

Boris Lurie and Wolf Vostell

Art after the Shoah –
An Art of Survival



KUNSTMUSEUM
DEN HAAG

Kunstmuseum Den Haag from
22 January to 29 May 2022

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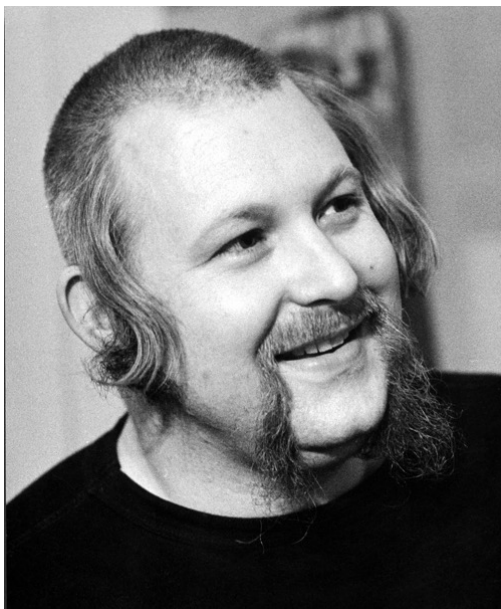
Exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag from 22 January to 29 May 2022

Subsequent locations: Kunsthaus Dahlem, Berlin, 7 July to 30 October and Ludwig Museum, Koblenz from November 2022 to March 2023, exact dates to be confirmed.

The exhibition is the first to compare artists Boris Lurie and Wolf Vostell on the theme of their joint approach to the Shoah. The Boris Lurie Art Foundation and the Wolf Vostell Estate have given it their generous support.

Boris Lurie, born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in 1924 and Wolf Vostell, born in Leverkusen in 1932, shared a lifelong friendship. Lurie, the Russian Jew who grew up in Riga and experienced the horrors of the Shoah, was instantly understood by Vostell, who as a German wished to empathise with these traumatic experiences. Vostell believed that he himself had Jewish roots and felt closely tied to the fate of the Jews. The two artists were not only linked by a joint theme; in a similar way, both went back to the early avant-garde techniques of collage and montage during the 1950s, independently of each other.

The men probably met during Vostell's first visit to New York in May 1963. Looking back at this meeting, Vostell wrote: "At the same time I met Boris Lurie [...] it was only natural that we should meet, because we were working on the same topic and the same forms of expression." Vostell showed his deep bond and friendship by doing all he could to promote Boris Lurie's art in Germany.



Wolf Vostell (14. 10. 1932 – 3. 4. 1998)



Boris Lurie (18. 7. 1924 – 7. 1. 2008)



