

REGEN PROJECTS

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PARKETT

Abraham Cruzvillegas

Outside, But Very Close, War Rages

ALINE HERNÁNDEZ

*Although we may record and diagnose our times,
we are only truly contemporary if we see in our
times another possible time.*

—Juan Villoro¹⁾



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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 2 (Self-Destruction 2)*, 2013, iron, stone, bricks, adobe, glass, wood, concrete, stainless steel, beer glass, bottle caps, cinderblocks, volcanic rock, granite, asbestos, water boiler, leather sandals, other demolitions materials, variable dimensions, installation view Museo Experimental el Eco / *SELBSTZERSTÖRUNG 2*, Eisen, Stein, Ziegelstein, Lehmziegel, Glas, Holz, Beton, rostfreier Stahl, Bierglas, Flaschendeckel, Schlackenbetonblock, Vulkangestein, Granit, Asbest, Wasserkocher, Ledersandalen, anderes Abbruchmaterial, Masse variabel, Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: ENRIQUE MACÍAS)

AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN (Self-Construction, 2007–), Abraham Cruzvillegas's long-running project, is often described as a series of assemblages and installations that are provisional in appearance, an aesthetic intended to echo the informal architecture of the working-class community into which the artist was born. Construction, then, is understood on a material level: the building of houses, the expansion of a village. But the structures that Mexican citizens create outside state supervision are not only physical but social, political, and economic: Before one can build a house, one must claim the land beneath it.

In the two-channel video *AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN: DIALOGUE BETWEEN ÁNGELES FUENTES AND ROGELIO CRUZVILLEGAS* (2009), the artist's parents individually relate their stories of migration to the area now known as Colonia Ajusco, and recount the settlement's rapid development and absorption into the Coyoacán district of Mexico City. They discuss the state's attempts to take away their land, and the community's strategies in response. Ángeles,

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Cruzvillegas's mother, recalls a protest in response to the government's failure to provide running water: Holding up their dirty clothes, residents blocked traffic on a central avenue in Coyoacán.

The struggle of Ajusco residents to keep their homes is only one chapter in a long, ongoing history of indigenous movements to reclaim land, primarily in rural regions—from Zapata's fight for *tierra y libertad* (land and liberty) in the early twentieth century to the 1994 armed uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas, which declared its own government, autonomous from the state. But land dispossession has shifted from an exercise purely of state power to the domain of the private and the criminal: Drug cartels no longer simply produce, sell, and distribute drugs but have ventured into new illegal activities such as kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking, and organ trafficking. Today, the government, armed forces, police, and criminal organizations operate in complicity in a war against the Mexican people. According to the government's national data register, between 2007 and March 2015, 25,821 people have "disappeared"—nearly half during the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto, who took office in 2013.²⁾

In recent works, Cruzvillegas has traced the transformation of this war against the people and the growing power of criminal organizations. Two assemblages from 2014 make reference to key books that investigate the relationship between the government and drug cartels: HANGING/PENDING, CONTRADICTION, UNSTABLE AND GENTRIFIED SELF-PORTRAIT, SMELLING LIKE MALT, STUCK IN THE TRAFFIC JAM, NEEDING TO TAKE A SHIT SINCE A WHILE AGO, LISTENING TO MARTHA DEBAYLE, THE NEXT DAY HAVING READ 'CAMPO DE GUERRA' BY SERGIO GONZÁLEZ RODRÍGUEZ, ATTEMPTING TO ESCAPE FROM THE MYSTICS OF EFFICIENCY AND COMPETITIVENESS, WITH NO SIGNAL ON MY CELL PHONE, AND DREAMING ABOUT DEVOURING A JUICY PAPAYA FOLLOWING THE BEAT OF 'DEMOLICIÓN' BY LOS SAICOS AND LOS SEÑORES DEL NARCO +2. EL USO DE LOS PLACERES (Drug Lords + 2. The Use of Pleasure).

