

REGEN PROJECTS

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PARKETT

Abraham Cruzvillegas

DORYUN CHONG

INTERCONTINENTAL MISSIVE

Dear Abraham,

I remember two particular moments when I was struck by something you said. The first occurred when you showed the film *AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN* (2009) in New York. During the post-screening Q & A, a gentleman in the audience raised his hand and observed that there is a certain "Oriental" (or did he say "Asian"?) quality to your film. The polite audience, myself included, shifted in their seats, feeling somewhat confused and discomfited by what sounded like a genuinely innocent but politically incorrect statement. You, kindly but also in a rather tongue-in-cheek way, said something to the effect of, "We are, of course, all Asians because Asians crossed the Bering Straits and settled in the Americas thousands of years ago." And that was that.

Not long ago, I learned of this scholar in Korea. Although he officially specializes in Spanish literature, more recently he has been prolifically writing articles and books, and even lecturing on TV, about alleged connections between ancient Koreans and ancient Mexicans.¹ He claims that certain early Korean tribes trekked from the Asian continent to the Americas to start new civilizations. One of the an-

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cient Korean tribes was called Maek (or Maek-i) and is believed to have lived near the modern-day border between North Korea and China, in the northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, the area that used to be known as Manchuria. They, along with some other proto-Korean groups, are said to have established the semi-mythical nation Gojoseon (2333–108 BC) as well as the powerful, vast kingdoms of Buyeo (2nd century BC–494 AD) and Goguryeo (37 BC–668 AD). Goguryeo's territory stretched far up into Manchuria and deep down into the Korean peninsula, pushing other kingdoms to its southern extremes. Through unexpected twists and turns of history, however, Goguryeo fell to its much smaller competitor, Shilla, which unified all of the Korean kingdoms in the seventh century AD. Since then, the Korean nation has been confined to the peninsula, and Koreans have grieved over the irrevocable loss of vast northern territories. The lost land has long been claimed by the Mongols, Manchus, and Chinese, and few historical accounts of these early sovereignties remain, other than in Chinese classical chronicles. The question is, where did all these vanquished proto-Koreans go?

This scholar claims that those lost proto-Koreans crossed over to the Americas—specifically, to Mesoamerica—between the tenth century BC and the tenth century AD (but in especially large num-

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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN (Self-Construction)*, 2009, 1-channel HD video, color with sound, 1 hr. 3 min. /
EIGENBAU, 1-Kanal-HD-Video, Farbe mit Ton.



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ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *LA MODERNA (The Modern)*, 2003, 6 sickles made of stainless steel, wood, wooden oar, paper, 8 3/4 x 35 1/2 x 32" / *DIE MODERNE*, 6 Sicheln aus rostfreiem Stahl, Holz, Holzruder, Papier, 22,2 x 90,2 x 81,3 cm.

bers from around the fifth century BC for about 200 years) to establish civilizations there. How does he substantiate this declaration, you wonder? Much of it is via linguistic comparisons. First of all, there are the similar-sounding names of Maek and Mexica, which is how the rulers of the Aztec empire referred to themselves when they came into contact with the Spanish conquistadors. He has many other examples: The name of Mexica's language, Nahuatl, is derived from Korean *Na wa tadl* (I and everyone); Aztlan, the mythical homeland of the Aztec people, is in fact Asadal, the capital of Gojoseon; the Nahuatl word for mountain, *tepec*, comes from Taebaek, the tallest mountain located on the border between China and North Korea, which is often referred to as the spiritual home of the Korean people. He also found numerous cultural similarities, such as traditional cos-

umes and body decorations. For instance, Aztec men kept their long hair in a topknot and sometimes wore a headdress closely resembling the *gat*, a tall cylindrical hat with a wide brim worn by literati men during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897). Both Korean and Aztec women painted two red circles on their cheeks and kept their hair in place with long hairpins, at times decorated with avian motifs. And so on and on.