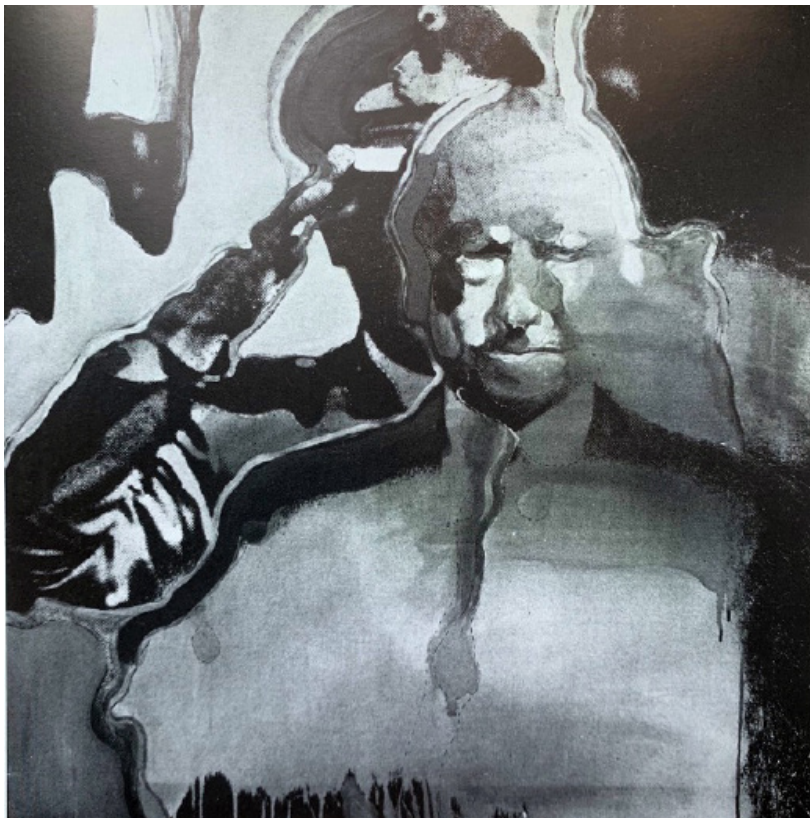
Boris Lurie,
Combat, 1951

Despite the age difference, both artists only began their artistic production after the end of the Second World War. Both initially used traditional painting forms and during the 1950s both used the techniques of collage and assemblage to engage critically with Pop Art in New York (NO!art movement, Lurie) and New Realism in Paris (décoll/age, Vostell).

Boris Lurie born in Leningrad in 1924, was the youngest child of Shaina (a dentist) and Ilya Lurie (a merchant, leather manufacturer and furrier). A year later, in 1925, his parents left the Soviet Union and moved to Riga in newly independent Latvia with him and his two sisters. Like many Jewish children there, he attended the German school. The family spoke Russian, Latvian, German, English and Italian. As a teenager of 17, Boris was forced to experience how his family was brutally torn apart. When the Germans occupied the country, the family had to move into the ghetto. Boris' mother, Shaina, his grandmother and the younger of his two sisters, Jeanne/Jeanna (Josephina), waited in the Riga ghetto for their "evacuation"; in fact, they were deported to Rumbula forest eight kilometres from Riga, where on 8 December 1941, in midwinter, they first had to strip and were then shot. Boris' young sweetheart, Ljuba Treskunova, was also among the victims. This was the second "campaign" after that of 30 November that finally resulted in the murder by shooting of over 30,000 Jews in Latvia. "My family was killed under German command, but in fact Latvians carried out the killings, the Latvian fascists. What had happened seemed to me like a bad dream. I had no interest whatsoever in the details. Later, it all came back to me. But that was much later." Against all the odds, Boris Lurie and his father Ilya managed to survive the next four years, first in the labour camps of Lenta and Salaspils, then in the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig and a Buchenwald satellite camp in Magdeburg, where forced labourers for the Polte munitions factory were housed.

Wolf Vostell was born as Wolfgang Schäfer in Leverkusen in 1932 to his parents Hubert Schäfer and Regina Vostell. He was too young for wartime military service; during the war years he lived with his parents in Chomutov in Sudetenland, Bohemia, and Thuringia, as evacuees from the Rhineland. In 1945 he undertook a three-month walk via Budweis, Prague, Chomutov, Dresden, Gera and Kassel back to Leverkusen. This long march through physically and morally devastated landscapes made a profound impression on him. An installation from 1973 that includes a tree and brain matter has the significant title *MANIA* and may refer to something he saw during the long walk: the brains of a pilot whose plane had crashed. Vostell never spoke to anyone about these experiences. Looking back, Vostell, like Lurie, related his biography to his work, saying in a conversation with Allan Kaprow: "I lived through my first happenings when I was about eight or nine: during an air raid warning, we all had to run one kilometre from our school into open country [...] and from there I saw aircraft combat and bombs falling to earth like flocks of birds."

Vostell's father was a guard on the German railways and a convinced antifascist. To distance himself from his German-ness, his son changed his surname on 14 October 1957, taking his mother's maiden name.



