

# REGEN PROJECTS

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## Abraham Cruzvillegas by Haegue Yang



114 BOMB 124

Installation view of *The Autoconstrucción Suites*, 2013, dimensions variable, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo by Gene Pittman. Courtesy of the Walker Art Center.





*Installation views of The Autoconstrucción Suites, 2013, dimensions variable, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.*

Before I met Abraham Cruzvillegas, more than once I'd heard curator Clara Kim mention in passing that he was a special person. This piqued my curiosity. When I finally met him in Los Angeles in 2008, the rumors about him were confirmed. Five years after our first meeting, my sense of his uniqueness has not waned but rather continues to grow through our different interactions. We've introduced our respective home cities to each other and see each other's shows whenever we can. So powerful are Abraham's special qualities that they seem to be contagious—he influences people around him, alters their experiences and perception of what is possible in life.

As an artist, one may fall prey to feeling anxious, weak, and even terrified by a fear of failure, of falling short of one's desire to be good to oneself and to share something with others. This pressure is self-imposed.

**HAEGUE YANG** I remember your beautiful long hair when we met for the first time in LA in 2009. Don't ask me why, but tonight in Dubai, this strange "island" in the gulf region, all of a sudden I found myself thinking about whether it meant anything to you to cut your hair.

In Korea, under Confucianism, hair was regarded as something inherited from your parents or ancestors. There were people who would rather cut off their heads than their hair. I guess it was about protecting their honor.

**ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS** When I cut my hair, there was no symbolic meaning. I had let it grow because when my wife, Alejandra, and I went to live in Paris in 2005, my head felt cold in Europe. Prior to that, I had shaved my head every other week for nearly 20 years. The change was good. When I moved to Berlin in 2010, shampoo was expensive and I wanted a change, so I cut my hair. Change is very important for all of us—it's not just something that happens, it's something we must provoke.

When you first wrote, I was installing some works from my series *Autoconstrucción* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. *Autoconstrucción* means transformation to me. I apply the notion to houses being both built and destroyed simultaneously, according to the specific needs of their inhabitants. Change is the rule for the *Autoconstrucción* houses, and transformation of identity is behind my approach (or misuse) of the concept: self-construction is permanently unfinished. I love that idea.

And it so happens that hair affects people's perception of us. Ah, yes—and the inventiveness of a new haircut. My haircuts can be a little Navajo, a little redneck, a little bit *microbusero*, a little

Cruzvillegas's body of work provides a daring and encouraging optimism. The physicality of his sculptures and works on paper can't be considered without noticing how processes unfolding in time, commitment (togetherness), and a vital nature (spirit), give them shape. Like Duchamp, who was often praised for his modes and efficiency with time, Cruzvillegas exercises a specific mode of efficiency, even when it comes to emotion. The works grow out of fertile ground, from his being in this world, which requires a temporal engagement different from that of being in the studio. His thinking process accumulates depth while it takes inefficient, nonlinear paths. Yet the making of his works occurs in a miraculously swift and decisive manner—their graceful execution is full of wit and demonstrates respect for their materials' origin.

— HAEGUE YANG

bit *guama* . . . I like it when people don't recognize me in the street—also when my work becomes something like a cumulative dialogue of inner identities that are constantly switching arrangements, opinions, and relationships. The exhibition at the Walker is like that: a sort of confrontation of groups of works that I get to witness.

**HY** I wonder whether I am too Korean to be your Mexican sister. What do you think about coming from the Third World, from a nonindustrialized country? Are we similar to each other, since we share this experience of the Third World?

**AC** I like it. What does that mean? I'm sure there are more worlds in our world: a fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh . . . In Baja California shamans are called *guamas*; they sit in narrow caves, covered with other people's hair. People cut their hair and attach it to the heads of the *guamas* (like bizarre extensions, similar to dreadlocks). They remind me of Cousin Itt from the TV series *The Addams Family*; a funny character similar to a large walking wig with John Lennon glasses. My mother used to say that our family was more eccentric than the Addams family because we lived in the so-called Third World.

Very often I put diverse objects from contradictory contexts together in one work. This is like an economic clash—it's having things on top of each other that are organic matter, industrially made, or handmade. They can be made in Taiwan, Marrakech, New York, Paris, or Mexico City. These objects have an internal system, and I like witnessing how they come together. I become a voyeur of their relationships. Between them there might be a conflict, or physical or conceptual instability, but also love, hate, gossip,

power, and sometimes friendship. It's the same for all of us; sometimes we have to accept our own contradictions in order to develop friendships. Or not.

