

# ANNA MARRA

ARTE CONTEMPORANEA

Maria Elisabetta Novello

Christoph Weber

## **FRAGILE earth and sky, handle with care**

text by Giorgia Gastaldon

This exhibition's title is borrowed – from a rather non-artistic sector and English – a warning to “handle fragile” materials “with care”. At the same time it refers to the paradigm of the sky and earth, spatial and temporal coordinates within which, this is certain, our existence takes place: their boundaries limit the reality within which our lives unfold, the certainties of a system and which now, more and more often, is showing signs of collapse.

The word “fragile” (from the Latin “*fragilitis*”) indicates, literally, a tendency that some materials, not able to deform themselves or bend, have of breaking into pieces. The term is not used exclusively for materials but, by extension and analogy, it is an adjective used to describe people, situations and entire ecosystems and societies. It is in this “extended context” that the concept of fragile has become common when referring to crisis situations, splits, collapses and fragmentations, which appear every day on the pages of our newspapers, linked, variously to environmental precariousness, weaknesses of our current political structures, cultural conflicts and so on. On the other hand it is a fact that currently, perhaps more than ever before, the West finds itself confronted by a crisis of doubt regarding perennial utopic technological progress, even when this is used to achieve positive ends or for the good and growth of the collectivity.

The collapse of Ponte Morandi in Genoa last summer has certainly become emblematic of the crisis of the durability and resistance of reinforced concrete, for Italy but also abroad, in one moment we awoke to some of the fragility that characterises Italy's current social, political and economic systems, a climatic event as it were.

Once we moved beyond the real tragedy, the collapse of this bridge touched off a process of reflection and review regarding the condition of Italian infrastructure and the outcome of this has been both disquieting and alarming, thousands and thousands of bridges are structurally fragile because of the lack of care taken in their operation and maintenance. Italians have discovered that they are living in an historical period and in a country in which sizable portions of Roman aqueducts are still standing, but no one can guarantee the safety of thousands of bridges constructed built over the last seventy years.

The image of cracked concrete and collapsed reinforced structures has for years been the *leitmotiv* of Christoph Weber's research in his sculptural work, work which more often than not has used precisely cement.

So in this two-person exhibition his works are transformed into a trigger inspiring a reflection which is not only formal: his structures and masses of cracked or fractured concrete, which have collapsed on themselves, in fact become metaphors for the structural and cultural “fragility” of contemporary society. His works in cement – here representing the artificial surfaces on which, more and more often, we place our steps – inevitably end up revealing our unshakeable faith in the infinite resistance of modern constructive techniques. At the same way though they lay bare our faith – probably anything but unshakeable – in the social system within which we live out our existences. So inevitably his works are all, representations that in some way move visitors to ask themselves what exactly, in terms of structures, materials, weights and counterweights, they are looking at.

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In one of the sculptures shown here, bearing the ambiguous title of *Not yet titled* (2014), there is a steel bar similar to those used in building reinforced concrete structures, located under a block of concrete that, because of this latter's weight and the "softness" of its material in the drying period, has literally collapsed around it. On the surface of this volume – it still seems visually soft and melting and caressable in its languid materialism – we note a crack: a wound, which cannot be fixed because of the dry cement's current hardness, revealing how the work was done, but also highlighting the presence of the steel bar. The bar normally used to support a structure, here ends up breaking it, and that which makes the construction safe and lasting in this context reveals itself as "other" – a purely aesthetic solution, without any architectonic function whatsoever – but rather as a fragile and uncertain poetic element. This concept is further elaborated in another work, created in the same year and given the same title, in which a thin but wide block of cement is placed on low steel steps. Here once again, as before, the softness of the concrete, not yet dry, obliges the block to adapt its geometry – its surface is flaking and can only be guessed at – to the solids and voids of the underlying structure, causing folds and cracks that bring to mind the drapery found on more classic sculpture.

In another work – *Beton (Gerollt)* (2013) – a further paradox is presented, concrete usually used "to support" is here "supported" as the cement is inserted in the fold of a looped sheet of tarpaulin which in its turn hangs from large nails in a wall. Similarly in *Beton (Lehnend)* (2019), a thin sheet of cement instead of forming a wall of a building leans against a wall of one of the gallery's rooms. As if this were not enough this last seems even to be winning in this precarious contest of strength and it has managed to cause an nth, deep and irreparable crack in the sculptural body of the work.

This type of contradiction can also be observed in two works that relate the concrete to more malleable and less durable and resistant materials. In the *Carton Pierre* (2016) series, for example, the blocks of cement are inserted in cardboard boxes that seemingly are not going to be able to take the weight of the sculptural mass contained if they are raised from the ground like any other box. In the same way, in *Beton (gefaltet)* (2013) – translated, literally "folded concrete" – cement takes on the characteristics of a textile folded back on itself and resembling a book as one is leafing through it.

With the earth shaking and cracking under our feet, revealing its senseless and scary fragility, the sky – toward which for centuries explorers and navigators turned the eyes in search of luminous reference points to orient themselves – is certainly no more reassuring: in fact in many cities atmospheric pollution obscures the view of the sun, while light pollution, probably irreversibly, has made it virtually impossible to observe the most beautiful stars in the night sky.

These aspects too are emblematic of the fragile system within which we live. The air we breathe, for example, though it continues obviously to represent a fundamental element for our survival is all too often the source of invisible dangers linked to pollution that has now unequivocally modified our ecosystem forever. In the same way the sky above our heads is the immaterial space in which the invisible radiation of all our communication systems is concentrated, while the grey smog that obscures the vertical horizons of our cities is no longer really atmospheric in nature.