Wolf Vostell,
Adenauer, 1967

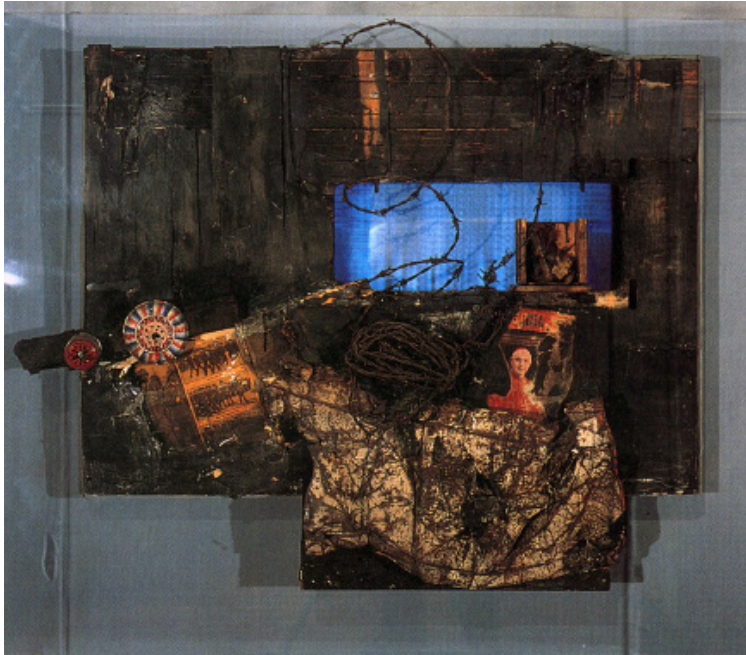
Fourteen years after his liberation in 1945, the traumas Boris Lurie had suffered were shown for the first time in his picture *Liberty or Lice*, 1959/60. The title can be read as a sarcastic commentary on how he was torn between the lice, a deadly menace in the camp, and the promised "freedom" in America, his new, but alien, home. It was the first time he managed to record the flow of his memories, to give them a visual language and shape.

In his memoirs, *In Riga*, Lurie writes that this "painting in which you ruthlessly superimposed alternatively your past history and experiences of the American reality, until all these disparate little chapters, covered over and extinguished in the process, jelled into a unified work [...]" was for him the inauguration of "an art form of full and reckless and conscious sincerity and openness". In his opinion, this new art form was "arrived at via 'unconscious' exercising, gesturing, of instantaneous projections of the mind immediately fixed on canvas; and this was art, not Dada or anti-art".

Wolf Vostell staged his first happening, *Das Theater ist auf der Straße* [*The theatre is on the Street*], in the Rue de Tour de Vanves in Paris in 1958, with a random audience. He met the Affichistes and New Realists, who had left their studios to take over the city streets and squares "as paintings".



Boris Lurie,
Liberty or Lice,
1959/60



Wolf Vostell,
Deutscher Ausblick,
1958-59

Like Boris Lurie, Vostell radically rejected the art market and the view of art as a commodity.

He too concentrated from 1959 onwards on engaging with the suppressed past and the continuation of violence and wars in the present, e.g. the Vietnam War. *Schwarzes Zimmer* [Black Room] (1958/1959, Berlinische Galerie) was Vostell's first work that was explicitly related to the topic of Auschwitz and his first "environment" in the form of a montage of three assemblages – *Auschwitz-Scheinwerfer*, *Deutscher Ausblick* and *Treblinka* – in a black room lit by only one spotlight that blinds viewers as they enter the room. It comprises exclusively found objects "décollaged" from their previous context, such as a barbed wire, children's toys, television, films, motorbike parts, a crucifix, a spotlight from the Auschwitz concentration camp, newspapers, radio, bits of wood, etc. Through the "living images" of the television and the sound of the transistor radio, Vostell creates a permanent link to the outside world, thus connecting past and present. The surreal combination of unrelated objects and the physical language of the materials in *Schwarzes Zimmer* enter into a shocking link with historically stigmatised names like Auschwitz and Treblinka. Vostell's art is, as Adorno put it, "mimesis to the hardened and the alienated". The past that has not been dealt with collides with a present that cannot be dealt with.

At the core of both Boris Lurie's and Wolf Vostell's artistic work is the engagement with the reality of the mass media and the way it absorbs and relativises all critical content. Both artists aim to adopt mass media image techniques in order to brush them against the grain, counteracting the permanent manipulation that the mass media perpetrates.