**HY** We are very privileged to work internationally and share friendships with people with various cultural and geopolitical backgrounds. However, it seems like we artists don't hang out with each other so much. We visit each other's shows less often than curators do. Are we hesitant to knock on each other's doors? If we ever made an effort to stress the importance of the friendships among us, what would it be for? And why? I know of your friendship with Jimmie Durham, but also with your peers in Mexico, as well as of your activities with La galería de comercio.

**AC** I've cultivated strong friendships with some other artists who are like family now: Damián Ortega, Gabriel Orozco, Gabriel Kuri, and Jerónimo López, a.k.a. Dr. Lakra. And, through them, extended relationships with José Kuri, Mónica Manzutto, and others. Also, teaching has provided me with many friends and accomplices. What I really like about these long-term bonds is that we can approach each other for advice, for help, or just to spend time together, without having any specific purpose or intention to plot something together. In Mexico everybody knows about our small community and our interests, since we've always been transparent and open. Our gallery, *kurimanzutto*, resulted from the development of our community. It is a commercial context and social sphere for the production of art, but also for the production of friendship. It has made our group bigger and more global. I would say—and maybe this is only my perception—that sharing



*Installation view of María Cerdá Acebrón, **Tapete**, 2011, a participative installation by the community residing and working near La galería de comercio, Mexico City.*

*right: Martina Núñez reading texts by Alexandro Rodríguez that interweave probable tragic events and Mexican recent history in Wendy León, **TLQNSDEP**, 2011, at La galería de comercio, Mexico City.*



*La Polar, 2003, umbrella and peacock and pheasant feathers, 43 5/16 x 78 1/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.*



*Performance view of CRV: Collaborative Re-creation Vehicles, 2009, parade and race, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, November 21, 2009, San Francisco. Photo by Johnna Arnold. Courtesy of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts.*

experience, information, dialogue, time, energy, and love also leads to the production of knowledge.

In February 2010, when Nuria Montiel and I started La galería de comercio, my idea was to reconnect with some old students and friends to organize street events, essentially for the pleasure of working together. La galería de comercio is a nonprofit seven-headed entity—Alejandra España, Jimena Mendoza, José Luis Cortés, María Cerdá Acebrón, and Martín Núñez, in addition to Nuria and I—that presents free monthly events at the intersection of José Martí and Comercio streets, in the Escandón neighborhood. We've organized drawing, stamp, and sticker workshops, installations, performances, film screenings, demonstrations, and some other activities, but mostly what we do is channel the energy and collaborative force from the environment around us: school children, hobos, housewives, merchants, plants, roaches, and also some other artists. Edgar Arceneaux said that instead of fund-raising we do friend-raising.

**HY** Once we compared notes on our homelands' recent histories.

Astonishingly, there were lots of parallels concerning intense struggles and efforts for independence and democracy. I am curious about your own view of history after World War II and its impact on your upbringing, if it had one.

**AC** In my understanding of why I make things the way I do, not only as an artist, but also as a person and a citizen, history has been crucial. In Mexico, as in many other countries (now called underdeveloped, but when I was a child, President Luis Echeverría liked to use the concept Third World, accepting the exoticism associated with belated development), we never encountered modernity proper, only its promise of consumption. The progress of Western civilization meant flattening every culture into the "American way of life." In Mexico we missed the stage of producing our own scientific and technological languages almost completely; we simply became consumers of knowledge and industry. Of course we kept producing our own languages, but more as a means of survival in a never-ending economic, political, and social crisis. Ingenuity became the national currency, with occasional exemplary exceptions in

art and culture that gave people abroad a reason to talk about the country. More recently, we've added new items to the possible conversation topics about Mexico: drug trafficking and the lack of public safety.

In your country you had many colonial interventions and, more recently, a dictatorship. The past has returned with the current presidency of Madam Park, daughter of the former military dictator. In my country we did not have a dictatorship, but a one-party system under the PRI—ridiculously named the Institutional Revolutionary Party—lasting over 70 years. After some struggles for democracy, thrown down the toilet by the PAN (the right-wing party that ruled Mexico for the last 12 years) the PRI has returned. So for both of us that past is still so present—we don't have to feel sad that it's behind us!

