a discovery of the self through walking the streets that provided the context urban life. In a post-war world which was heavily focused on the future, Vostell's art forced a confrontation with both the past and present in order to construct a more engaged social existence. There was a deliberate attempt to reconnect the urban dweller to the city space both in order to connect individual and collective memory to public space, but also to encourage a contemplation of the connection between man and his environment in order to instigate a more critical sense of identity in the post-war city. The hope was that through this self-reflection the individual would 'retreat into reality' and become a work of art (Vostell 1968: 1).

INTERACTIVE MAP OF BERLIN: 100 EVENTS:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1w6CUwrQmVWT3DQjK3QVyIGIXVKs&usp=sharing>

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