



Methodology and Process: The Development of Christoph Weber's Comprehension-Driven Treatment of Material

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In an interview preparatory to this article, Christoph Weber described his artistic development as a practice moving from “methodological comprehension” in earlier pieces to collaborating and struggling with one material: concrete. From their titles alone, the sculptures **Beton (gehoben)** (concrete [lifted]), **Beton (gefaltet)** (concrete [folded]) and **Beton (gerollt)** (concrete [rolled]) describe procedures that seem to defy the conventions of concrete's use. This archetypical twentieth-century building material is associated with fixity of shape, solidity, inalterability, hardness and resilience. Yet concrete is elegantly wrapped around reinforcement bars in **Bündel** (Bundle), protrudes from a tarpaulin hanging on a wall in **Beton (gerollt)**, bends pliantly around boards and steel plates in **Beton (gewickelt)** (concrete [wrapped]) and **not yet titled**, leans on the wall like an unsteady body in **bent inversion**; or as a frail sort of seesaw- or arc-shape balances on the floor in defiance of gravity's pull. The appearance of the artwork is both coarse and soft, solid and fragile, rigid and immovable — as if they are a congealment of time itself, clutching a moment and conserving an action to render it visible for the viewer. Thorough preparation of the mould and precise knowledge of the hardening process are critical for the final result. At the very moment when its state of matter shifts from viscous to solid, Weber lifts, overturns or folds the concrete and forces it into a shape for which the material was not intended. Happenstance is intentional, just as failure is a constant companion in the artist's experimental trials, albeit one he sees as constructive.

Christoph Weber is interested in processuality and the contextual shift created by the physical metamorphosis from the shapeless to the literally concrete, a transition during which he subjects the material to an extreme load test. The material, rather than submitting to total *a priori* control, dictates the artworks' shape by way of its physical properties and its production process. In his more recent concrete sculptures, Weber's performative procedures and the material's processuality are manifested in shapes that are practically “flash-frozen.”¹

1 Thomas Trummer, “Precariously Balanced Roughness,” in *RES* (June 2013), p. 50.

Even if the focus appears to be placed on the artistic act and the near-infinite array of ways to shape concrete, Christoph Weber's work should by no means be classed as purely formalist. He is also permanently interested in semantic dimensions, in what he calls "methodological comprehension". He is vitally occupied by his search for a specific technique that can realise his concepts, for the criteria of when and why a particular artistic method or material must be brought into play. Accordingly, his point of departure is a conceptual analysis, the idea of an object that governs the choice of material and the process of execution, even if that process in turn — despite all artistic mastery — remains unpredictable.

Weber has said on several occasions that, for him, concrete is a material of violence, a symbol of destruction and occupation. Indeed his first works in concrete might leave viewers with precisely that impression. In **Contradiction**, reinforcement bars jut out dangerously into the room while serving, in their systematic neatness, as an almost melancholic "picture frame" for the exposed concrete square. In **Schade, dass Beton nicht brennt** (pity concrete doesn't burn) a concrete block that has been forcibly liberated from its casing using flame-throwers testifies at once to vulnerability and an almost sentimental, scenic beauty.

Christoph Weber's work always displays an innate dichotomy between construction and destruction, violence and tenderness, depression and hope. In the artist's own words, it has a distinct "laconic sadness"² to it. No sculptures convey this compound dichotomy better than a series of pieces that bear the common designation **Untitled (Gegenstück)** (counterpart) from 2010. In each piece, two monolithic concrete blocks stand facing one another, separated by a crack and appearing to have been broken apart from a single solid block. If one of the blocks is missing an enormous corner piece, its counterpart has a protrusion that matches it perfectly. Yet there are also smooth surfaces between the two blocks, revealing the absurdity of the fissure and thereby the artificial production process. First, one block was cast in concrete. After it hardened, a corner was broken off. Next, the resulting surface of fracture was moulded in silicone rubber and added to the mould of the second block, which was then poured. Both objects indicate that Christoph Weber's artistic practice not only accommodates the metaphors inscribed in the material, but also the material's unique consistency. As a type of artificial rock, concrete passes through various states of matter from liquid to solid, enabling it to be cast in a pre-determined shape or sculpted in its hardened state. Concrete allows for both "modelling," an additive process that creates a shape by affixing material, and "carving," a subtractive process that creates a shape by removing material.

² In this connection, Weber also discusses literature, especially the work of Thomas Bernhard and Erich Kästner's metropolitan novel *Fabian*, for whose "laconic sadness" he feels a deep affinity. Cf. unpublished interview with Timothée Chaillou, January 2012.



