



Papier-maché Cobblestones: On Christoph Weber's Untitled (Ramponeau)

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I have no significant events to relate from the years 1870–71.
I divided my time between the field and the studio.

Paul Cézanne
(in a letter to Ambroise Vollard)¹

How striking is it that the pioneer of modern art had nothing to report from this period.² 1871 was the year of an event in which, according to the Russian revolutionary and contemporary witness Pjotr L. Lawrow, “socialists of all persuasions worked not to implement some particular programme or isolated dogma, but rather to take every opportunity to bring about the historical conditions for a conscious struggle of the proletariat against its oppressor.”³ This event was the Paris Commune.

But Cézanne was focused on his own work,⁴ a stance that was emblematic of the artist's role in the newly autonomous field of art, which separated the radicalism of artistic production from any kind of emancipatory politics. Their reconciliation has been sought ever since. Not that connections between politics and art have been absent from the modern age: They have indeed endured throughout this period in both social and artistic terms, and 1871 was itself a crucial point of reference for politically oriented art. Even then, well-known artists such as Gustave Courbet and Camille Pissarro were expressing sympathy for the rebels and paving the way for what became a fluctuating history of “art interlinked with

1 Cited in Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Paul Cézanne, 1839–1906. Pioneer of Modernity* (London: Taschen Verlag, 2007), p. 19.

2 Thanks to Tom Holert for his critical and helpful comments on this text.

3 Pjotr L. Lawrow, *Die Pariser Kommune. Geschehnisse – Einfluss – Lehren* [1880] (Unrast: Verlag Münster, 2003), p. 182.

4 That this process of concentration is not the exception but, because it is so focused on the processes of shaping and perception crucial to art, the recognised rule. “There is no doubt,” writes the art historian Herbert Read on Cézanne, “that what we call the modern movement in art begins with the single-minded determination of a French painter to see the world objectively.” Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* [1959] (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), p. 13.



revolution.”⁵ Nevertheless, whether its engagement is expressed through its themes, contents, or simply the positions adopted by those who make it, the need to justify the involvement of art in politics is as old as “art” itself.⁶

Any political engagement requires a certain dialogue with notions of artistic autonomy. Christoph Weber is one of many artists to have entered into this exchange, and the resolve with which he has made this step is clear from **Untitled (Ramponeau)**: a work which goes back to the first moment in which the separation can be said to have occurred. The “pioneer of modernism” may have chosen not to see the social and political struggles of this time, but the significance of the moment has continued to be recognised “in every language of the civilised world.”⁷⁸

When Weber made his heaps of papier-mâché stones, reproduced from a cobblestone, which he took from the rue Ramponeau, the site of the Commune’s last barricade in May 1871, he did so using books that were around at the time. Snippets of text can be discerned in the papier-mâché’s grey-brown sheen: The stones cannot hide the fact that they are made from the wrong material.⁹

In one sense, these piles of papier-mâché stones touch base with other works of Weber’s in which the question of material is raised; the usage it permits, what it has to say. Weber’s buckled, folded, and tilted concrete is of course provocative and shows no respect for the grandiose sense of stability that has made it, together with glass and steel, a symbol of economic progress as well as a reference point for art. Stones made of paper might also induce the same surprise and unfamiliarity as that of folded concrete, but insofar as they prompt broader reflections on the artistic processes involved in selecting, using, and giving value to things, these papier-mâché cobblestones do more besides.

5 Gerald Raunig: *Kunst und Revolution. Künstlerischer Aktivismus im langen 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Turia + Kant 2005), p. 7 and 63ff. See too the exhibition organised in 2007 by Charles Esche and Will Bradley in the Tate London and the Vanabbemuseum Eindhoven and the accompanying publication on the relationship between art production and social change is considered in relation to the Paris Commune, Charles Esche and Will Bradley eds., *Art and Social Change. A Critical Reader* (London: Tate/Afterall, 2007).

6 See for example Helmut Draxler, “The Curse of the Good Deed / The Claim to Autonomy and the Suspicion of Ideology in Political Art,” in *Texte zur Kunst* no. 80 (December 2010), pp. 100–103.

7 Piotr L. Lawrow: *Die Pariser Kommune*, op. cit., p. 181.

8 Weber has also made *Untitled (copper engraving, 1631)* with the same historical and material accuracy: copper strips in the form of modified clouds of smoke are mounted on the wall along the lines of a caricature from a 1631 leaflet. Such leaflets were first produced during the 30 Years’ War, and, because of the then high rates of illiteracy, were heavily reliant on visual elements.

9 A photograph of the street with the missing stone and a box of old books no longer or never read also form parts of the work.



Unlike his concrete works, Weber's cobblestones are not made from cheap materials like sand, but from what Pierre Bourdieu would describe as valuable "objects of cultural capital"¹⁰: old books. An educated audience would normally be shocked at their destruction, but any sense of outrage is allayed here simply because they are turned into art.¹¹ Weber's powerful paper stones raise several questions of legitimation: In what context and conditions do materials have worth? They also demonstrate the contingency of this kind of legitimisation. Things that are valuable one day for one person can be worthless the next or to someone else. This is not, of course, completely arbitrary; norms and institutions underwrite the relative permanence of value. But the principle is clear: Enduring value has to be produced by meanings developed in the course of social struggle. This is not just the kind of struggle that pitches cobblestones against police truncheons, but the struggle to establish legitimate perspectives, the worth and significance of values, norms, and meanings, and so a common notion of the social dynamic.

This struggle for meaning is exactly where artistic production and street protests meet, even when they are playing by very different rules.

