

CHRISTOPH WEBER: PRECARIOUSLY BALANCED ROUGHNESS

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On the floor lays a gray slab. It is only a few inches thick, but it is still virtually impossible for a person to lift. Its cool colour makes it mute. Concrete is a material that does not speak. It seems silent and oppressive, not least due to its density and brittleness. At one end of the slab, the bulk has been bent upwards. While hardening, this was folded over backwards, like a piece of paper. A bulge formed along the edge, where the concrete collapsed on itself under its own weight. This warping of the material caused it to crack. The pasty substance is crumbly. The upper side of what was once formed and cast has become formless and flawed.

Some of Christoph Weber's works look as if they were flash-frozen. Is it their precariously balanced roughness that makes these objects so cold, so uncanny and rigid? Other works are curved and appear almost delicate, despite their origin as a gray sandy paste. In yet another work, two extremely heavy blocks stand opposite each other. They appear to have been made from one block that has been broken in two along a huge fault line from top to bottom. The surprising fineness of the rift's jagged accuracy points out the artificiality of the two matching pieces. Another group of works consists of laths and rough building blocks that seem randomly strewn on the floor. The cluster reminds us of the building timber left behind at construction sites or on piles of rubble. While their surfaces clearly show the traces of casting and the wood grain, their positioning and layering indicate a sense of randomness and neglect. Elements lie on top of each other, awkwardly obstructing passers-by. If it wasn't for the association with rubble and decomposition, they might remind us of deconstructive model designs taken from the bold architecture of the 1980s.

As Christoph Weber once said in a conversation, concrete is the material of violence. Indeed, this substance has a clearly defined set of meanings. Concrete stands for solidity, walls, and defence, for bulwarks and bunkers. Concrete is the substance for the construction of buildings and civil engineering – for bridges, blocks, barrels, tunnels, power stations, and military strength. When combined with steel reinforcements, it is the most stable building material, but its dull colour and inanimate firmness make it seem hostile toward life, anonymous, and blunt. Its violence lies in its ability to resist, its resilience and durability.

Weber understands his art as a kind of a stress test for the thingliness. He tests different effects and applies different types of stress. Sometimes he hangs concrete mixtures from the ceiling in

tarps, or he thinly encases reinforcements with concrete mixtures, or he waits until they are dry before taking a hammer to them or breaking them into rough fragments.

Weber's actions are not as aggressive as they are investigative. He is primarily interested in the formation process during which form becomes its opposite: formlessness. For Weber, the fluid state that defines concrete's becoming and forming is transformed after hardening into a process of erosion that signifies loss, decay, and an obliviousness to form. He creates isolated objects that exhibit refusal, resilience, and endurance. They are therefore also political.

Jacques Rancière sees the object's resistance to the hand that works it within the processing of a material as a metaphor for his current political philosophy: The essence of art cannot be defined. Art is the collapse of equality and the intrusion on the inequality of the world. Art is the will to form, against substance. Weber has explained that concrete is the material of power, 'the material of occupation.' Inspired by his family's background, he became interested in the history of Israel, the building of barriers, and the factual power of concrete and its symbolic weight. Concrete denotes violence; it guards against resistance. One of Weber's solitary cubes shows traces of fire. The block also has scratches on the edges and a crack in the middle. The injury done to it is obvious. He takes the most robust substance and lets its materiality show the degree of threat. He may be referring to the title of a 1980s song by a punk band from the squatter and anti-nuclear power movements, 'Pity Concrete Doesn't Burn,' but he proves the opposite. Burned concrete is destroyed power.

Contrary to the impression that the artist from Vienna may be part of a haptic and sculptural culture, Weber sees himself as an author who relies on critical and expressly cognitive methods. Perhaps he is even best described as an artist who keeps political Conceptual art alive because his pieces testify to methods of investigating the material and criticizing expression. And yet, Weber goes beyond the conceptual. Unlike classical Conceptual art, in his work there is no evidence of comparing texts, visual comparative studies, or semantic exercises in style. And he does not use other media, such as language. The interpretative entity remains the material itself – hence the mere presence of broken pieces of concrete and the attempt to openly display his handling of the material by destabilizing, disturbing, and stressing it.

