



Not yet titled, never will be

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Concrete cures; it doesn't dry. The process does end, but it takes a long time: concrete is still curing long after it has become hard enough to use. Concrete is a kind of runny rock, a liquid limestone that can be poured into a mould or even sprayed onto a surface to attain the strength and appearance of quarried stone. It is a mixture of water, aggregate, and cement, which is a powder cooked from stone that was once at the bottom of the sea. Its production transforms the raw material of rock into a remarkably versatile and malleable substance. Since the invention of modern cement in the mid-nineteenth century, the excavation of stone and its redistribution in concrete form all around the world has been conducted on such an enormous scale that it is perhaps the clearest marker of human intervention on and below the surface of the earth. Bridges, tunnels, dams, canals, walls, pipes, railways, runways, and roads: concrete is the crucial substance of the entire structure and infrastructure of the modern world.

Christoph Weber's concrete was just about to turn into a standard slab when the process was arrested, stopped in its tracks. Like a cake taken out of the oven too soon, or a photographic plate prematurely brought to light, each of these not quite ready-mades stands, or rather doesn't quite stand, paused on its way to assuming its proper industry standard form, not quite up to the shape it was supposed to take. These pieces were going to be slabs, but they didn't quite make it, they never arrived. Not yet titled, not yet finished, never will be.

The result is incongruous. The slabs look soft and pliable, more like textiles than blocks of stone, but they are in fact as fixed and solid as any uniform concrete slab. They appear to have lost, or never quite attained, their shape, but of course they have lost nothing; they are simply as they are. One series is arranged as a sequence of five slabs, which appear to be slowly sliding down the wall, slumping to the floor, each less stable than the last: the first almost holding itself upright; the last folded in on itself, buckling under its own wet weight. The series is in fact supposed to run from left to right: the slab that has almost completely collapsed was the first to have its shuttering removed, after just 90 minutes, when the concrete was too fresh, and each subsequent slab was given a little longer to solidify before it was released. The last is almost standing, but hasn't quite managed to maintain its shape.



They could be stills from a stop-motion sequence, frames of a narrative which would conclude with a stable concrete block: the story would end with the finished work. But Weber does not frame the series with an unformed heap or a final piece: the world has no need for yet another perfect block. Instead we are shown the story in between; captured are the moments on the way, the stages of development implicit in every finished block, but normally not let out of the box.

It's not that the slabs have not dried properly: cement sets and hardens, but drying is peripheral to the process of curing, the final stage in concrete's long passage to itself. Water makes it plastic and malleable: it needs to be wet in order to be workable. Some of this water evaporates, but this is not what makes the concrete hard. It is in fact a process of hydration, rather than dehydration, which makes concrete stiffen, solidify, and gain its strength. A series of exothermic chemical reactions begins when water is added to cement and ends long after a concrete form can be considered strong enough to fulfill the purpose for which it has been cast. It seems so solid, dead and dry, but it is water that makes concrete hard. So crucial is water to its chemistry, that concrete can almost be said to be a means of trapping liquid, making water set.

Concrete is cooked in a series of processes that employ a culinary vocabulary of ingredients, recipes, ovens, and mixers, not to mention all the crushing, baking, cooling, grinding, stirring, pouring, spreading, and setting. These terms are just as likely to be found in a kitchen as they are at a cement works. It is in myths about the cooking of food that Levi-Strauss divines the difference between nature and culture, the unelaborated and the elaborated: food in the raw is life in the raw, and cooking marks the shift into the cultural. Some kinds of cooking involve only the most minimal processing of food: roasting over a fire is a matter of cooking with air, an immediate and direct use of heat that can lead to food that is well cooked on the surface but raw inside. Others are more thorough and elaborate: boiling requires the mediation of pots and pans and water too, and uses fire to heat the pot and the water to cook food. But all kinds of cooking mediate between the natural and the cultural world. Cooking is a moment of transition, a shift between dimensions, a step between two worlds.

