

Wolf Vostell (1932-1998): *Nürnberg*, 1968, screen print and blurring on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, The Wolf Vostell Estate



The picture last shown in the exhibitions *Boris Lurie. Anti-Pop* at the New Museum in Nuremberg (March 17 to June 18, 2017)¹ and *Flashes of the Future. The Art of the 1968 Movement or the Power of the Powerless* at the Ludwig Forum for International Art in Aachen (April 20 to August 19, 2018)² counts among the group of works called blurrings. Since 1961, the artist had been dealing with this technique. Vostell used a mixture of turpentine and carbon tetrachloride which he applied to photographs from magazines so that they were turned into being at least partially beyond recognition. In the case of *Nürnberg*, the photo was first transferred by screen printing to the canvas. The blurring is unusually large-sized and remnants of the underlying photo can be detected only on the upper and right-hand edge of the picture.

The invisible picture regains in attention what it had lost in visibility. “Blurring to see clear“, that’s what Vostell wrote in his sketchbook in 1959 already.³ The artist doubted the effective power of the inflationary use of photos in the media. In 1961, Vostell had worked for a short period of time as a layout man for the magazine *Neue Illustrierte*: “He was now exposed daily to hundreds of agency photos of contemporary historical events, such as wars, accidents, disasters” wrote Eckhart Gillen.⁴ It was certainly not by coincidence that Vostell began to grapple with blurrings that same year. It is proof of Vostell’s dialectic mind when he destroys the photo in order to actually enhance and upgrade it in the final analysis. This is in line with the German philosopher Hegel’s term of *Aufhebung* (or ‘sublation’) which incorporates entirely opposite meanings: The photo is “abolished” because of its blurring. It can no longer be recognized. Yet, at the same time, it is kept

¹ Illustration in the catalog, p. 185

² Illustration in the catalog, p. 189

³ Cited from: *Vostell. Happening & Leben*, Neuwied and Berlin 1970, p. 323

⁴ Eckhart Gillen: “Wolf Vostell: „Deutscher Ausblick““, in: E. Gillen (Publisher): *Deutschlandbilder. Kunst aus einem geteilten Land*, exhibition catalog, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Sep 7, 1997 to Jan 11, 1998, Cologne 1997, p. 240

under its blurred surface and is in that sense also “safeguarded“, i.e. preserved. The combination of both conflicting aspects creates a third meaning of *Aufhebung*: It is raised to a higher level and is thus uplifted.

Veiling and covering or concealing has its own history in 20th century art. This ranges from Man Ray's *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse* (1920) via Gerhard Richter's painted over photo-paintings of the RAF-cycle *October 18, 1977* - among them the painting *Decke* ('Blanket') (1988), and all the way to Christo's *Wrapped Reichstag* (1995). At the time, Petra Kipphoff wrote in the German weekly newspaper *DIE ZEIT*: “As shown in cultural and art history, veiling creates distance, an aura of mystery, and is the necessary preliminary stage of cognition, the naked truth.”⁵ This understanding largely corresponds with Wolf Vostell's esthetic concept of *dé-coll/age*. His concern was also nothing less than the truth.

“The observer's imagination is able to fill in the missing parts by making assumptions about what had been there before - this will create a continuous state of tension.”⁶ But will Wolf Vostell's strategy prove right even when the image is almost entirely „abolished“? *Nürnberg* is an extreme example in that respect. Accordingly, it is particularly tempting to pursue the question as to which image was shown on the canvas before it was blurred. Considering Vostell's intensive critical analysis of and grappling with the National Socialism or Nazism and the Holocaust, the title suggests thinking about images of Nazi Party Rallies or of the Nuremberg trials.

In connection with the Boris Lurie exhibition in Nuremberg in which Vostell's picture was shown, the museum and exhibition technician Jürgen Schuster made photos of the canvas surface illuminated with UV light (so-called blacklight). The photos thus taken merely produced more pronounced markings of the non-covered or only lightly covered parts of the picture. It was only through the use of various image processing programs and the resulting possibility of the interplay of brightness, contrasts and image definition that Jürgen Schuster was successful in exposing contours which had not yet been visible until then. They were already suggestive of a hidden pictorial motif. In the following period of time, Mr. Schuster intensified his work on the image file by producing a negative - again using image processing programs; he resorted to fading out colors - red, green and blue; he made color corrections and changed gray tones. For some parameters, he had to make multiple changes in specific combinations. After quite a few attempts, the image of a person finally appeared.

⁵ Petra Kipphoff: “Reichstags-Verhüllung. Verweile nicht! Du bist so schön!“, in: *Die Zeit*, 27/1995, Jun 30, 1995

⁶ Wolf Vostell, cited from: Gillen 1997, cf. Note 4, p. 244



Unfortunately, it is not possible to spontaneously identify the person shown. It can be assumed that only in-depth research in contemporary newspapers and magazines will bring clarification in this respect. Despite the picture's title, it is quite conceivable that the blurred photo presents a scene from the Vietnam War. The man's facial features could certainly be interpreted along that line. In 1968, the war reached a dramatic culmination with the so-called Tet Offensive, a major attack by North Vietnamese forces which was reflected with great impact in the media at the time.

The question would remain why a blurred photo from the Vietnam War is entitled *Nürnberg*. Reference to a work of art by Hans Peter Alvermann might possibly be helpful in this respect which had also been exhibited at the mentioned Boris Lurie exhibition in Nuremberg: his assemblage *Warten auf Nürnberg II* (1966). This "Monstrum" (*monster*) - as the artist himself called it - was Alvermann's contribution to an exhibition by the Berlin gallerist René Block who, in 1967, evoked the events of the 25-year old massacre in the Czech village of Lidice (1942). Many important artists participated, among them Joseph Beuys, K. P. Brehmer, Gotthard Graubner, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter and also Wolf Vostell.

Alvermann's poignant work against torture and war also wants to be understood as an admonition and reminder to his contemporaries. The artist noted the following regarding his title "Nürnberg II", which means a repeat performance of the Nuremberg trials: "To avoid the futility of yesterday's victims, it can only be in their - and our - best interest to point out today's killers. Any illusions about the brutality and the methods of terror of today's rulers illustrates the extent to which we were able to cope with the past. Coping with the past primarily meant truly and thoroughly negating the suffering of the victims, together with the circumstances that made them victims, and made others into murderers. And then concerning the title of the object: We will not allow that our murderous present times, once they will have become the past, will be coped with just as inactively as our fathers and their cronies are coping with theirs for twenty years already. We will remember well the names of all those who are at work today."⁷

If Wolf Vostell actually had chosen a scene from the Vietnam War for his blurring *Nürnberg* (1968), the title might probably best be interpreted in that sense - namely as a plea to condemn American war crimes in Vietnam under international law.

Thomas Heyden, March 2019

⁷ H. P. Alvermann cited from: René Block: "Auf einer Reise nach Prag am 19. Januar 1997", in: *Pro Lidice. 52 Künstler aus Deutschland*, exhibition catalog, České Muzeum Výtvarných Umění, Mar 9 to Apr 6, 1997, w/o p.