In this sense, Maria Elisabetta Novello's research as presented in this exhibition is both contrary to and complementary of Christoph Weber's. She looks at, not the earth – artificial or not, under our feet – but at the celestial vault that is still to be seen over our heads. It is in this sense that also Novello enquires about the "health" of our skies, denying its predictable, unchanging, constant presence to concentrate both her and our attention rather on the precariousness and fragility which characterise it.

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In *Carte del cielo* (2018), for example, the celestial maps of the months of November, December and January (2018-2019) are reproduced on large sheets of lead: on these the artist has painstakingly picked out the stars, constellations and other astral reference points. These celestial maps are, in fact, parts of the sky which have “fallen” – more or less ruinously – to earth, in a scenario that moves scientific and astronomic research and knowledge toward a post-catastrophe climate. The choice of lead has been anything but casual. Firstly one should remember that though this metal, initially was used in art as a manifesto of the extra-pictorial per antonomasia, it can now boast of a decade’s long tradition in avantgarde artistic research, from Richard Serra on. Secondly, one must not forget that lead is one of the fundamental elements used in alchemy, the esoteric science whose first goal was precisely to transform this poor and negative metal – not by chance linked, in astronomy, to the planet Saturn and so the symbol of evil and ignorance – into the most noble of all materials: gold, a metaphor of splendor, knowledge and a raising of the spirit. In addition, lead is, because of its metallurgic characteristics, a material that does not allow the passage of luminous radiation and it is here that these celestial maps reveal their how they are a real contradiction in terms. They represent that which is most brilliant, the stars, but on a material which cannot be crossed by the luminous radiation of these.

The ambiguity of the materials adopted is on the other hand the principle ordering many of Maria Elisabetta Novello’s works, even when she uses her preferred material – impalpable ash – modelling it into structures and blocks that seem solid, durable, resistant and sculptural to those observing them, but which then crumbles in the lightest of draughts.

This contradiction between the reality of the representation and the reality of the materials is central also in the series of *Notturni* (2018) and *Notturmo I. Sereno* and *Notturmo II. Sereno* (2019), works in which compressed soot forms “pictorial surfaces” that change into documentation, apparently photographic, of the infinite and imponderable astral universe, a contradiction similar to that of the heavy lead celestial maps depicting the lightness which we normally associate with the sky over our heads.

In conclusion, this exhibition aims to probe the paradigm of knowledge that has become technique, whether positive or a failure. Regarding this latter aspect the artists look at some of the real and factual aspects of the crisis of contemporary society, using modern sculptural research as their metaphor. The decision to present a dialogue between two artists who do not usually work with the materials “typically” used in producing more traditional sculpture has to be read in this same direction, as the first step of placing their public in crisis, obliging it in this way to ask “questions of the sense” in the presence of the works they find themselves confronted with.

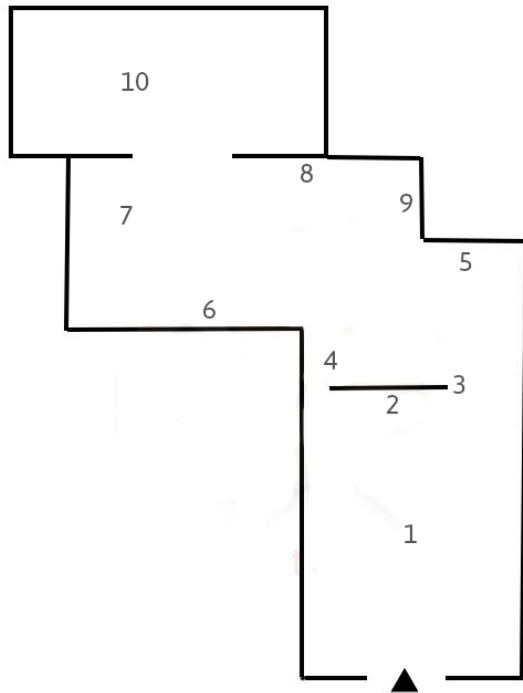
It is the unmasking of and denunciation of the fragility of materials that this exhibition wishes to show the public, using aesthetic paradigms to avoid the boundaries of simple artistic reflection, influencing rather our thoughts on the real world of today.

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- 1| Christoph Weber, Not yet titled, 2014
- 2| Maria Elisabetta Novello, Paesaggi, 2018
- 3| Christoph Weber, Beton (lehnend), 2019
- 4| Christoph Weber, Beton (gefaltet), 2013
- 5| Maria Elisabetta Novello, Notturmi III, 2018  
Maria Elisabetta Novello, Notturmi II, 2018  
Maria Elisabetta Novello, Notturmi I, 2018
- 6| Maria Elisabetta Novello, Carta del cielo. Novembre, 2018  
Maria Elisabetta Novello, Carta del cielo. Dicembre, 2018  
Maria Elisabetta Novello, Carta del cielo. Gennaio, 2019
- 7| Christoph Weber, Carton pierres, 2016
- 8| Maria Elisabetta Novello, Notturmo. Sereno I, 2019  
Maria Elisabetta Novello, Notturmo. Sereno I, 2019
- 9| Christoph Weber, Beton (gerollt), 2013
- 10| Christoph Weber, Not yet titled, 2014

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