Most, if not all, of these claims are not difficult for even non-specialists to debunk. Incredibly for a literary scholar, if not officially a linguist, he never seems to consider how pronunciations in any language change, evolve, and get corrupted over time, nor does he seem to reckon with unavoidable discrepancies that occur between two languages in the process of transliteration. That his archaeological or art-historical sources are drawn from sources that are

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hundreds of years apart does not perturb him. For example, he compares without compunction a mural from Teotihuacan (approximately 1st century BC to 8th century AD) with an eighteenth-century Korean genre painting. Encountering another culture, we often rejoice in finding in it certain familiar traits we know about ourselves. We may even distort our own mother tongue and mold the foreign one so that they sound like one another. Even an allegedly serious scholar might fall prey to this desire for such connections and identifications, although I am tempted to think of this particular example as wishful thinking at best, and at worst, quackery.

Advances in archaeology and physical anthropology, genome mapping, and plate tectonics and ice-age geology together now allow us to fairly accurately pinpoint the period of Asian-American intercontinental migration to around fourteen to fifteen thousand years ago—in other words, far earlier than the alleged disappearance and out-migration of the proto-Koreans of northern territories. In this legitimately scientific way of establishing connections between peoples of the two continents, one relies on data derived from fossils and geological strata, carbon dating, Y-chromosome and mitochondrial DNA haplogroups, and arctic and even underwater archaeological digs and finds. Even so, we may never know conclusively who from where crossed over exactly when for what reasons and purposes. The crucial evidence that can answer the questions once and for all

may be long gone. I cannot deny, however, that part of me finds that this realistic, fatalistic acceptance of the limits of science makes the self-confidence of the pseudo-linguistics and chronology-busting comparative morphology rather alluring. No?

The second comment of yours that has stayed with me came up during a conversation we had in Berlin, several months after the New York episode. You were speaking about Antonin Artaud's time in Mexico, and his quest to experience the Tarahumara people's peyote dance. You described this as a desire to experience a time and culture unadulterated by modernity, which might open the door to a fundamental insight into the production of human knowledge and language. For you, Artaud's expedition exemplified a longing to find one's own identity rather than seeking to belong to a group not of one's own origin. Every search is always ultimately about the seeker himself.

I thought of this again recently, when you wrote to me that—as you have said previously in other contexts—you feel that every object of yours is “alive, has opinions, will, and attitude, with which it participates in a dialogue with other objects, things, events, persons, animals, and so on.”²⁾ This immediately made me recall some of my favorite objects by you, which date from 2002 and 2003: LA POLAR (North Star), an upturned photo umbrella sprouting peacock and pheasant feathers from its rim; LA MODERNA (The Modern), six sickles whose sharp ends converge on



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, NUESTRA IMAGEN ACTUAL: ROLLO (Our Real Image: Rollo), 2012, vinyl paint, ink on water based acrylic, enamel on kraft paper, 18 1/8 x 157 1/2" / UNSER WIRKLICHES BILD: ROLLO, Vinylfarbe, Tinte auf wasserbasierter Acrylfarbe, Email auf Packpapier, 300 x 400 cm. (PHOTO: ESTUDIO MICHEL ZABÉ)

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a single point on a wooden oar; and AEROPUERTO ALTERNO (Alternate Airport), a bundle of knives of various sizes stuck on a round wooden block standing on three long legs. I have always felt that the elegance of these works relies in large part on the simplicity of their construction: two found things brought together in an alchemical marriage. Through the governing principles of balance and gravity, the unions transform into whole other beings—a constellation, a machine-for-living, and an agave plant, perhaps. At the same time, I like to think of them as shamanic objects that wield great powers, even though they may not be made from precious materials—like the staff of the Tarahuraman medium with whom Artaud became obsessed, or the mundane walking stick he believed to belong to St. Patrick.

Shamans continue to exist in certain contemporary societies, such as Korea and Mexico. They cannot be wiped out by modernity because the lands from

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.

(PHOTO: KIM TAEDONG)

which they spring forth still-demand their mediation, and the animistic force that endows things with life has not been expunged. Lands like these are haunted by brutality and precariousness—the brutal order of humans and things that shifts often and irreversibly as if in seismic jolts, and the two somehow managing time and again to be in a precariously balanced co-existence or a prolonged suspension rather than in a rigid hierarchy. Modernized citizens of these lands

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submit, helplessly and yet willingly, to autochthonic (autoconstructive?) forces. They deal with the dark yet liberating forces by employing shamans to fall, on their behalf, into a “divine illness,” when the appointed mediums speak in tongues, can change gender, and even leap over gorges of time and culture.