Art is governed by rules, which were already implicit in Cézanne's desire "to see the world objectively" (Read), and have been further refined by attempts to purge art of subjective expression and coded narration. Modern art has moved away from representation to give the nature of materials an increasingly decisive role (in the production of "good art"). It is a game, which has often assumed more of an analytical than a playful character: a matter of running through all the possible permutations. When Carl Andre lined up his 137 firebricks end to end on the floor, (Lever, 1966) it was not to allow them to be decrypted or decoded, but so that they could be experienced as materials in space.¹² Such an apparent and decisive purification of art from all its extrinsic elements remain ambivalent in their effects. The involvement of audiences (in the experience of the space, for example) always tends to return to the question of the social and cultural orders to which they belong. Existing patterns and grids

10 Pierre Bourdieu: "The forms of capital," [1986] in J. Richardson ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 241–258.

11 This is not so easily achieved when old cars are turned into art, as in Nam June Paik's *32 cars for the 20th century: play Mozart's Requiem quietly* (1997) because car-lovers value artistic transformation less than book-lovers do. Nevertheless, Paik, like Weber, draws attention to the precise shift between spheres of recognition, legitimation, and valuation, that a celebrated work like the diamond-studded skull by Damien Hirst (*For the Live of God*, 2007) deals with far less consistently because it leaves its materials unchanged. The diamonds can be sold again as diamonds, but books and the cars cannot.

12 Because art, in Andre's programme, "is a direct experience with something in the world," Carl Andre, interview by Willoughby Sharp, *Avalanche 1* (Fall 1970), p. 24.

(of thought and perception) are not to be disrupted by the decoding and processing of information, but by the experience of the material in its space: No matter how free it is of metaphysical clutter, this is an art that still seeks to shake up established notions of presentation and representational art.¹³ In its effects, this strand of radical artistic experience, at least as embodied by Carl Andre, encounters that other tradition of politically engaged art in which “painters build barricades” (Ludwig Rubiner).¹⁴

These refined perspectives also brought new insights to bear on the very rules of politics. Collective protest was no longer simply a logical reaction to poverty and injustice, but now included an enormous range of motives related to the discrepancy between the state of the world (or one’s own situation) and how it could or should be lived. It has certainly become clear that social movements function as producers of meanings that far exceed the articulation of their concrete demands¹⁵ to encompass meanings, definitions, and classifications that affect the whole social space. In the 1960s, the cultural dimension, understood as practices and processes of producing meaning and significance, was central to the sociological reception of new social movements, as well as to the actual conflicts in which they were involved. The actual conflicts themselves backed this focus on the cultural dimension: Whereas the Commune’s piles of cobblestones were intended as means of resistance and defence, the barricades erected during the legendary events of 1968 were more aesthetic than strategic. Even then, however, as Carl Douglas has shown, the barricades were also about the erection of moral defences and the “communal construction”¹⁶ of a visible collective subject. Far from military defences, “the barricades erected in Paris during the night of May 10–11, 1968, were an historical quotation,” writes Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey in her analysis of the movement.¹⁷ “Built by schoolchildren and students aware of their significance at the time of the Commune and during the liberation

- 13 Carl Andre, who invited the public to walk on his work and experience it in a bodily sense, was in this respect quite pleased to see his art having such ambivalent effects. Although he sought to rid artistic production from all non-artistic elements, he was at the same time—as Julia Bryan-Wilson suggests—“at the forefront of an abstract, politically committed art practice”. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers. Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 49.
- 14 Ludwig Rubiner, „Maler bauen Barrikaden“ in *Künstler bauen Barrikaden. Texte und Manifeste 1908–1919*, ed. Wolfgang Haug (Darmstadt: Sammlung Luchterhand, 1988) pp. 81–86.
- 15 See for example Stuart Hall, “Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates,” in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 2, no. 2 (June 1985), pp. 91–114.
- 16 Carl Douglas: “Barricades and Boulevards: Material transformations of Paris, 1795–1871,” in *Interstices. Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, no. 8 (2007), pp. 31–42, here p. 39.
- 17 Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, ‘Die Phantasie an die Macht’. Mai 68 in Frankreich (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), p. 240.



of the city from the German occupation, they evoked the memory of these historical models, and were entirely made in their image in terms of their goals and the form they took.”¹⁸ These barricades were deployed simply — perhaps perfectly — as citations in the struggle for historical memory as well as the presentation of another world, a utopia.

There are two senses in which **Untitled (Ramponeau)** responds to the ways in which these developments have played out in relation to the arts and social movements.

In the first place, its focus on the use and reuse of materials as central to artistic production makes it quite distinct from both the purist fixation on materials in minimalistic art, and the unambiguous logic of political activism as expressed by the Brazilian conceptual artist Antonio Dias. When Dias laid his hand sized stones on the gallery floor, each hung with a small sign bearing the words “To the police” (*To the police*, 1968). Weber is more concerned with the creation of their conditions and possibilities rather than this activist impulse to transgress the “frameworks of contemporary art.”¹⁹

Secondly, Weber’s cobblestones integrate the kind of performative recycling, which can be seen in political struggles when rubbish bins, cars, and other everyday objects are piled onto the barricades in reference to earlier battles and in order to symbolise contemporary challenges to the existing system of values. (“Integrate” in the sense that the papier-mâché stone has already assumed the logic of political action: The use of the material and its infusion with new meaning makes conscious reference to the barricades of 1968 and earlier events, and knows that a balance of historical awareness and future orientation is crucial to an effective political imagination.)

In its exploration of the ways in which ideas become embodied in material processes, **Untitled (Ramponeau)** defines, reflects, and performs what has here been described as the convergence of political activism and art.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Tom Holert, *Übergriffe. Zustände und Zuständigkeiten der Gegenwartskunst* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2014), pp. 9ff.