Weber's exhibitions are more than just collections of artworks; they are also proof of certain processes. They are the residue of experimental arrangements and the visual examples of trial scenarios and political statements. In his studies (there is really no other way to refer to his concrete works), Weber does not begin with appearance, but with meaning and transitory points – the moments of the material's genesis, when it passes from a smooth and viscous to a hard and resilient state. He looks for the points when the substance lets go of its resistance, when it becomes fluid, or hardens, when it breaks or becomes vulnerable. Weber often talks about process, by which he means the substance's metamorphosis from something useful and durable to something that fails and is distorted. As long as concrete is formable and is poured in casts, it obeys its designer's will to form. But put under stress, its form and power begin to falter. Weber demonstrates this in his slender, narrow, almost elegant pieces of concrete that have been laid on plastic supports to harden. The results are thin concrete sheets that bend under their own weight, taking on a graphic quality. These leaning objects, which resemble insecure bodies, explore the limits of gravitas. The old sculptural questions – of the object's balance and weight – are visible here, as are newer

questions that correspond more to Weber's way of thinking about relationships to the body, entity, and substance. These questions concern whether or not there is some kind of existence concealed within materiality, and, not least, whether concrete material, in its Being as it is, is not in itself political.

Weber does not fall for the temptation of likenesses. His objects never illustrate anything. None of the pieces have been broken off a wall; none denote the memory of an injury survived. If we recognize one of his broken objects as a particular wall, or if we see in the works a metaphor for actual conflicts, we overlook their isolation, their presence, their character as singular artworks. Weber's objects represent nothing apart from themselves. In this sense, they are similar to the 'specific objects' of Minimal art. Unlike Minimal artists, however, Weber stresses the fact that he manufactured his works himself. His handling is what makes the destabilization of their provoked solidity possible. Weber once explained in a conversation that his works must be manageable by him, or at least by his gantry crane. To hand over their manufacture would betray their relation to the body – their relation to sensually palpable reality – and not least to the silent presence of their isolation. Part of mastering is also not mastering. The transitory points of surrendering the self – when bodies break or burst – are the points from which the material itself derives. They cannot be delegated. They rely on the autonomy of the physical substance.

Is not concrete's primary form the block? Is not its impenetrability its most effective feature? Is not its endurance more contemporary than metal bronze, which seems inferior and for ages has stood for duration and survival in the arts? Apart from political meanings, Weber's attempts to capture materiality as such leads to deeper, more serious, even primary questions. Presentation and isolation create presence. His concrete cubes, laths, and strips stand for themselves. "To exhibit" also means 'to hold something out' in the sense of presenting. This was also what existence meant to Martin Heidegger. The Latin root of 'existence' means 'to stand out.' Existence means no substitute, no representation, no depiction is allowed. Rancière also points out that art can only have an effect if it refuses representation. It stands for itself. According to Heidegger, existence means standing out in the open – in other words, exposing its Being, its embedment in threats and open decisions. While Weber understands his objects as examples of this standing out, he also distances himself from their human aspect, their aliveness and psychological make-up. He is interested in constructing a sensual ontology of materiality within time. He therefore positions the concrete bodies as free-standing things, whose solidness gives them an unthreatened appearance, but whose brittleness and injuries cast doubt on their apparent inviolability.

Translated from German by Michelle Miles and Ingo Maerker.

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Not yet titled, 2012
concrete, 29 x 98 x 75 cm
Spieltrieb, ibid projects, London



Untitled (Gegenstück), 2012
concrete, 2 parts
each 130 x 90 x 60 cm
Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris



Untitled (graues Holz), 2012
concrete, dimensions variable
Galerie naechst St. Stephan - Rosemarie
Schwarzwaelder, Vienna



Beton (gehoben), 2012
concrete, tarp, steelcable
359 x 62 x 59 cm
10, 25, 80 - projecte50, Barcelona



Buendel, 2012
rebars, cloth, cement
approx 11cm diameter, 700 cm
Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris

Untitled (Zementsprayung), 2010
Cement, Sand, Water
2 x 95 x 80 cm
Galerie naechst St. Stephan
Rosemarie Schwarzwaelder, Vienna



not yet titled, 2012
concrete
45 x 30 x 15 cm
10, 25, 80 - projecte50, Barcelona



Bent inversion, 2012
concrete
each approx 110 x 36 x 0,7 cm
10, 25, 80 - projecte50, Barcelona