



Amanda Trienens, of Cultural Heritage Conservation, center, leads the preservation effort discussion in June for Wolf Vostell's 1970 work, Concrete Traffic, a Cadillac encased in concrete. The sculpture will be returning to University of Chicago campus Friday.

MICHAEL TERCHA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

# Art on the move

## Concrete-covered Caddy sculpture headed for new home at U. of C.

BY STEVE JOHNSON  
Chicago Tribune

It is mid-June on the West Side of Chicago, and a dozen or so people are standing around what looks an awful lot like an automobile encased in concrete. Pock-marked at multiple points on its surface, blotchy in others, the structure is under a protective canopy. The people, mostly, are not.

"We don't want to bring any more original material in danger," says Christian Scheidemann, an expert in conserving art made from unusual substances. "I think we have to be very sensitive here about these bumps."

"There's a natural area here you can patch against," says Amanda Trienens, a specialist in concrete restoration. "But you have to consider where you stop."

Hannah Higgins, a University of Illinois at Chicago art historian, says, "I think it's important to leave real visual evidence of what was patched, even if it's a bad patch."

The conversation continues in this vein: sober talk about the nature of sand and concrete, the experts' level of happiness with patches on the rear of the structure, whether they should drill into the thing to take a core sample, and what is the right level of inflation for the tires on what is, in fact, a concrete-clad car.

This is not just any vehicle rendered immobile with nearly 14 tons of a hardened sand, aggregate and cement slurry, however. It is a 1957 Cadillac DeVille that was entombed by German artist Wolf Vostell, a leader of the Fluxus movement, in a 1970 public performance near the old site of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. And on Friday the Caddy will



Anna Weiss-Pfau, U. of C. campus art coordinator, and Christian Scheidemann, of Contemporary Conservation, examine the sculpture, which was moved off campus in 2009.

revisit that site as part of a procession that will see the sculpture returned to its second and longest-standing home, the University of Chicago campus.

That parade will mark the end of a five-year, roughly \$500,000 rediscovery and restoration process that began with a Chicago art history professor asking herself what public art the university owned. It will also be the catalyst for a series of programs in the next year under the banner Concrete Happenings, meant to make people think about public art. Prominent among these is a Vostell exhibition at the university's Smart Museum of Art in January.

The work, titled Concrete Traffic, is, in fact, the largest remaining artifact of Fluxus, a largely performance-based movement that counted Yoko Ono among its associated artists.

But for now, in June in Humboldt Park, it's also a not-street-legal 32,400-pound shapely slab deteriorating out behind an art handling shop, its home since it was moved from the U. of C. campus in 2009 to make way, ironically, for a new arts center.

It is a work of art that people can lean on as they discuss its conservation. Somebody brings up the "Bumstead patches," so named for a university landscaper who tried to do some repair work years ago, the removal and replacement of which is a key part of the restoration process.

Somebody else wonders aloud about whether Jimmy Hoffa might be inside. "You're not the first person to say that," says Anna Weiss-Pfau, the U. of C.'s campus art coordinator.

"Oh, God, I'm dying to see the inside of

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JOHN VON RHEIN  
Heard & Scene

## COT dares audience to take risks as well

Ever since Chicago Opera Theater staged composer Ricky Ian Gordon's "Orpheus and Eurydice" at a Chicago municipal swimming pool in 2013, Andreas Mitisek, the company's adventuresome general director, has boldly gone where no local opera impresario has gone in recent memory.

And he is daring his audience to do the same.

For its expanded 2016-17 season, beginning this weekend, COT will seek to entice Chicago opera fans out of their comfort zones with site-specific shows too intimate for the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, home of the city's second opera company for the past 16 years. But the Harris' 1,525 seats have a tough sell for COT over much of that time, hence the diversification to smaller venues.

As a matter of fact, three of the four operas COT is producing this season will involve Chicago theaters seating no more than 500 to 600 patrons. First up will be the Music Box Theatre, a historic 1929 Lakeview movie palace. The other "new" venue is the Studebaker Theater, a vintage auditorium in the Fine Arts Building on South Michigan Avenue that's been redeveloped as a rental facility for local performing arts groups.

As Mitisek puts it, "We are challenging, but we also are inviting, our audiences to explore the great (performance) spaces we have in this city." It's a marketing strategy that has proved successful with his other opera company, Long Beach Opera in Southern California.

Opening the COT season this weekend is "Le Vin Herbe" ("The Love Portion," in this English-language version), Swiss composer Frank Martin's 1942 oratorio based on the Tristan and Isolde legend, the same source on which Richard Wagner drew for his revolutionary opera. The seldom-heard work will be performed by a 12-member cast conducted by Emanuele Andrizzi and directed and designed by Mitisek.

