



Sculptural Bodies: Lying, Hanging, Unfurling... Situating Christoph Weber's Sculptural Works

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Concrete, concrete, concrete
concrete, concrete, concrete, concrete
concrete washed,
concrete ready-mixed,
concrete finely reinforced,
We're building a world to last
more than fifty thousand years.

[...]

Clean and low-maintenance, beautiful, germ-free
you can never have enough of it,
mixed, reinforced,
fine-washed, fair-faced,
concrete, concrete, concrete,
concrete, a coloured concrete paradise.

Gerhard Polt, *Concrete*

The contrast between the neo-classical interior of St. Gallen's grand museum and Christoph Weber's raw concrete sculpture could not be any greater. Massive, immutable, and yet fragile, the sculpture lies on the fine parquet floor and "occupies" the light exhibition space, its supine form giving the impression that it has suddenly collapsed and broken apart in a great movement of unfolding and unfurling. Striking fissures streak across its surface, branching into countless finer lines. Seemingly granular extrusions protruding between the bulges on one side are perceived as elegant folds on the other. Even with these delicate differentiations of form, the sculpture has a terse sense of self-evidence, as though a vigorous motion has been solidified, the traces of a massive gesture caught in the act.

The work is basically an angular, industrial, grey concrete slab, several centimetres thick, which the artist has raised on one side during the hardening process as though to gently fold the tough material. Weber has provoked and captured a precise moment of transformation, a point of enormous material stress at which control of the substance was lost and one form tipped into another. On the back, the process has produced a regularly shaped curve, while from the front the material seems to have collapsed under its own weight, connecting the distortions to the structure as a whole. The movement that is trapped within the concrete is transformed into elegant curves and abrupt breaks, unfoldings and fault lines. It is a creative process that can be traced intellectually through the gesture of lifting, the beginning of the “folding,” the precarious moment of tipping into material overload, and the force of the collapse. All of this speaks in a figurative sense to the equal importance of construction and destruction as elements of the creative process.

Not yet titled, 2014 is so named with a wink and a nod to the fact that the act of naming a work is as crucial as giving it form. This is abundantly clear when one reconstructs the thinking behind the work. With its slabs, folds and faults, Weber’s sculpture could be (mis)understood as an accelerated experiment or an artistic model of tectonic processes over an immeasurable period of time, possibly a simulation of geological phenomena. But the material refuses such a partial natural historical reading: as the functional stuff of construction, the language of concrete makes unambiguous reference to industrial scale manufacturing in architecture and city planning, perfectly exemplifying the promise of modernity. Dreams of utopian societies and visionary urbanism did not, however, last very long. Even when it finds its way into a song by someone like the German cabaret artist Gerhard Polt, concrete is now associated with the non-places of the inner city: inhospitable residential buildings in congested areas, the forgotten spaces between roads and railways, and a general sense of blight on the landscape. The word is sometimes used as a metaphor for the apocalyptic sentiments echoed in the “No Future” attitude of late 1970s punk where “concrete” refers to the rigidity of traditional class structure and bourgeois power, not least because concrete is the stuff of bunkers and fortifications.¹

1 Cf. Thomas Trummer, “Precariously Balanced Roughness,” in *RES* (June 2013) p. 50–54. The author refers to the symbolic power of concrete, making explicit reference to the punk movement of the 1970s, squatters, and the anti-nuclear movement.





Material: traditions and qualities

Artistic materials are never, therefore, simply neutral, but have imagery of their own. That imagery, along with the history of their use and the traditions of art history on which they draw, remains inscribed in the things they form and “resonates” in each new work. Concrete has often been used in fine arts in relation to architecture, as with the modernist “Kunst am Bau,” while the apparently limitless possibilities of “béton brut” have brought a certain sculptural quality to construction. It is amazing that contemporary concrete sculpture so rarely refers to these traditions. Distant reference is made in the towering concrete steles of Isa Genzken (*1948), and in the sculptural interventions of Manfred Pernice (*1963), whose “concrete castings” take up the formal language of actual architecture and transform isolated elements into unique hybrid objects whose purpose remain unclear. Other artists use classical applications of the material to produce surprising forms: Lutz / Guggisberg (*1968 / 66) make small and medium sized concrete sculptures, which have a surreal playfulness of their own. Kilian Rüthemann (*1979), for his part, sprays liquid concrete onto walls to produce monumental drawings in space, which challenge the crude building material’s capacity to adhere to the walls of the white cube.

