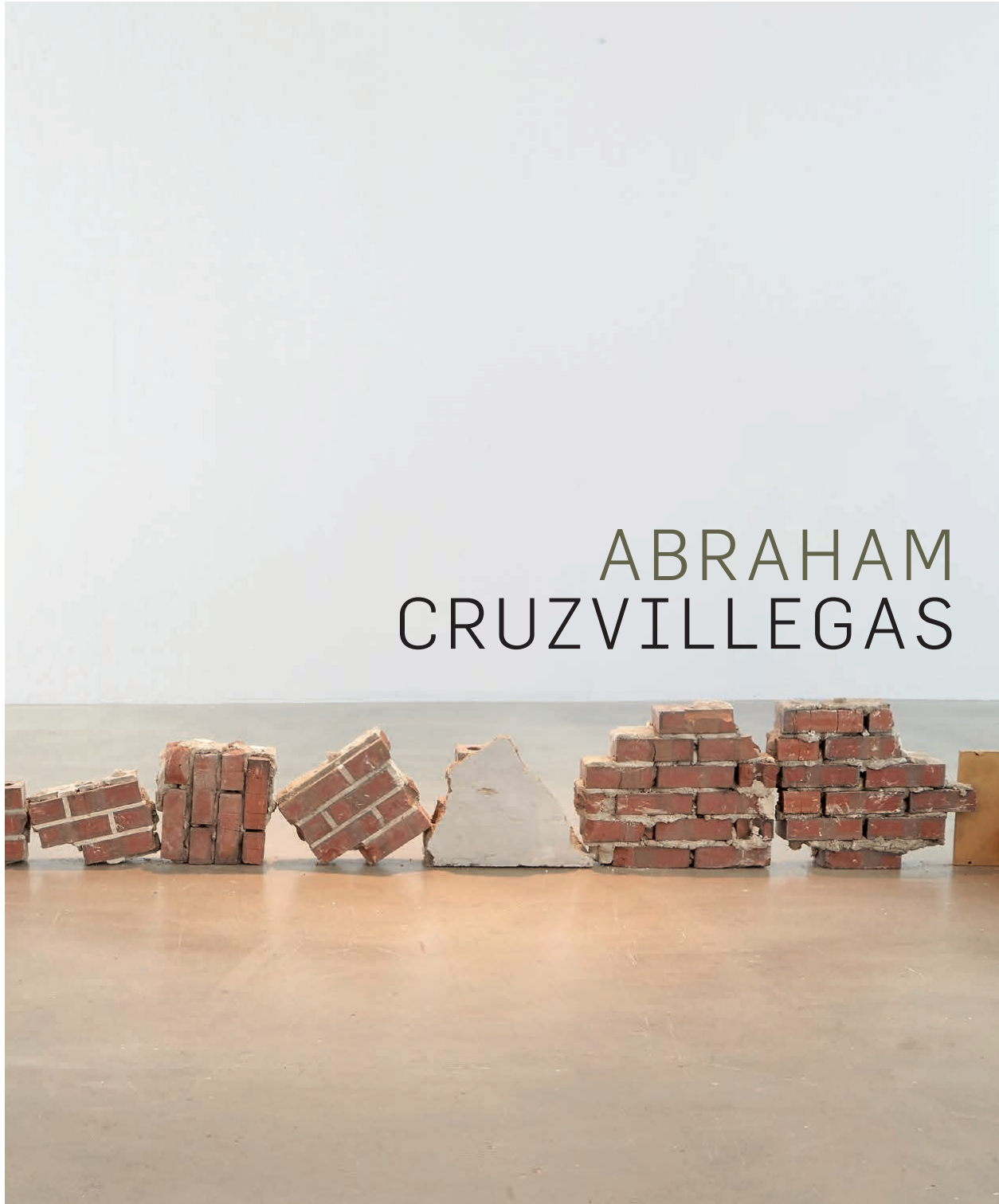


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McDonough, Tom. "The Berlin Wall." Parkett (2015) pp. 62 – 69 [ill.]