HANGING/PENDING is a chaotic jumble of garbage cans, ladders, and construction materials salvaged from building sites in a gentrified area of Mexico City. Suspended from the



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *LOS SEÑORES DEL NARCO +2. EL USO DE LOS PLACERES* (Drug Lords + 2. The Use of Pleasure), 2014, mixed media, 27 1/2 x 43 1/4 x 19 3/4" / *DIE DROGENBARONE +2. DIE VERWENDUNG DER GENÜSSE*, verschiedene Materialien, 70 x 110 x 50 cm.

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ceiling, the assemblage seems sustained by some miraculous means—much like the reality of Mexico itself. The floor-based sculpture LOS SEÑORES DEL NARCO includes two copies of the eponymous book by Anabel Hernández (2010, published in 2013 in the US as *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords and Their Godfathers*), its pages “bookmarked” by pieces of pavement and rusted rebar. Toward the end of her book, Hernández writes that only ordinary citizens can put a stop to the current situation: “It will only end when Mexican society unites against this immense ‘mafia.’ That means overcoming fear and apathy, and above all the tacit assumption that things cannot be any different.”³⁾

In the past few years, a number of communities have made new efforts to regain control of their land. Residents of Nahuatzen—the village Cruzvillegas’s father left in the ’60s, on the Purépecha Plateau, in the state of Michoacán—have responded to illegal logging with different forms of resistance, such as blocking highways and boycotting elections. In 2011, the neighboring town of Cherán K’eri stood up to criminal organizations and municipal officials, forming their own communal government.⁴⁾ Last year, the Nahuatl community of Santa María de Ostula, on the coast of Michoacán, celebrated the recovery of almost 1,000 hectares from the Knights Templar cartel, in complicity with various state armed forces; the new community is named San Diego de Xayacalan.⁵⁾ All of these efforts reflect a movement away from politics, understood as forms of institutionalized social practices, and toward the political, understood as the field where collective forms of social organization fight for social commitments created by and for the people. EZLN remains a strong organizing force, regularly convening meetings between activists, intellectuals, students, and indigenous leaders.

These struggles are not only taking place in rural areas but in the cities as well, such as the metropolis of Mexico City, where land dispossession is part of the neoliberal agenda. Recently, residents of Ajusco and other communities in Coyoacán have been fighting an urban redevelopment project known by the acronym ZODES (Economic and Social Development Zones). In this plan, the city government, working with corporate partners—and architects Herzog & de Meuron—will redesign areas of Mexico City according to economic themes: Future City (for technology), Health City (for hospitals and medical schools), Creative City (for culture), and so on.⁶⁾

In order to construct a new society, the old one must be destroyed—its architecture, as the seat of hegemonic power, and its paradigms. Recognizing this, at the end of 2012, Cruzvillegas shifted his focus from construction to destruction, inaugurating his AUTODESTRUCCIÓN series. The following year, he presented AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 2, at Museo Experimental El Eco, in Mexico City. The installation was created with materials that Cruzvillegas recovered from the demolition of his house in the city, symbolizing the need to make space for our own desires and subjectivities outside the neoliberal system. Alongside the exhibition, the artist held a series of dialogues with family members, including siblings Jesús and Eréndira, who serve on committees for human rights in Ajusco and Oaxaca, respectively. Eréndira detailed the difficulties she faced when she tried to register at Mexico’s National Autonomous University (UNAM) to study law; when she stated that she wanted to become a human rights lawyer, the director of the law school argued that such people “start revolts.” Community is central to any social movement, as Eréndira explained, “I never act if not working and building from my community; that is the strongest lesson in learning to construct and transform a reality from the human rights perspective.”⁷⁾

Mexico is in the midst of a human-rights crisis, and a radical imagination is needed to maintain and strengthen resistance against a murderous neoliberal state that targets its own

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citizens. As philosopher Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez has written, "For critique to have force, it must be radical. 'To be radical,' Marx says, 'is to attack the problem at the root. And, for man, the root is man himself.' Radical critique is critique whose center, whose root, is man; it is critique that responds to a radical need."⁸⁾ Cruzvillegas's projects return to those roots, giving life to the radical imagination that is necessary to deal with today's complex reality. His work articulates a long process of reflection about the political, economic, and social conditions of contemporary Mexico, offering testimonies of the various ways in which the civil population has managed to resist and rebuild. Cruzvillegas's assemblages might look like the ruins of a dreamed-of Mexico, slipping through our fingers ever more quickly, but these vestiges also speak to the possibility of reconstructing another reality. In a moment in history that is rife with violence and absence, it is necessary to demolish and destroy, then recover the pieces and assemble them anew.

