

### Wolf Vostell: Conceptual Décollage

Wolf Vostell was involved in a variety of artistic movements throughout his career, as the changes in ideology and explorations of nuance within contemporary European conceptual art expanded the types of art being created. The artists during this time were involved in their own groups and collectives as well as contributing to the paradigm of conceptual art that became more and more prominent as the 20th century continued. Vostell's work expands across many mediums and conceptual focuses, but the focus of his work is to dissect parts of our world, exposing the inherent sameness between art and life. His focus was not one of pure physical creation, but of reinterpretation. He recognized the power of everyday life, and believed that it should be understood and participated in with the same intentions as one views art.

Vostell's life centered geographically around Germany, and this is visible throughout his work. He initially trained at schools throughout Europe, but the traditional art schooling did not serve the conceptual focus that Vostell desired, and he began to structure his work into everyday life rather than the exclusive art world. When the Fluxus and Happenings movements began in the early 1960's in the greater art world, the artists unfulfilled by the current expectations of art were at the forefront, and Vostell was among these. He travelled to the U.S. and gained recognition among the growing community of Happenings artists,<sup>1</sup> and worked within these growing expressions of conceptual power and pushed the connections between art and life, developing his concept of destruction and reinterpretation of life as *décollage*.<sup>2</sup> This idea looks to dissect, change, and break existing objects, using what is already there rather than the usual object-oriented art that focuses on making something totally new.

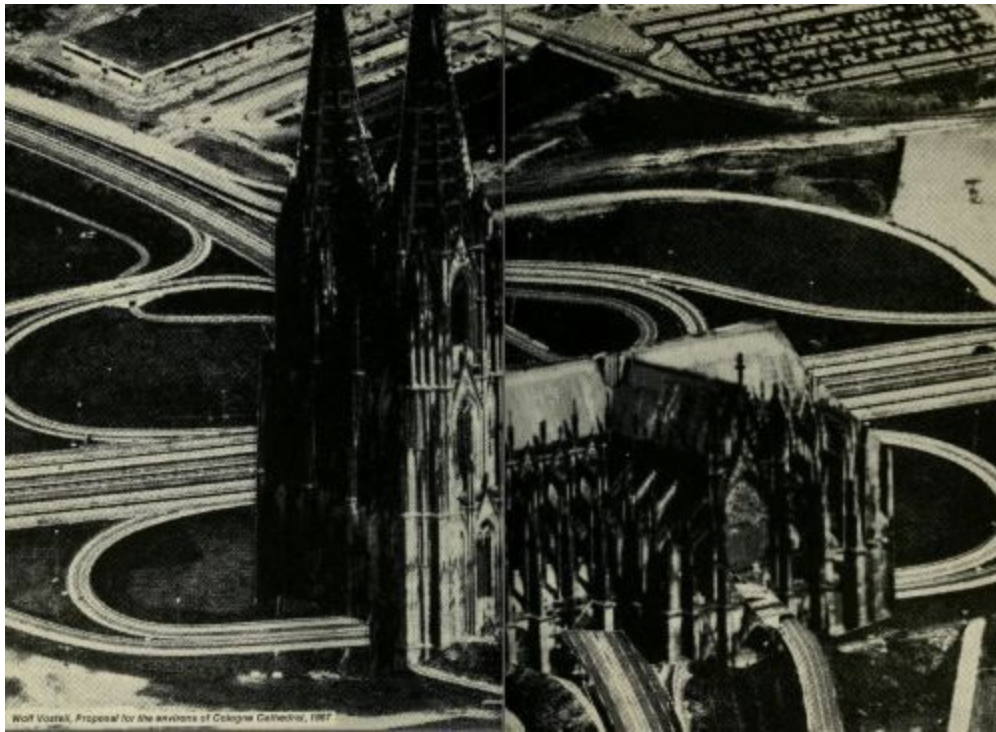
Along with Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, Vostell wrote the text "Fantastic Architecture" as an exercise in concept art. Throughout this book, artists show their ideas of outlandish conceptual architecture plans, and explain the practical and artistic purposes of shifting the status quo in our society through construction. They question why these major changes haven't been made in this part of our creative expression, and why there are no niche and conceptual architectural styles, such as the Fluxus, Dada, or Expressionist styles of traditional art. Additionally, the book includes a variety of writings from Higgins and Vostell explaining the importance of these conceptual exercises, the incorporation of technology and symbology in our lives, and more. The artworks and architecture plans featured throughout the book come from an assortment of artists, including work by the authors themselves. Shown below, Vostell's visual concept of a revision of European cathedral architecture applies ideas of modern utilitarianism

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<sup>1</sup> Medina, Cuauhtemoc. "The 'Kulturbolschewiken' I," 185.

<sup>2</sup> Zielinski, Siegfried. "In Praise of What Is Not Systemic about the Arts," 135-136.

and the need for mass transportation to the cathedral, serving a purpose that was not served before, and imagining what a major paradigm shift within architecture could really look like.<sup>3</sup>



Wolf Vostell, *Proposal for the environs for the Cologne Cathedral*, 1969

Although this work includes no physical manifestation of the idea shown, the importance is the concept. Realistically, movements such as Dadaism occurred so quickly within the larger timeline of the arts that there was not the time nor funding for the physical construction of major architectural works within this category. The idea of having large scale monumental works with the same conceptual drives as European anti-art is interesting, and necessary, conceptually- but the execution of these actual projects would be too costly in both time and money to really happen. Is this a major missed opportunity? These works would invade our daily lives in such an apparent way that people would be unable to avoid considering the works and their implications. The concepts would reach everyday life in a more direct way than we currently experience, and this is how Vostell wished that life and art would merge until they became indistinguishable from one another.

Is the most important part of this book the fact that it simply exists? The suggestion of a shift in paradigm, a major change in the way that we construct a very important part of our daily lives, rather than a physical art object, is the product of this work. Like the systems theory of artmaking described by Jack Burnham in 1968, this concept goes out of its way to avoid

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<sup>3</sup> Vostell, Wolf, and Dick Higgins. *Fantastic Architecture*, 56.

technical perfection, craft fetishism, or obsession over new technologies;<sup>4</sup> in “Fantastic Architecture” Vostell describes the ways in which new powerful technologies are wasted, and enforces the importance of idea over idealized physical end products.<sup>5</sup> Burnham also describes the unimportance of execution by exposing the limits actual physical creation and execution can impose on a project, describing the way in which contemporary pieces allow “Conceptual focus rather than material limits [to define] the system”.<sup>6</sup> In this same way, the redefinition of the Cologne Cathedral in the context of modern human geography may never be executed, but that does nothing to lessen Vostell’s work.

Not only do the concepts of “Fantastic Architecture” propose major changes to the status quo, they work to expose the underlying rules of our society. The status quo is composed of a series of intentional changes and sets of rules, never neutrally motivated. Ideally, the psychogeographical context of an architectural or urban plan would be utilized to create a utilitarian solution for the area to best improve life for the residents. However, this has not been the case, as politically motivated urban planning works to keep those in power where they are and maintain the status quo.<sup>7</sup> All of this fits into the situational context that we exist in, and the *décollage* art being produced by Vostell worked to break down and dissect these structures and expose the theories and algorithms that drive them.

While Vostell was participating in the U.S. and German art scenes with other Happenings artists, his work pushed a confusion between everyday life and art, and the idea that the two are one and the same.<sup>8</sup> With this as his motivation, he planned Happenings that incorporated scenes and situations made available through everyday life. These could include variations and *décollages* of different scenes, shown as films, large scale sculptures, and situations that transform spaces and augment facets of everyday society. In *9 Nein Décollagen* he ferried participants to nine different locations with participatory Happenings. His participants were meant to experience these things in their own personal ways, with the filters of their personalities, lives, and experiences shaping their interaction with the piece. As systems esthetics proposes, there is no predetermined course or planned result for the Happening, only a wish that the participants experience it with the careful attention of viewing an art object.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Burnham, Jack. “Systems Esthetics,” 5.

<sup>5</sup> Vostell, Wolf, and Dick Higgins. *Fantastic Architecture*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Burnham, Jack. “Systems Esthetics,” 6.

<sup>7</sup> Debord, Guy. “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” 2.

<sup>8</sup> Berghaus, Günter. “Happenings in Europe in the 60’s: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures,” 159.

<sup>9</sup> Berghaus, Günter. 163.



Poster advertising *9 Nein Décollagen*, 1963

Vostell arranged the *9 Nein Décollagen* experience in the city of Wuppertal, Germany, as a series of experiences meant to deconstruct and shift perceptions of various pieces of everyday life. Additionally, all of these situations were created with participation in mind; audiences should be experiencing the work rather than passively viewing it.<sup>10</sup> This idea highlights an important shift present within concept art from entertainment to experience, and further emphasizes his wish that people experience art and life in the same way.

Some of his work did include physical objects that were beings created or output, but all of these were still meant to represent a deconstruction and repurposing of different parts of society rather than an emphasis on any technical craft or creation. Vostell worked to push concepts that would change the way we think about our everyday world, moving creative intention and interpretation from just the art world into the world as a whole. In this, he asks his participants to view life as art and vice versa. There is no need for a definition between the two.

<sup>10</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. "Two Selections by McLuhan," 201.

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