**HY** I felt very frustrated when more than half of the population of South Korea preferred to "vote" for someone associated with political degradation and a violent totalitarian society, and no freedom of speech, instead of someone associated with progress and justice. What can we as artists do to get over such deep



*Aeropuerto Alterno (Alternate Airport), 2002, machetes, knives, and wood, 67 x 39 3/8 x 47 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.*

## Sharing experience, information, dialogue, time, energy, and love also leads to the production of knowledge.

frustration with politics? I almost feel like my own people do not need or want my political activism. Would you help me analyze this feeling and give me some advice for getting over such pessimism?

**AC** What surprised me in the recent presidential election was that a lot of people voted mainly against the candidate of the old party (PRI), in favor of any alternative. There was a lot of enthusiasm, and we even witnessed something like a proto-youth movement (called “Yo Soy 132”) fighting for the right to have access to information, while officially controlled media manipulated everything to make the PRI candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto, appealing and seductive. An extreme caricature of this was his marriage to a soap-opera actress. I personally find it very hard to sustain any kind of activism that does not just lead to cheap actions for good causes, or to propaganda. I think I can do more by discussing problems on a small scale, rather than trying to solve all of the problems in my city, country, world, and universe. If I can, I attend demonstrations, meetings, and public discussions because I’d like to become a political actor, but my art is not a political pamphlet.

**HY** I got to learn about Juan O’Gorman in Mexico City when you brought me to the Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli, which was built by O’Gorman for Diego Rivera’s collection of pre-Hispanic art. After you guided me through O’Gorman’s early works, it seemed to me that he underwent quite amazing transformations, ranging from rational modernism to postprimitivism. I’d like to hear your thoughts about those artistic metamorphoses. Have you, yourself, also experienced them?

**AC** You might know the story of the last house O’Gorman lived in. It was more like a cave than a building, and he decorated it with mosaic murals whose syncretic iconographic motifs are like the ones at the library of the National University (UNAM), only wilder and rougher. When he was younger, he was the most important representative of modernist architecture in Mexico, as his Bauhausian constructions prove: the studios of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in San Ángel, lined with a beautiful cactus fence, for instance. I like his process, not only as

an artist. He turned against himself—not only metaphorically—by erasing or destroying his knowledge of architectural language, condemning it as man’s erection on earth. I don’t feel I’m going in that direction, but sometimes I like making work that’s not necessarily supposed to be seen as art. In fact, I feel like I am naturally more primitive; I don’t have to try too hard. I like to think of myself as an intergalactic indigenous, chatting with you on a Korean cell phone.

**HY** The neighborhood you grew up in is close to O’Gorman’s Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli, right?

**AC** Yes, I grew up in the neighborhood of Ajusco, which evolved gradually in a nonplanned area in the southern part of Mexico City. Back then nobody thought that it could be inhabited. The people there took over plots of volcanic rock and started building their houses slowly over time. They had no money and no knowledge of architecture or engineering, but lots of needs. This fueled them to weave a strong social fabric and become a very politicized community. People would work together to build a new wall, or march together to claim ownership of the land and demand basic services such as electricity and running water. They would demand education and the right to live dignified lives. I grew up in that environment: chanting slogans against the government and its corruption, supporting student movements, socializing and partying while working, and becoming an optimist—someone willing to be happy, even in the worst circumstances.

For many reasons, I remember the sentence “tomar el cielo por asalto” (to take the sky by assault), which I think Karl Marx said originally in German, but unfortunately my mother tongue is Spanish and, during the time I spent in Berlin, I never learned German. Maybe if I find the original quote it will mean something perfectly different from my version in Spanish; I prefer to keep it as I know it. Maybe you know it in Korean—I’m sure it comes across really different from the Spanish, not even considering how it is expressed in Hangul, the Korean written language (with its perfection and beautiful story). You and I both speak in English all the time, as we’re doing now, and, we can say whatever we want about agreeing or disagreeing, laughing or crying,

being happy or sad, but if someone who wants to read about us doesn’t speak English, it doesn’t really matter. For some indigenous people from Mexico who have migrated to the US for economic reasons, it’s a tricky situation. They speak fluent English and their original language—Mixtec, Zapotec, P’urhépecha, or Hñhññhu, for example—is not Spanish, which is the official language in Mexico. Interesting, isn’t it?