It is the quality of the material and the design opportunities thrown up by the peculiarities of its plasticity and production that fascinate Christoph Weber. His ability to turn the process of curing to his own advantage, intervening at exactly the right moment to subject his material to the most diverse forces, lifting it, turning it, letting it fall apart, gives his work its unique character. These are the movements, which remain apparent in the finished sculpture: the work is process frozen or hardened. It may make a powerful first impression, but there is nothing monumental about not yet titled. Still, it does evoke the metaphors of violence and power, which are inherent in the material. Simply in the acts of folding and collapsing his material, Weber is able to stretch conventional conceptions of vulnerability and fragility and pack his sculptures with complex metaphors of power and powerlessness, creation and destruction....

A look back: processes in art

Op Losse Schroeven. Situaties en Cryptostructuren and *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form* were two epochal exhibitions held in 1969, one at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the other at the Kunsthalle Bern. Together with *Eccentric Abstraction*, held three years earlier at the



Fischbach Gallery in New York, these exhibitions made an enormous contribution to the emergence of an expanded field of sculpture, which moved beyond the neutrality and rigid severity of minimalism. So-called post-minimalist art marked a conscious departure from the position represented by Donald Judd, breaking with the traditional understanding of art as artefact in favour of more process-based approaches. Artists such as Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, and Keith Sonnier expanded the canon of materials to include neon, latex, and polyester, and other hitherto untried substances in an effort to render their materiality visible. This "anti-illusionistic" art made careful use of the qualities of materials and material traces of the creative process, rather than denying their importance. And with works protruding from the walls, hanging from ceilings, spanning the walls, occupying the corridors, post-minimalist art was also characterized by fresh approaches to the use of space. Forty years later, Christoph Weber's sculptures make these moves as well: they dangle from the ceiling, lean against the wall, hang around, lie on the floor and, as with not yet titled, simply occupy the space. This is a work in which the artist transforms the strictly minimalist form of a concrete slab into a shape that is ultimately uncontrollable and so exceeds the austere aesthetics of minimalist art.

In the space of contemporary sculpture

The *Post / Post Minimal* exhibition at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen in 2014 pitched some outstanding post-minimalist works – from Bill Bollinger, Gary Kuehn, Richard Serra, and Keith Sonnier – against sculptures by contemporary artists, from Katinka Bock to Christoph Weber, whose work pursues the sculptural possibilities opened up in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In contrast to this period, the art of today is less concerned with moving beyond the conventional artistic canon as it is in broadening its contents and materials. Artistic approaches no longer define themselves in terms of bold gestures or radical breaks with tradition, but instead build naturally and smoothly on the formal research of previous generations, linking it to other artistic experiences and creating works informed by unique sensibilities of their own. The four sculptures Weber exhibited here – Beton (gehoben) (concrete [raised]), Beton (gerollt) (concrete [rolled]), Beton (gewickelt) (concrete [coiled]), and not yet titled – are emblematic of this shift. In a text accompanying the exhibition, Céline Gaillard outlines the significant moments of Weber's artistic approach: "For him [the artist], the properties of the material and its symbolic power give it an

Beton (gehoben) → p. 80
Beton (gerollt) → p. 82
Beton (gewickelt) → p. 48
not yet titled → p. 50

Beton (gerollt), 2012
82 × 58 × 11 cm

inherent meaning. He uses the process of curing to allow the act of manipulation to become visible as a performative moment. As if conducting a series of experiments, Weber explores the material's potential by searching for the ideal moment of hardening. Whether by lifting or rolling, the conditions he wrests from this archetypal twentieth-century building material are fundamentally at odds with its standard industrial usages. Weber...is basically playing with both the properties of the material and the conventions of its use.² Thomas Trummer describes this concrete sculpture as a kind of a "stress-test for thing-ness,"³ which opens metaphorically onto the two crucial aspects of contemporary art: its material properties and formal content. It is their close entanglement, highly developed in both material and intellectual terms, that testifies to the eminently contemporary nature of Christoph Weber's works. They are distinguished not only by their sense of their own materiality and the artistic processes to which it gives rise, but also by their ability to realise the metaphors latent in objects, as only the work of art can do. Weber's sculptures are substantial, but they also exemplify the precarious nature of the "human condition" in Gerhard Polt's lyrical "paradise of coloured concrete."

2 Céline Gaillard, "Exhibition text" for *Post / Postminimal. The Rolf Ricke Collection in Dialogue with Contemporary Artists*, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen 2014, unpublished.

3 Thomas Trummer, op. cit.

In the background (p. 39):
 Bill Bollinger, Untitled, 1970
 Richard Serra, Duplicate (Cut Piece), 1970
 Gary Kuehn, Straw Piece, 1963
 Gary Kuehn, Untitled, 1968
 Richard Serra, Coils [Lead Piece], 1968
 Richard Artschwager, Untitled, 1967

