

REGEN PROJECTS

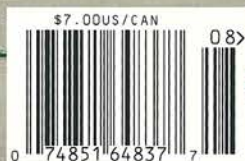
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Abraham Cruzvillegas
Ilya and Emilia Kabakov



Objects Are Alive



A Conversation with **Abraham Cruzvillegas**



Autoconstrucción, 2010. Installation of performance set and documentation, performance duration: 70 min. A project by Antonio Castro, Abraham Cruzvillegas, and Antonio Fernández Ros.

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BY ROBERT PREECE

Autoconstrucción (resource room), 2010. Maps, drawings, photographs, text, and found furniture, dimensions variable.

Abraham Cruzvillegas's *Autoconstrucción* works ricochet back and forth between categories, from intriguing, aesthetically constructed, found-object compositions to emotionally charged, socioeconomic/political statements. Rooted in the real world situation of Mexico City specifically, and to some extent of Latin America generally, this ongoing series builds on the art historical vocabulary of Duchampian readymades, Arte Povera, and assemblage. It should be noted that Cruzvillegas sees *autoconstrucción* ("self-construction") as "a way of making things," a methodology that "exists in many places and cultures with specific differences."

Cruzvillegas has exhibited around the world. A 2013 mid-career retrospective organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis continued on to the Haus der Kunst in Munich earlier this year and will be shown jointly at the Jumex Foundation in Mexico City and the Museo Amparo in Puebla in 2014–15. In 2012, he won South Korea's 2012 Yanghyun Prize, which awards 100 million won (approximately \$88,000), and exhibited several works at the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. Back in 2003, he exhibited at the Venice Biennale, in a presentation curated by Gabriel Orozco. Cruzvillegas lives and works in Mexico City.

Robert Preece: *What led you to work so intensively with found objects?*

Abraham Cruzvillegas: I started working with objects in 1987, experimenting with things from my parents' house. I wanted things to become "themselves" after my appropriation.

RP: *Could you explain what you mean when you say that the "objects are alive"?*

AC: A work from the early 1990s, *Objeto útil pero bonito*, is a good example of the evidence of life in objects. I used a stair railing from my parents' house and a painting by my father. I did nothing but put them together. I wanted to test my ability to allow things to have a dialogue among themselves, not really making any transformation or using any technique. There's no way of interfering in their relationship besides adding our own voyeuristic gaze and interpretation.

Previous to my intervention, the objects had a life of their own, separately; and since then, they share a diverse circumstance—being together, as a whole. I'm not necessarily a believer in animism, but I'm sure that matter, energy, things, and ourselves, we all never die—much less when we belong to a whole.

RP: *I've grown to appreciate vernacular innovations in "self-constructed" environments that I've seen in Caracas and Manila and in concrete workers' houses in Busan, South Korea. In particular, I was intrigued by narrow stairwells between houses, certain walkways, and molded forms for structures and courtyards along creeks. Are there any innovations that you've seen over the years that stick out in your memory?*

AC: I don't think that *autoconstrucción* is vernacular. That term applies to architectural analysis, and *autoconstrucción* is not architecture at all—or at least it can't be critiqued

GENE PITTMAN, COURTESY WALKER ART CENTER

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Above left: *La Familia*, 2009. Coconuts, artificial hair, steel wire, and glue, installation view.
 Above: *Autoconstrucción: Fragment: Lattice Bureau*, 2007. Bricks, iron, and wood, approx. 98 x 79 x 38 cm. Left: *Measure for measure*, 2010. Wood, skateboard, brick, cotton, enameled acrylic, and nunchucks, 130.5 x 99.5 x 20 cm.

or understood within the categories or premises of architecture. For me, *autoconstrucción* is a way of making things. It's a form of understanding reality and of approaching things in a very specific economic, political, and social environment. It's not a technique, it is not a subject. For me, it comes from my own experience, and it became a platform for making projects. The work that I call *Autoconstrucción (resource room)* includes documents, books, references, and diverse information related to my experience. I didn't choose it from any agenda or catalogue.

On the other hand, I'm convinced that *autoconstrucción* exists in many places and cultures—with specific differences and with diverse names. For me, the concept refers not to building shapes—I'm not especially interested in architecture—but to the needs that produced those shapes. The context is also very important for me—the context in which certain needs become a determination for constructing, transforming, adapting, or destroying.