Weber's **Gegenstück** sculptures always follow the same procedure. Rational, calculated fabrication is followed by physical demolition, which in turn serves as a precondition for renewed fabrication. Construction enables deconstruction and the other way around. The capacity for human control remains crucial throughout. Christoph Weber would never abandon his process-oriented technique in favour of a purely mechanical procedure; unlike the Minimalists, he would never use mass-produced or made-to-measure industrial products. Although his sculptures are reminiscent of minimal art, they never deny the traces of their production conditions, the material's consistency always remains in view, and they never convey the Minimalists' rigid self-referentiality and chilly severity. Christoph Weber even creates the **Gegenstücke**, some of which weigh tonnes and are beyond human scale, by hand on his own. He only resorts to help from a crane and assistants when demoulding and repositioning them. In that sense, Weber is a completely traditional sculptor who processes his work.

Concrete was not always Weber's preferred medium for his sculptures, but they were always about "methodological comprehension," about materials as carriers of meaning, about questions of construction and deconstruction or, to put it broadly, about the inextricable entanglement of material, formal and semantic dimensions. Unlike his current concrete sculptures, Weber's earlier works do not put their materiality on display. Rather, the materials he uses are processed and transformed so as to metaphorically reference other materials or objects. While the earlier works suggested historical or socio-political implications, such implications are already inscribed in the concrete itself. This transformation from one material to another, with its own appearance and set of connotations, is now accomplished within one material and its states of matter.

In his installation **Untitled (Ramponeau)**, for instance, Weber arranges papier-mâché cobblestones modelled on one taken from the Rue Ramponeau in Paris, the location of the last barricade of the Paris Commune in 1871. By creating the papier-mâché exclusively out of books that predate the Commune, Weber not only inscribes the abstract objects into a tangible historical discourse, he poses questions about the interrelationship of fiction and reality, signifier and signified. The materials in **Objets externes** (external objects) undergo a similar procedure: he created silicone rubber moulds of building façades, used them to cast slabs in coloured wax, and folded the slabs into post-minimalistic-looking cubes.

With the silicone moulding process, the precise surface textures of the façades were recreated down to the slightest detail, negotiating questions about the categories of public and private, outdoor and indoor. As the texture of some of the façades have since changed or been painted over, the objects can be seen as kind of time capsules that inscribe historical information from the past for the sake of the present and future, but also expose the specific material properties of change and evanescence.

The "comprehension" of a historical or personal experience depends on memory. In 1914, Sigmund Freud proposed "remembering, repeating and working through" as a method for coming to terms with a traumatic experience by re-presenting the past.³ Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud's theory in 1953 and radicalised it by describing repetition as a symbolic act in contrast with memory, which he called an imaginary act.⁴ Postmodern philosophy views repetition as a positive capacity of action, an act of differentiation; because an "again" never occurs at the same point in time, time is the differentiator. The act of repetition produces memory; the act differentiates itself from what was repeated and enables something different and new. The action itself is what differentiates.

In works such as **Untitled (Chunks)** or **Trauma**, Weber consciously endeavours to come to grips with the theme of repetition as a means of re-presenting repressed fears and memories. In both cases, the prerequisite of repetition is destruction. For **Untitled (Chunks)**, he created many deceptively realistic copies of a concrete block that he had violently broken apart. He lined up the new blocks, made of chalky grey plastic, in a precise row across the room. Although the installation might call to mind a defensive barricade, the exact repetition of its shape and spatial presentation gives the violent imagery an absurd overtone. This absurdity and artificiality is exposed more directly than in later sculptures, for it only references the material of concrete instead of actually being made of it. Likewise, **Trauma** plays with the bewilderment that comes from precisely repeating destruction several times over. Weber smashed into a door with an axe, meticulously moulded the splintered gash in silicone rubber, and affixed the replicas onto six identical doors. The arrangement of the identically broken doors around a closed room, which visitors can only glimpse through the hole in the original door, can be read as a reference to the destructive power of humans and the psychological trauma of both perpetrators and victims.

3 In 1914, Sigmund Freud coined the term "working through" in a short article as a psychoanalytic technique based on the assumption that remembering an unpleasant experience and repeating it are not enough to bring about a permanent change. See: Sigmund Freud, *Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten (Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse, II)* (Remembering, Repeating and Working Through [More Suggestions on Psychoanalytic Technique, II]) (1914), in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10 (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1946), pp. 126–136.

All of Christoph Weber's work grapples with reality, its representation and perception mechanisms, investigating nomenclature, conceptual patterns and socio-political systems of organisation. His art is intrinsically imbued with both semantic / conceptual and formal / material ambiguity and embodies an implicit dichotomy between deconstruction and construction. It is never only one or the other, but always both: unsettling and conciliatory, solid and vulnerable, aggressive and passive, coarsely unrestrained and elegantly sensual — and always human. Christoph Weber's path as an artist has taken him from contextual shifts by material transfer to his current exclusive use of concrete, within which he negotiates formal and semantic implications. One might posit that his treatment of materials has changed overall: While the act and repetition of destruction sometimes played central roles in his earlier work and can still be recognised in his scorched concrete sculptures and his bisected solid **Gegenstücke**, his more recent work seems to suggest a self-confident, almost playful treatment of the material. For Christoph Weber, concrete has become a matter of course. His struggle against the material has given way to a sense of play with(in) it. What remains constant is his practice of "methodological and processual comprehension", an act that, in its specific temporality, will never be an affirmative confirmation, but always a visualisation, a differentiation, an attempt.

⁴ In particular, see: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

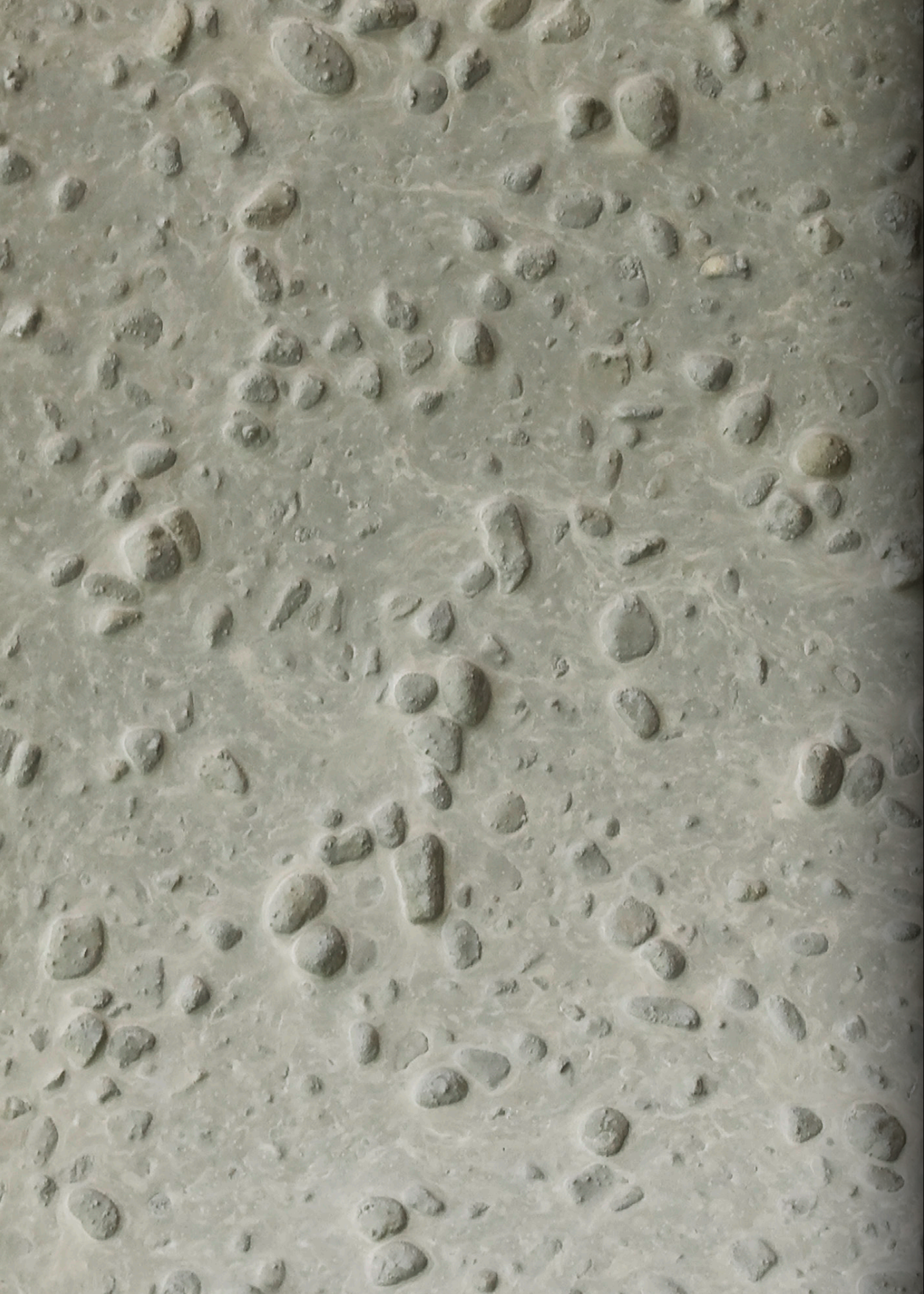
Untitled (Gegenstück) → p. 140





Untitled (Gegenstück), 2012
130 x 135 x 90 cm overall









unfold, 2011
2/2 parts
198 x 19 x 5 cm each