This distinction can of course be played in many ways, as Levi-Strauss does in relation to food: it might be said that the most elaborated processes of cooking have an affinity to the most elaborated forms of cultural life. But food that is barely touched, the least mediated food, also belongs to the most refined cultural plane: sushi is far more sophisticated than boiled fish; the bourgeoisie favours salad over fast, processed food.



The work of stonemasons might also be considered far more sophisticated than that of construction workers mixing and pouring their concrete on site, and buildings cast in concrete might be seen as impoverished and crude when compared to buildings sculpted out of stone. But in terms of the complex nature of its production, its unique material qualities, the sheer extent of its use, and the scale of its impact on the world, concrete is exemplary cultural stuff. The making of rock by grinding, baking, and steeping stone, distributing it on a global scale, and pouring it into negative spaces formed by moulds or shuttering on site: these are infinitely more elaborate processes than cutting and using stone fresh, as it were, from the ground. As a construction material, concrete has a plasticity that constitutes a break with the necessities of stone and makes entirely new forms and structures possible: it is the stuff of contingency. The scale of its use, its ubiquity, and its crucial role in the erection of the entire military and industrial edifice, make concrete one of the most present and dominant expressions of anthropogenic impact on the world.

But concrete does as much to scramble distinctions between nature and culture, origin and artifice, as it does to solidify them. The production of concrete continues the long journey made by limestone, itself a sedimentary rock, which forms in warm and shallow seas alive with corals, algae, and the skeletons and shells of underwater organisms rich in calcium carbonate. This fossilised marine environment is the limestone that is later quarried, crushed, and baked into cement. When water is added to the mix, it is this ancient underwater world that assumes a new and massively redistributed role on the surface of the earth.

Modern concrete — made from Portland cement — was developed in the nineteenth century, but the use of stone did of course survive: some cities celebrate the purity of such raw material, defining themselves by the natural simplicity and local nature of the stone with which they are built. Jerusalem owes its identity not only to the stone backdrop of the Knesset and the stones of the Western wall, but to its whole built environment, which must, by law, be constructed using local limestone, “Jerusalem stone”. Or at least, its buildings have to appear to be built from this stone, even when they are in fact concrete clad in a just few millimeters of stone. Tel Aviv, on the other hand, to the west, is a city of concrete, not of stone. This is the city of experimentation: just as stone stands for tradition, religion, and stability in Jerusalem, the city set in stone, the concrete curves and contours of Tel Aviv’s Bauhaus buildings were designed to represent the modern, the secular, the adventurous side of a city facing the future and sea.



Tel Aviv's architects explored the qualities proper to concrete, what it could do that stone could not. But rather than providing a basis for experimental design, concrete's plastic properties are more often channelled into the production of blocks of easy, cheap, and convenient artificial stone.

This is concrete at its most conventional, dull and drab; a standard and monotonous expression of the standard building blocks of modern culture. And if Tel Aviv took its special shape from concrete's very malleability, the landscape to the east of Jerusalem is marked by concrete at its orthodox extreme: a brute show of strength and uniformity in the form of a tall and implacable wall. This concrete has been cooked to perfection and properly cured, its liquidity locked into the rigidity of a standardised form. Tel Aviv's architects took careful account and great advantage of concrete's unique qualities, but the wall's engineers are using it simply as a substitute for stone, stuff to be set in an established mould.

It is in this standard use of concrete, the production of blocks, the building of barriers, that Weber intervenes. His concrete exceeds the standard form, refuses to be held and slotted into place. It breaks the mould, evades its proper destiny, interrupts the standard story that would make it fit for purpose in the construction industry or military machine. In Levi-Strauss's terms, it would be rotten, not too raw or under cooked; in a concrete plant it would be thrown away.

Weber's blocks are neither standing stones nor standard concrete slabs, nor are they rotten scraps or half-baked goods. They may seem immature and insecure, but this belies their solidity; they are as fixed and finalised as concrete blocks can be. They have the appearance of unfinished, uncooked goods, but they are locked into strange forms of their own, one of which is the mould of modern art. Weber's concrete journey is not broken, but diverted to the gallery, where concrete meets culture once again and curing converges with curation.



not yet titled, 2015
5/5 parts
140 x 766 x 77 cm