PARKETT



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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 8: SINBYEONG, (Self-Destruction 8: Sinbyeong), 2015, found objects from redevelopment areas in Seoul, variable dimensions, installation view Art Sonje Center / SELBSTZERSTÖRUNG 8: SINBYEONG, gefundene Gegenstände aus Sanierungsgebieten in Seoul, Masse variabel, Installationsansicht. (ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO; THOMAS DANE GALLERY, LONDON, AND GALERIE CHANTAL CROUSEL, PARIS / PHOTO: KIM TAEDONG)

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Abraham Cruzvillegas

TOM McDONOUGH

The Berlin Wall

In 2008, while on a residency in Scotland, Abraham Cruzvillegas began writing song lyrics. He has described their style as “a hybrid combination of inspiring sources, such as romantic popular music from Mexico, folk music, boleros, dub, rock’n’roll, salsa, reggae, Brazilian music, corridos, punk, ska, cumbia, trova Yucateca, funk, protest music from Latin America during the seventies, commercial pop from everywhere, norteñas, hip-hop, etc.”¹⁾ The songs are reminiscences of his childhood during the 1970s and ’80s in an informal settlement in Ajusco, at what was then the southern edge of Mexico City; as such, they are coextensive with the origin of his AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN (Self-Construction, 2007–) works and reflect many of the same concerns of this ongoing series of mixed-media sculptures, whose point of departure is the improvised methods of construction found in Ajusco and other squatter communities throughout Latin America. Alternately humorous and poignant, militant and intimate, Cruzvillegas’s lyrics speak of growing up in a peri-urban zone marked by insecur-

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ity, insufficiency, and solidarity. Each song, we could say, holds a lesson, but some in particular seem to provide a broader reflection on the structural parameters not only of the *colonia* of Cruzvillegas’s youth but also of his current artistic practice.

That’s the case with “El muro de Berlín” (The Berlin Wall, 2010), a song about a fence erected to separate two adjacent neighborhoods, the “hoity-toity and cocky” Colonia Romero de Terreros and the “proletarian” Pedregal de Santo Domingo, “full of argumentative plebs.”²⁾ The wall, a product of intolerance, is also a monument to hypocrisy: If the inhabitants of these quarters “mutually despised one another,” they also “needed each other desperately”:

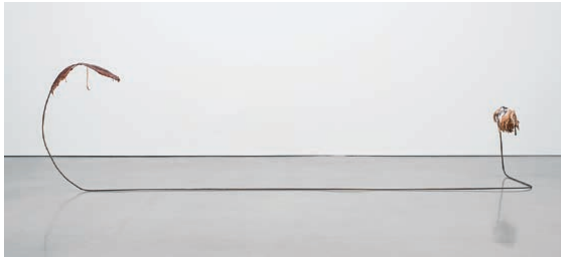
*Some were masons, plumbers and domestics,
Metalworkers, carpenters, painters, body shop workers,
And the others hired them at low rates.*

If the wall appears physically as a barrier, as an absolute dividing line between these socially divergent settlements, its actual function is revealed to be more complex. It acts more as a membrane, allowing labor and money to pass through while filtering out

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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *ILS SONT ZAZOUS (DEMOCRATIST & ENGAGED)*, 2012, rebar, fabric, feathers, chain, meat, 35 x 135 x 30" / *SIE SIND ZAZOUS (DEMOKRAT & BESCHÄFTIGT)*, Armierungseisen, Stoff, Kette, Fleisch, 88,9 x 342,9 x 76,2 cm.



the social costs of this uneven division of land and wealth, embodied in the excretions—the piss, shit, and garbage—that pile up on one side. As Cruzvillegas writes, “It was important to work and to survive / With the other, without the other, and despite the other.”