**HY** Back to the transformation of O’Gorman, it was reflected not only in his approach to formal language, but also in his use of materials. The “direction” of that transformation is also interesting. He seems almost against the modern idea of progress, which might be a paraphrase of what you said about him turning against himself by destroying his knowledge of architectural language. Here I have to ask you about the piece in dOCUMENTA (13) last year. Your piece was so radical that it fit what you said above: “I like making work that’s not supposed to be seen as art”—it was almost invisible.

**AC** Well, O’Gorman went really far: he killed himself. Me, I’m just in search of transformation as evidence of existence: nature and humans work together everyday on this with or without violence. For my project in Kassel, I made a project in a parallel environment to the main exhibition. I wanted to test if I was still able to make something without money or an audience, as I did when I was younger. I didn’t want to escape from myself. I made a set of rules out of ideas, intentions, and constant interests from my practice since I started working as an artist in 1987. I recovered notes and images from my notebooks to make a list of 34 concepts including the following: delirious, affirmative, sweaty, definitely unfinished, fragmentary, communal, empiric, coherent with the landscape, laughing, inefficient, unstable, happy, contradictory, generous, indecent, sensual, amorphous, warm, and blind date! Then I assigned a color to each concept, and I painted a bundle of pick-up sticks with those colors. Playing in the streets of Kassel with the sticks I would randomly select two colors/ideas and then improvise with materials gathered from the surroundings. I documented some of my activities, but in the end decided not to have any register of them—it was too





Installation view of *Autoconstrucción*, 2009, Thomas Dane Gallery, London.  
Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

“efficient.” I’m still working on a book from that project, but I have nothing to show!

**HY** Speaking of big exhibitions, I was wondering about the show at Walker right now. The exhibition’s complexity and scale make it seem like a survey show. Am I correct?

**AC** As I said before about my sculptures, I pile objects to create physical and conceptual instability, contradiction, fragility—everything is about to collapse. So the show at the Walker, organized by Clara Kim, is like piling exhibitions together. It gathers different projects I’ve been working on in recent years. All of them share the same title: *Autoconstrucción*. It was nice to see all of these installations in dialogue with each other, each saying their own thing. Now they are independent, and I like that.

**HY** I am curious about all the vehicles in your work: they can be bicycles or carts. There is a mobile and romantic and humorous element in your sculptures. Are they vagabonds? I am also very curious about your sonic vehicles.

**AC** For me the vehicles are, first of all, objects. Because of this, they each have a specific weight, shape, texture, color, and size. Most of the time bicycles are industrially made, yet regardless, to me they are alive. When you buy one, you customize it according to your specific needs, adding a horn, a different saddle, a big mirror, a satchel, or a basket. Sometimes

you can even paint or decorate it with a couple of tassels. In some extreme cases, you can turn it into a portable house, as some homeless people do. In those bikes people haul lots of bags and cases with things to protect them from the weather, other people, and other vehicles. I’ve seen customized bikes here and there, and I always wanted to have one.

In 2008 I was invited for a six-month residency in Scotland by Alexia Holt from Cove Park and Francis McKee from CCA in Glasgow. There I met John O’Hara, a wise man whose specialty is customizing bicycles. He works at the Common Wheel, an organization that runs workshops in which forgotten or destroyed bikes are salvaged. They also help people with disabilities by giving them related tasks as a form of therapy. With John’s help I made my dream come true: I used pieces of discarded bikes to make a portable sound system, like those from Jamaica I always liked, with lots of speakers to play music in the streets. Then I started thinking about writing lyrics for songs. I found that every Glaswegian is a musician, so I started asking local bands to create music for my lyrics. These lyrics tell stories about my neighborhood in Mexico City—very personal stuff became a music album. But it’s also a portrait of Glasgow as a city and the result of joyful, spontaneous collaboration.

By now I’ve made a group of four bikes. I developed a particular story for each. One I made with students in San Francisco when I was a visiting professor at the California College for the Arts. Another one I made when I was in Berlin

on a DAAD—there I wrote a new set of songs with music by Gabriel Acevedo Velarde, Sebastian Gräfe, Valentina Jäger, and Maureen Tsakiris. We performed live in some of the city’s public spaces. Another I made in Oxford. I appropriated some local music (especially from the collective called the Blessing Force) and some 1960s and ’70s protest music from Latin America, all of it whistled by me. This last bike was inspired by the motorcycles in the film *Quadrophenia*.

