

Christoph Weber, *Untitled (Schotterkahn)*, 2017

Opus caementicium, or Roman concrete, a cement-like structural mortar, is regarded as a precursor of modern concrete and was already known to Roman builders more than two thousand years ago. Consisting of a mixture of rock, sand, pozzolanic ash and quicklime as binders, it was used to make water pipes, piers, foundations and structures such as the Colosseum or the Pantheon.

Ever since ancient times, then, this building material, that was constantly refined, has been a symbol of a social process, a cultural transformation of the raw into the cooked in the sense of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who sought to couch different world views in language by forming categorical opposites. Without judgement, he contrasts “cold societies”, that hold on to traditional structures, with “hot societies”, whose concerted endeavours are aimed at progress and change.

Concrete is thus defined as the material that has accompanied our economic and socio-political development since ancient times. Harking back to Lévi-Strauss’s book *The Raw and the Cooked* from 1964, Sadie Plant observes: “food in the raw is life in the raw, and cooking marks the shift into the cultural”.¹ With regard to concrete as a material, this is important in that its ingredients are deposits from the depths of the ocean, eruptive rock masses and mined materials. These raw materials are combined, “cooked”, in order to set cultural standards.

Cement serves as a hydraulic binder that causes concrete to set rather than dry. Paradoxically, the setting process is only effected by adding water and thus turns concrete into a liquid substance. This apparent contradiction turns out to be a tautology in which the liquidity of the material is as true as its stability.

Being characterised by oscillations, by repulsive and attractive tendencies, the breathing of a material, this goes to substantiate the untenability with regard to unequivocal interpretations of human development projects.

In his work, Christoph Weber immerses himself in this oscillatory process, scrutinising various materials, their properties and fields of application, so as to create new proposals and forms. In this process he deals with various issues and historical facts along with the connections that exist between different materials and meanings. Concrete as the most frequently used material, both constituting and interlinking our transport lifelines, fortifications, stately buildings, factories and private homes or furniture, has seen, and continues to see, new interpretations in terms of its use especially since Le Corbusier. This material is folded, rolled, shaped, and used by Weber in a sculpturally distinctive mode. At odds with its customary usage, the artist opens up the material, becoming engrossed in it and exposing its ramifying cracks along with the ambivalence of fragility and durability, liquidity and stability, nature and construction. Fracture points are defined as constructionally meaningful occurrences and their historical and evolutionary significance is put into perspective by processes of seismographic probing.

The background for *Untitled (Gravel barge)*, 2017, *Re-enactment of historical gravel mining, concrete sculpture* lies in the old sideline of mining gravel 2017

and sand from the river Feistritz and transporting it on rafts. The photographic archive of Franz Rabl from Altenmarkt revived this long-forgotten work. His media documentation forged a link to the past and revealed the importance of this work for the present. Flat barge-style boats developed especially for transporting this material were filled to the brim with sediments, using the river Feistritz as a transport route.

Research into this forgotten tradition and into a fundamental process in the history of technology, separating and sieving materials—the basis of the concrete plants that exist here today—is as

distinctive of Weber's work as his visualisation of the production of concrete by crushing and grinding, that implies harking back to the old milling technology in the region and its connection with water.

In reference to the mining process, the artistic concept includes a collaboration with the local concrete manufacturers and the vocational training institute bfi in Fürstenfeld, involving young people receiving second-chance training. As part of their wood workshop training, based on old photos and using three-ply spruce boards, a transport boat is reconstructed which is 5m long, 2m wide and 60cm deep, the only variation being its gently curved keel.

In this case, the combination of conceptual and craft work, essential for Weber, begins in his collaboration. Using poles he steers his boat upstream along the waterway together with young people from Fürstenfeld, scooping up sand and gravel with original equipment and shovels. With the aid of a grading line, a column of sieves, the material is separated based on grain composition. An inspection of the standard grading lines shows how many additives are needed. Material is added for concrete of excellent pouring quality. In addition to preparing the mixture, the work also involves taking account of work conditions and the production process: no permits are required for removing the material from the river as long as the work is done manually. More than 800 litres of water and three tons of gravel were scooped up with buckets and analysed to make the sculpture.

In the end, the boat as a means of transport becomes the formwork. The self-mixed concrete is poured into the conical form of the barge and the sculpture is "baked" in a "pan". To prevent wood and concrete from fusing, the boat is treated with polyurethane varnish so as to rule out any sticking and to allow the finished product to be "turned out" easily, similar to a cake. This reveals another material tautology, given that spar varnishes are also the ideal coating for concrete formwork too. Hence, "everything just falls into place, everything is already there".²

Production conditions, raw material mining, technical development and social conditions are not only reflected on in this work, but are also integral elements. The result is a concrete sculpture that, once it is turned over and the formwork removed, creates the image of a boat protected from storms. Contrasting with the actual weight of the ton-heavy sculpture, the ease of the gesture of turning over a boat on land corresponds to the relation between the apparent lightness of the load-carrying vessel on the water and the invisible weight of the turned-out mould.

Made from that material that, on the one hand, stays liquid, but which can only set with the aid of water, this sculpture explores points of intersection between different aggregate states and divergent levels of meaning. Mingling natural and cultural manifestation and juxtaposing various interests that lead to tension, as a narrative element—and at the same time as a "counterpart" and "negative form"—the object raises questions concerning production conditions, mobility, prosperity, economic viability, capacity for technical development, efficiency and their meaningfulness, lending concrete form to these questions as a new sculptural posit on the bank of the river Feistritz.

¹ Sadie Plant, "Not yet titled, never will be", in: Christoph Weber, *Uncast*, ed. Georgia Holz, Christoph Weber, Leipzig 2015, p. 21

² Christoph Weber in an interview on 19 April 2017