The troupe will move to the Studebaker for its second and third offerings of the season. The first, in November, will be a contemporary adaptation of English baroque master Henry Purcell's semi-opera "The Fairy Queen," based on Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." That will be followed in February by COT's first-ever world premiere, Stewart Copeland's "The Invention of Morel," a co-commis-

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MICHAEL TERCHA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Restoration efforts on the Concrete Traffic sculpture have cost an estimated \$500,000. The proper level of inflation for the tires on the 1957 Cadillac was also debated.

# Sculpture had languished for years

*Sculpture, from Page 1*

the car," says Higgins. "I want to know what happened to the car seat material. There could be a whole ecosystem in there."

"Yuck," responds one of the eminent conservators.

As the focus moves to the bottom of the car, the debate becomes about how much tire should be showing when the sculpture gets remounted, how much was originally showing and whether the steel undercarriage built for the piece will need to be redone. But maybe they're being too fussy?

"We're art historians," Higgins points out, "not normal people."

It was an art historian who got this whole project rolling. Christine Mehring was in her fourth year at Chicago when, in September 2011, the provost put her in charge of a faculty committee, the University Committee on Campus Planning.

"I said, 'Well, it would be nice if we started paying attention to public art. What do we have anyway?'" she recalls.

She heard about the car sculpture that had been moved from a campus sculpture garden — right in front of the studio where the sculptor Lorado Taft worked — to make way for the gleaming new Logan Arts Center, and she drove to Humboldt Park to have a look. It was a moment both exciting and sad, as she describes it.

"It looked awful," she says.

"There were big patches of concrete missing. That's what was so overwhelming."

At the same time, she knew what she was looking at, more or less. German herself, she had written about postwar German art and recognized Vostell's style. "It was a really important work," she says. "I think I was absolutely exhilarated. Wow."

She had a thought that proved, she allows, naive: "Early on, I thought it would be cheaper to conserve it than to keep paying



ALYSSA POINTER/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Christine Mehring, chair of the art history department at the U. of C., spearheaded the preservation effort.

the storage fee."

But she started scraping together money to look into restoring it. The school's Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society got behind the project, including with early grant money. A conservation team came together in a manner that sounds a little like the way the team is assembled in a caper movie, except without Matt Damon.

She reached out to Scheide-mann, she says, because of his work with extraordinary materials. It was a perfect fit: "He came out, and we immediately started arguing about what needs to be done," she says.

Trienens, the concrete specialist, came on. Two engineers, "the art structural engineer and the historic structural engineer," Mehring says. MCA staff, who found documentation on the original fabrication of the piece, fundamental to settling questions

*"A lot of it became about that why is it art and why does it matter."*

— Christine Mehring

about how best to restore it.

Also joining the team were university conservators and scholars. Higgins, from UIC, "the daughter of Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins, who are key, key Fluxus artists," says Mehring. An architect to help them keep the big picture in mind. A classic car expert.

The car guy, she says, told her,

"Wow, this Cadillac is in better condition than it would have been if it had sat on the street." That's probably doubly true when you consider that it was purchased for the art project for just \$89.

"That completely fits in with Vostell's thinking about the sculpture, which we know was a kind of mummification for him of an object of industrial civilization. It's a completely violent gesture but at the same time it's preserving it," says Mehring.

Arguments along those lines had to be made on campus to convince Chicago authorities this thing was worth restoring and bringing back.

"A lot of it became about that why is it art and why does it matter," says Mehring. "That took a long time, making those arguments. In the end the approval to bring it back hinged on having a site everyone could agree on. And on getting the funds to conserve

it"

The money came in a series of grants and from a private donor, and has climbed from an initial guesstimate of \$60,000, Mehring says, to a number she figures is over \$500,000, if you include pro bono work.

Finding a site proved challenging. Exposure to the elements could mean further deterioration and the undoing of some of the restoration work. Yet there aren't a lot of indoor spaces that can accommodate a nearly 20-foot-long, 16.2-ton object.

But near the offices of the art history department, which Mehring chairs, and also near the Smart Museum, there is a nondescript multistory parking garage with a sort of open, sort of covered entryway. The work could be on public view there, mostly protected, right alongside the entry gate. Its presence in a row of parked cars would be kind of poetic. As the group looked at photoshopped images of Concrete Traffic on this site, they came to really like it.

"The sculpture is so strong it makes the garage actually better," says Mehring. "And you can suddenly appreciate this gritty, kind of awful garage in a totally different way."

When Concrete Traffic arrives at that spot after the procession Friday, there will still be more work for Trienens, the concrete specialist, to do on-site. It'll get preservative treatments, she says, including a water repellent and anti-graffiti coating.

But the car-based artwork that began in a parking lot on Ontario Street will have come full circle. Then, the fledgling MCA had to keep paying to park it, one of the reasons it donated the work to the university after half a year. Now Concrete Traffic, redone and re-appreciated, will be at rest rent-free.

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Lines shorter as another batch of 'Hamilton' tickets goes on sale