The Agency of Concrete
Artistic Practice With and Within the Assemblage Concrete

UE by Christoph Weber; Language: English; Art and Architecture; Friday 1-6 pm

The course enables students to develop critical projects with and about concrete - sculptures, experiments, projects, performances, artistic interventions that are based on a contemporary reflection of the built environment.

Concrete is humans’ second most extensively used material - after water. As such it has tremendous effects on the globe. The anthropocentric promises of modernism to improve mobility, housing, hygiene and the domination of nature also caused effects like the sealing of soils, carbon emissions from cement production, resource extraction, freshwater consumption, toxic dust, overheated cities, and the creation of massive horizontal and vertical barriers.

On a micro-level concrete can be described as an assemblage of cement, water, aggregates and chemical additives. From a distanced point of view it is an assemblage of global proportions: limestone mountains, corporate manufacturing, science and engineering, streets, policy makers, manual labor, aesthetics, corruption, shipping of cargo, CO2 emission trading, crafts and more. The term assemblage – as defined by Manuel DeLanda – means a grouping of diverse elements, be it human, animal, structure, thought, mineral and many more. The concept is particularly well suited to define concrete as a process of heterogeneous forces. "Each member and protomember of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage." (Bennett, J.; Vibrant Matter, 2010; 24)

Agency is generally understood as the capacity for effective and meaningful action and mostly linked to actions of human beings only. From a human-centered point of view, concrete is a manmade, artificial stone, poured or printed into shape to fulfill specific needs of human societies. It is seen as a dull, passive material which couldn’t have any agency of its own.

Today we should overcome this conventional understanding of concrete as mere petrification of human action by investigating the agencies of concrete. Several New Materialisms liberate the term agency from an exclusive association with human activity. "A theory of distributive agency (...) does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits." (Bennett, 2010; 31f)

As a first step this course aims to identify ‘the contours of the swarm concrete’ by searching for its agencies in a group setting. Analysis of the global assemblage that concrete is, as well as historical and contemporary positions in art history shall prepare for individual projects with and about concrete.