“The Berlin Wall” is, on one hand, a vivid observation of this singular location, of the thin line that divides and conjoins these two districts. But on the other, it is a reflection on the dynamic that propels Cruzvillegas’s sculptural practice, which also posi-

tions itself between two worlds, one proletarian and the other posh. As the artist has explained in regard to the AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN project, “Many of these works express my wish to confront two or more radically different economic systems, creating hybrid marriages and unexpected combinations of materials and techniques.”³⁾ Of course, these marriages and combinations are evident within individual works, whether we want to label them assemblage, bricolage, or, as Mark Godfrey has convincingly argued, “structural juxtaposition.”⁴⁾ *LA INVENCIBLE* (The Invincible, 2003), for example, crowns a rough, heavy piece of concrete—as it features the number 190 in paint, we assume it is a fragment from a house—with a colorful array of feathers, composing a sort of avian Mohawk. Its title refers to a particular locale, as is often the case in Cruzvillegas’s work: here, a bar frequented by artists, actors, and others in San Ángel, just off of Mexico City’s great longitudinal axis, Insurgentes, north of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, where he studied in the 1980s.

But the confrontation of “radically different economic systems” must be seen as also taking place external to the singular sculptural object. When *LA INVENCIBLE* is exhibited, for example, in Cruzvillegas’s 2013 survey at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, we are compelled to see it, and the rest of



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *APRIL IN PARIS (BRIEF & DELIRIOUS)*, 2012, rebar, fabric, feathers, chain, beer bottle caps, meat, 115 x 80 x 84" / *APRIL IN PARIS (KURZ & HEFTIG)*, Armierungseisen, Stoff, Federn, Bierdeckel, Fleisch, 292,1 x 203,2 x 213,4 cm.

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his work, against the backdrop of the elegant white gallery space and to recognize it as an object that has traveled, so to speak, across the Berlin Wall separating its proletarian material origins from its current inhabitation of the decidedly hoity-toity and cocky environment of the global art market. Many critics only see Cruzvillegas's art occupying one side of this fence: For them, it is an unproblematic translation into sculptural vocabulary of the informal and communal building methods he encountered as a child in Ajusco.⁵⁾ However inspiring such accounts may be, they miss the larger institutional apparatuses within which his sculpture circulates. Only recently have those views been challenged, most notably by art historian Robin Adèle Greeley, who locates the work instead precisely "in the systemic interconnections between object experience in developing countries . . . and object experience in the hegemonic 'centers' of developed countries and the market-

driven international art circuit"—a position that allows him "to assert the asymmetries of object experience induced by global economic integration."⁶⁾

Perhaps we could say that Cruzvillegas's work occupies the *espace partagé*—the space both shared and divided—between those two experiences, those two economies. It's a term borrowed from the great Brazilian geographer Milton Santos, who from exile in Paris wrote a book of the same title in 1975, in which he characterized countries like Mexico as having a dual economy, or what he called an economy of "two circuits." Both were the outcome of contemporary technological modernization, but that process inevitably affected segments of the population unequally. There is an upper circuit, composed of capital-intensive modern industry, banking, export trade, and the like, which yields a higher income for those employed but which produces only a limited number of jobs; and a lower circuit, accounting for a

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *THE AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN SUITES (The Self-Construction Suites)*, 2013, installation view Walker Art Center / *DIE EIGENBAU-FOLGEN, Installationsansicht.*



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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 4: DEMOLICIÓN* (*Self-Destruction 4: Demolition*), 2014, installation view Thomas Dane Gallery, London / *SELBSTZERSTÖRUNG 4: DEMOLIERUNG*, Installationsansicht.

high ratio of people with neither stable employment nor income and “consisting of small-scale manufacturing and crafts, small-scale trade, and many varied services.”⁷⁾ This is the circuit from which Cruzvillegas draws his raw materials, and it is the one to which he tends to refer when discussing his work. But it would be too simple to merely align him with this underprivileged realm; as Santos writes, the upper and lower circuits cannot be so neatly divided. What he calls a “shared space” does not denote a realm of equilibrium or cooperation but rather an agonistic space in which the social classes corresponding to the two circuits compete “for market hegemony and spatial control,” with the upper claiming “total unification and penetration of the market” and the lower seeking to assert “some role in aggregate spatial organization.”⁸⁾

Cruzvillegas occupies an ambivalent position in relation to this dynamic. Through professional standing he certainly qualifies as a member of the upper circuit, but his working methods and personal solidarities align him with the lower: It is not only a formal vocabulary that links him with his childhood home in Ajusco but also an ongoing set of familial and communal relationships that extend from his mother and father to the Comité de Derechos Humanos Ajusco (Ajusco Human Rights Committee). At its most complex, his work involves a negotiation *between* these two circuits, a shuttling from the international art world to the Latin American urban periphery and back, which acts to bring each term into opposition with the other. As Cruzvillegas writes in the short text that serves as something of a statement of intent for the *AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN* project, “My main purpose is

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to generate knowledge and understanding of how human activity produces forms.⁹⁹ But we can be more specific: The significance of AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN is its lesson in how human activity produces forms *within* and *in spite of* the real social conditions of uneven development that their producers, including the artist, must necessarily inhabit.