(Translated from the Spanish by Jane Brodie and Mara Lethem)

1) The title of this essay is taken from Georges Didi-Huberman's *Survivance des lucioles* (Survival of the Fireflies), published in 2009; this line appears on page 11 of the Spanish translation, *Supervivencia de las luciérnagas*, trans. Juan Calatrava (Madrid: Abada Editores, 2012). The epigraph is excerpted from comments made by writer Juan Villoro during the seminar "Critical Thought Versus the Capitalist Hydra," held in Chiapas, May 3–9, 2015, and organized by EZLN and CIDECI/Universidad de la Tierra.

2) Flor Goche, "'Tragedia nacional': 25 mil 821 personas desaparecidas en México" ("National Tragedy": 25,821 Disappeared Persons in Mexico), *Contralínea*.mx, April 26, 2015, www.contralinea.info/archivo-revista/index.php/2015/04/26/tragedia-nacional-25-mil-821-personas-desaparecidas-en-mexico, available in English at www.contralinea.info/archivo-revista/index.php/2015/04/26/a-national-tragedy-25821-missing-persons-mexico (both accessed October 19, 2015).

3) Anabel Hernández, *Los señores del narco* (Mexico City: Random House Mondadori, 2010), 588.

4) See, for example, "Cherán K'eri. Cuatro años construyendo autonomía" (Four Years Constructing Autonomy), published on April 21, 2015, the fourth anniversary of the recovery of land, on *SubVersiones*, www.subversiones.org/archivos/115140 (accessed October 15, 2015).

5) Xilonen Pérez, Heriberto Paredes, and Cráter Invertido, "Celebración y lucha en tierra de xayacates" (Celebration and Struggle in the Land of Xayacates), *Subversiones*, July 7, 2015, www.subversiones.org/archivos/117049 (accessed October 15, 2015).

6) Natalia Alejandra Rodríguez, "El urbanicidio de la ciudad del futuro" (The Urbanicide of the Future City), *SubVersiones*, August 14, 2015, www.subversiones.org/archivos/117878 (accessed October 15, 2015).

7) Eréndira Cruzvillegas, quoted in "Diálogos (día 1), Eréndira Cruzvillegas and Alejandra Carrillo," *Autodestrucción 2* (Mexico City: Museo Experimental El Eco, 2013), n.p.

8) Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Filosofía de la Praxis* (1967; Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 2003), 137.

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PAPAYA FOLLOWING THE BEAT OF 'DEMOLICIÓN' BY LOS SAICOS, 2014, installation view / --
HÄNGENDES/SCHWEBENDES, WIDERSPRÜCHLICHES, INSTABILES UND GENTRIFIZIERTES SELBSTPORTRÄT,
DAS NACH MALZ RIECHT, IM STAU STECKT, SEIT EINER WEILE SCHEISSEN MUSS, MARTHA DEBAYLE HÖRT,
AM NÄCHSTEN TAG «CAMPO DE GUERRA» VON SERGIO GONZÁLEZ RODRÍGUEZ GELESEN HABEN WIRD, DEN
MYSTIKERN VON EFFIZIENZ UND WETTBEWERB ZU ENTKOMMEN VERSUCHT, OHNE EMPFANG AUF MEINEM
MOBILTELEFON, UND DAVON TRÄUMT, ZUM BEAT VON «DEMOLICIÓN» VON LOS SAICOS EINE SAFTIGE
PAPAYA ZU VERSCHLINGEN, Installationsansicht.



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