This somehow leads me to think of the first major work you exhibited in Korea, an AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN you made for the 2012 Gwangju Biennale. In it, you transposed a methodology of gathering, recycling, and repurposing from your neighborhood of Ajusco, outside Mexico City, and imbued it, as you did in the original context, with an “ethics of mutual assistance and cooperation, and of alternative economies,” as one writer put it.³⁾ This new application made sense given the historical victimhood, disenfranchisement, and resistant solidarity that permeate Gwangju. But for me, the artworks you made there were not so much the results of a “community” act but rather pulled themselves together, as if by gravity, into their own ragtag wholeness. They were less organized than self-organized—or “self-constructed.” They were themselves beings, not shamanic objects but shamans. All your AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN works may have been so, but perhaps I had that realization finally when I saw one in a place that I knew had so many unresolved grievances, mournings, and . . . ghosts.

I like to think that the series of giant calligraphic paintings of simians you made with a broom, following your first couple of trips to Korea—and which you presented in the exhibition “Nuestra imagen actual” (Our Current Image) in 2012—as arising from a kind of divine illness, a shamanic possession. At the time, you said that in Korea, “I recovered not only my love for calligraphy and drawing, but also the pride for my opposable thumbs and my humbleness in the face of the fierce and destructive nature that stirs within us.” Furthermore, you said, despite or because of the heightened fear and fatigue in today’s Mexico, “I would like to recover for myself the pride in being an animal, a beast, or a monkey.”⁴⁾ While I do not fully grasp the statement on a rational level, I sense that you made an intuitive linkage—possessed vision?—between drawing (the most basic artistic act), human evolution, and the id, while intercontinentally shut-

ting between two far-off places. And what resulted from it is a visual language that might be easily recognizable but still on the margin of intelligibility. I do not feel that you painted monkeys simply because of your realization that you are a monkey.

Perhaps it is in this altered state that you returned to Korea to stage your most recent exhibition, an installation that you decided to call AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 8: SINBYEONG, using the Korean word for “divine illness” as subtitle. You have been employing the antonymic term *autodestrucción* (self-destruction) in place of *autoconstrucción* (self-construction) as a title more often of late. On the surface, the methodology of gathering the flotsam and jetsam of a place and assembling them seems more or less the same. Is it then your own altered state that dictates whether it is destroying, rather than building, the self? The self as nonhuman, as simian?

One of these days, I may find the right approach to probe your encounters, identifications, and possessions in what may be your original homeland, and what you brought home from them. Maybe I will never find the proper words, nor will you. Then perhaps we can try to speak our own mother tongues and see if we may find an unexpectedly liberating common language amid a divine illness.

Yours,
Doryun

1) The scholar, Son Seong-tae, has published an extensive list of Internet-based articles in addition to books. Among the sources I perused are the two-part article “Unusual Claim by a Scholar of Meso- and South America: Native Americans are Koreans,” originally published in the November and December 2012 issues of *Monthly Chosun* magazine, www.monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?ctcd=&nNewsNumb=201211100049 and www.monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw_contentA.asp?nNewsNumb=201212100054 (accessed August 26, 2015).

2) Abraham Cruzvillegas, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 6, 2015.

3) Colin Perry, “Abraham Cruzvillegas,” *Frieze* (April 2015), www.frieze.com/issue/review/abraham-cruzvillegas1/ (accessed August 26, 2015).

4) Abraham Cruzvillegas, quoted in the press release for the exhibition “Nuestra imagen actual: autorretratos recientes” (Our Real Image: Recent Self-Portraits), 2012, Kurimanzutto, Mexico City, [www.kurimanzutto.com/en/exhibitions/nuestra-imagen-actual-autor retratos-recientes-abraham-cruzvillegas](http://www.kurimanzutto.com/en/exhibitions/nuestra-imagen-actual-autor-retratos-recientes-abraham-cruzvillegas) (accessed August 26, 2015).