Of course, which side prevails in this “negotiation” between upper and lower circuits remains up for debate. After all, the finished work exists entirely on one side of the divide: Whatever its origins in those continuous collaborative processes of building and rebuilding in the *colonia* that go under the name *autoconstrucción*, once Cruzvillegas’s artwork enters the gallery it is no longer subject to outside intervention. Despite its seeming precariousness, despite its “dynamic contingency,” it is a singularly authored object protected from any further change.¹⁰⁰ As the artist reminds us in his song, if the wall has long come down in Berlin, the walls that separate the wealthy from the poor continue to stand.

But Cruzvillegas’s work, enmeshed in those conditions, also imagines another horizon beyond the present realities of our at once shared and divided space. In a song from 2008, “Aprons,” about the

militant role of women in the seizure and settlement of Ajusco, we are reminded, “The land belongs to those who work it / That’s what Zapata said.”¹¹¹ The Mexican peasant revolutionary’s words, echoing across the decades, speak of the centrality of praxis, of human productivity as a mutual reshaping of the world; it is the same call we hear in the final lines of Bertolt Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, when the singer announces the moral of the play: “Take note of the meaning of the ancient song: / That what there is shall belong to those who are good for it”¹¹² The AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN sculptures, without pretending to be free of all the contradictions that an economy of two circuits imposes upon them, nevertheless persist as something like promissory notes for a future in which that praxis will have been realized, in which all the Berlin Walls will have come down.

1) Abraham Cruzvillegas, quoted in Francis McKee, “Mutable & Mutual” in *Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas* (Glasgow: Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2008), 2.

2) The song was written during a 2010–11 DAAD residency in Berlin and set to music composed in collaboration with Gabriel Acevedo Velarde and Sebastian Gräfe, which the artist characterizes as “somewhere between punk three-chord strategy, sample dub tradition, rebajada’s ear-splitting, slow motion, hip-hop appropriation, and Tyrolese-Tibetan electro digital tunes.” See Abraham Cruzvillegas, ed., *The Self Builders’ Groove* (Berlin: Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, 2012), which includes a CD.

3) Abraham Cruzvillegas, “Autoconstrucción” in Clara Kim, *Abraham Cruzvillegas: The Autoconstrucción Suites* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2013), 26.

4) Mark Godfrey, “Instability and Fragmentation / Improvisation and Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas’s Sculpture” in *Autoconstrucción: The Book* (Los Angeles: REDCAT, 2009), 69–70.

5) See, for example, McKee, “Mutable & Mutual,” 1–3; or Catalina Lozano, “Making Is Thinking, Thinking Is Acting” in Kim, *Abraham Cruzvillegas*, 45–52, among others.

6) Robin Adèle Greeley, “The Logic of Disorder: The Sculptural Materialism of Abraham Cruzvillegas,” October 151 (Winter 2015): 82.

7) Milton Santos, *The Shaved Space*, trans. Chris Gerry (London and New York: Methuen, 1979), 86.

8) *Ibid.*, 197.

9) Cruzvillegas, “Autoconstrucción,” 26.

10) Greeley, “The Logic of Disorder,” 79.

11) Abraham Cruzvillegas, “Aprons” in *Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas*, 82.

12) Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, trans. James and Tania Stern, with W. H. Auden (London: Methuen, 1963), 96. On this moral, see Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 175–78.

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, LA INVINCIBLE (The Inevitable), 2002, rock, feathers, mixed media, 18 x 15 x 4 1/2" / DIE UNBESIEGBARE, Stein, Federn, verschiedene Materialien, 45,7 x 38,1 x 11,4 cm.