Boris Lurie,
Hard Writings: SLAVE,
1972

In many of his works, Boris Lurie addresses the hypocrisy of the puritanical American public that uses sex for commercial advertising and places photos of the Shoah between ads for consumer goods. To experience the indifference of his contemporaries seemed worse to Lurie than the crimes and violence of the perpetrators that he had experienced.



Wolf Vostell,
B52 Lippenstiftbomber,
1968

Lurie's collages are a reaction to the cynicism of the American "affluent society" to which all needs such as love or human closeness and all images, regardless of their moral significance, have become commodities.

Boris Lurie knew that suffering, once experienced, can never be sublimated, symbolised or turned into history. After a few years, this led him to give up attempting to illustrate his traumas using the techniques of traditional narrative painting. The experiences of the past frozen into his works remain without a conclusion: questions to the viewer with no explanation.

Wolf Vostell tried to empathise with the experiences that Boris Lurie had gone through in the German camps, as Anselm Kiefer also attempted to do in his 1969 work *Besetzungen* [*Occupations*]. After Vostell had moved from Cologne to West Berlin, he grew side curls and wore a caftan and a fur-lined hat in memory of the Hasidic Jews of the former Scheunenviertel neighbourhood near Alexanderplatz. In this way he aimed to recall the Jews who had fled Russian pogroms to Berlin and Germany since early in the previous century, and who had completely disappeared from the streets of German cities.

Both artists chose to pursue an art that dismembered reality, reassembling it in surprising and shocking ways that confront the viewer with facts and phenomena of violence; by leaving them with no explanation or comment, they force viewers to formulate their own response. Both artists use violent forms of expression, trying in this way to soften up the senses of their audience that have been numbed, hardened by the media's sensory overload.

Presented at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag: 22 January to 29 May 2022.

Eckhart J. Gillen and Daniel Koep



Boris Lurie,
Hard Writings: LOAD,
1972



Wolf Vostell,
Treblinka, o. J.

Kunstmuseum Den Haag

For the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, formerly known as the Gemeentemuseum, the Dutch architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage designed a breathtaking building. The museum, completed in 1935, is the final masterpiece of this 'father of modern Dutch architecture.' As one of the earliest examples of modern museum architecture in the world, the building is designed specifically to house a collection of modern art while retaining a certain beauty of its own. The building and its main galleries are flooded with daylight and the interior of the museum is characterized by its expressive decorative details. The architecture is based on the 'Berlage brick', which measured exactly 11 cm and was specially developed for the building, whose proportions determine the basic dimensions of the museum. The unique floorplan of the main galleries, corridors and cabinets ensures an intensive and varied visitor experience.

The Kunstmuseum in The Hague is one of the most important art museums in Netherlands and the largest outside of Amsterdam. Its outstanding collection includes modern- and contemporary art, applied arts and fashion. The Kunstmuseum is the leading institute for research into the oeuvre of Piet Mondrian and, with over 300 works, has the largest collection of the work of this pioneer of modern abstract art. As in a visual time-lapse, the museum presents the development of his art from the early figurative works of the 19th century to the complete abstraction in his famous neo-plastic works. The Kunstmuseum also presents Mondrian within the context of the avant-garde movement De Stijl, a group of influential artists, including Mondrian, who are considered the Dutch equivalent of the German Bauhaus.

Ever since the foundation of the Kunstmuseum, the collection has been broad in scope. Today the collection includes classical modernism, art of the post-war period, early and modern applied art, as well as photography and fashion. The modern art collection includes many highlights, including works by Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Sol LeWitt, Louise Bourgeois, and Francis Bacon.



In the area of post-war art, the museum houses a collection with strong focusses on minimal art as well as works by artists who have interpreted and used abstraction in their own way. The Kunstmuseum also continually expands its collections through regular acquisitions of works from the 1960s to 1980s and contemporary artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Paul Thek, Marlene Dumas, Isa Genzken, Berlinde de Bruyckere and Sarah Lucas. The curatorial team consists of ten permanent curators.

With around 400.000 visitors a year, drawn by the building, the collections, and over thirty exhibitions a year, the Kunstmuseum Den Haag is the best-visited art museum in the Netherlands outside Amsterdam.





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