**HY** There is one thing I unlearned thoroughly: how to draw. You seem like a genuinely talented draftsman. I have to think about your gorillas. They’re drawn eloquently, in an amazing variety of styles. They’re realistic but they also look like calligraphy or reliefs, like carvings on the wall! Do you think that’s just due to your talent or does this have something to do with the figurative tradition, such as mural painting in Mexico?

**AC** In the late ’80s, I worked as a cartoon artist. I’ve liked to draw since my childhood, as almost everybody else. I’ve unlearned the right way to draw, but humor is still a very important element in my work. Political cartoons have a strong critical element against state power, obviously not only in Mexico. Here we have an important tradition of newspaper cartoons that point to ridiculous attitudes and negative circumstances in politics—they become the opinion of the people. This has been a key factor in my education, not only as an artist, but also as a person. Recently, when I made a series of drawings of apes, I was also trying to highlight our genetic proximity to them; they’re our closest relatives. That’s why I gave the drawings the names of some family members: Ángeles, Rogelio, Jesús, Alejandra, Eréndira. I also wanted to remind myself that I cannot only hold something with my hand’s opposable thumb to make things, like a brush to make a drawing, but I can also destroy nature or myself with a gun, for example.

**HY** You are such a rich thinker; your thoughts have a high degree of complexity, fluidity, and vitality. That eloquence in thinking is also found in what you make. The first piece of yours I ever encountered was a sculpture—I double-checked the caption next to it to memorize your name, because I was so heavily impressed by its eloquence. Like everything eloquent, it looked so effortless. Is it really effortless? If it is not, what kind of struggle is behind your production in general?

**AC** When we find a way to communicate, eloquence happens. I like to use language as a live organism. It has its own existence beyond me. When I make a sculpture, I think it is alive as well. I see myself more as a matchmaker of sorts. Sometimes, when there are more than two objects in the sculpture, or project, or specific situation I've set up, it becomes an eloquent orgy in which I make no effort other than to play with the elements of the piece. I feel a bit like an animist voyeur.

**HY** Once you purchased books in Korean, which you can't read. So what do books mean to you?

**AC** Yes, of course, I remember that visit to your studio in Kreuzberg very well. You shared some books on Rosemarie Trockel with me. Indirectly I understood your interest in her works. You also made some simple little dishes for dinner that were cooked easily: noodles and rice, a sort of quick *bibimbap* with some wine. We had some *makgeolli* to drink.

The first time I went to Seoul, for the Media City biennial in 2010, I went out with Clara Kim, Doryun Chong, and Eungie Joo to sing karaoke and drink cheap beer and *makgeolli* all night long. I found some good books the next day walking around: one on Jogyesa (the chief temple of Seon Buddhism in Korea), and across the avenue, a nice bookstore with very beautiful handmade books. They all contained extraordinary drawings and texts, prayers, and other religious content. It was impressive to witness the long tradition in calligraphy that, as I've been told, is now in a sad moment, because younger generations are not so interested in it. The only problem I faced there was not being able to understand any of those exquisite signs and shapes, many in Korean but also many in Chinese.

I like books, as our dear friends the artists Mariana Castillo Deball and Manuel Räder do. Both of them make really good stuff, including that book he designed with you, with the twisted pages. I also like Damián Ortega's generous project *Alias*, based in Mexico City, designed for sharing hard-to-find or out-of-print art books in Spanish. I also make publications myself. There's a lot to learn through making decisions for a book: choosing fonts, images, captions, paper, ink, size, stitching, gluing... not to mention all possible textual content. I like books and magazines that are thought of as objects; the thingness of publications



above: *Nuestra imagen actual: Helena*; below: *Nuestra imagen actual: Alejandra*. Both images 2012, vinyl paint, ink, and water-based acrylic enamel on kraft paper, 118 3/25 x 157 24/25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

(including posters, flyers, stickers, album covers, boxes) is very important to me. As I feel them in my hands, I try to understand what they are saying. They have something that is absolutely beyond mere content, which ideally should cohere with their shape and materials, just like with any other artwork.

**HY** Are you a book collector?

**AC** I have no special criteria for acquiring books; I just let them seduce me. I

prefer that they choose me by calling my attention. I almost never look for books; they find me. This happened during other trips to Korea, more recently in Gwangju, where I found some other books related to history, including one on the uprising of 1980 against the dictatorship. In this case the content became more important than the object itself. Good books don't necessarily have to be precious objects.