In my case, that context is called "solidarity." For me, approaching *autoconstrucción* is not to talk about my biography or about myself: memory exists in the shapes, materials, objects, structures, and in the other animals that inhabit them, as a whole, including myself.

RP: How do you reconcile your approach and the resulting objects with the sociopolitical/socioeconomic context of self-constructed environments?

AC: I don't need to reconcile anything, mainly because we exist in an ecosystem in which things fit together without exclusion, except when humans intervene. Struggle is everywhere, because we are ubiquitous. Then our eyes

BOTTOM: ESTUDIO MICHEL ZABÉ, 2010 / ALL COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RUIRMANZUUTO, MEXICO CITY

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Left: *Autoconstrucción Room*, 2009. Installation of 15 unique sculptures, dimensions variable. Right: *Chicas Patas Boogie (sweaty & needy)*, 2012. Rebar, fabric, feathers, chain, and meat, 100 x 80 x 93 in. Below: *An Affirmative Craft*, 2012. Folding bicycle, tools, extension cords, wooden ladder, wooden crate, coins, stainless steel, stones, acrylic sheets, ceramic dishes, cup and ashtray, rope, gloves, pillow, and mixed media, dimensions variable. From the Gwangju Biennale.



TOP LEFT: GENE PITTMAN, COURTESY WALKER ART CENTER / TOP RIGHT: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST

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transfer our conflicts to other beings, things, and situations. On the other hand, pretending to be away from struggle is useless and a little bit naïve.

Beauty is also everywhere, and in my work as well, but not because of my intervention. This comes in part from my way of working: putting things together not because they are nice or ugly, but because they are useful. In the context of *autoconstrucción*, almost everything is useful, and people become resourceful and in solidarity. To make *autoconstrucción* yours, it's not necessary to take an introductory seminar or to immediately adopt an ideological position that doesn't fit with your own education, context, needs, or ideas; it's more interesting to think that the hermeneutics of *autoconstrucción* rest on these latent elements from any possible audience, rather than anything from me. It should be an open scaffolding to move through freely.

RP: *How political do you see your works in terms of supporting struggles to reduce corruption and inequality? Do you see the works as activist?*

AC: Like any other person, I believe that we must support the causes we identify with and fight against circumstances we don't agree with. But I don't believe in art as propaganda. Art produces knowledge, and that's politics. Beyond that, it's up to every person to add meaning to artworks. Artists just propose sentences to be completed.

Corruption and unfair distribution of wealth are some of the many factors that cause *autoconstrucción* to exist, but I don't address this content or put these messages forth to anyone. Instead, I like the idea of setting up optimistic exchanges in our society, and for this, humor is crucial. Everything fits together.

RP: *Could you explain your works in the Gwangju Biennale?*

AC: I can't explain, but I can describe. I used an abandoned house for some weeks as a studio and workshop, using only materials from the house. While constructing my sculptures, I organized meetings with people from the city—students, doctors, activists, artists, professors, curators, historians, and cultural agents—to learn about local history, life, religion, education, the economy, and culture. Those meetings were open to any audience and were recorded for a book that will be published soon. The sculptures remained in the house during the Biennale, after I left.

RP: *What did you learn from the process of developing these works? What did spending time in South Korea bring to your work?*

AC: I learned a lot from the people with whom I spoke in different public dialogues organized at the house, and I also learned a lot from life in the streets, from the specifics of everyday life, which is very efferves-



Above: *Communal and Democraticist*, 2012. Wooden window panels, stainless steel, coins, tree branches, and beer bottles and caps, dimensions variable. From the Gwangju Biennale. Below: *A new self-portrait as a mismeasured punctuated lack of equilibrium (with denim)*, 2011. Plastic boxes, paint, paper, aluminum paper, stainless steel, copper, iron, plastic, wood, denim, glass bottles, and masking tape, dimensions variable.



cent and politically engaged. My mind is still organizing the many experiences that I took with me after my time there.

RP: *What are the things that you'd like viewers—art specialists and the general public—to walk away with after seeing your works?*

AC: One, a troubled mind. Two, a smile.

Robert Preece is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture.