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Abraham Cruzvillegas

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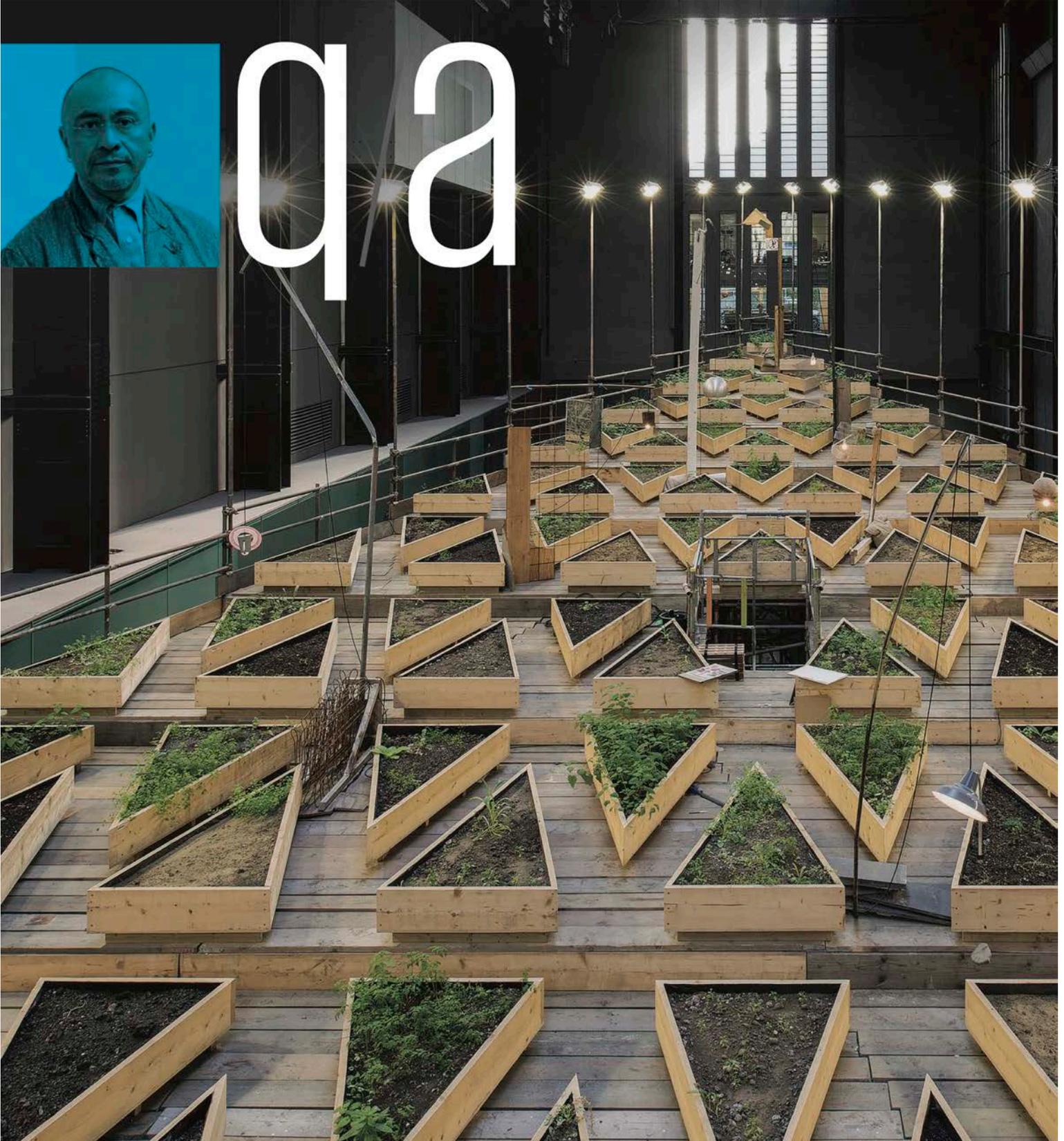
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Improvising and Transforming:

A Conversation with Abraham Cruzvillegas

by Robert Preece

Many of Abraham Cruzvillegas's projects are linked by the notion of *autoconstrucción*, or self-construction—a concept that draws from the ingenious and collaborative building strategies used in his childhood Mexico City neighborhood. For him, the term describes an approach of inventive improvisation and instability in which change becomes a permanent state, reflecting the chaotic and fragmentary nature of life. He has also explored *autodestrucción* and *autoconfusión*—additional forms of personal and collaborative research undertaken with family and friends that result in a constant process of learning about materials, landscape, people, and himself.

Working in sculpture, painting, drawing, installation, and video, Cruzvillegas maintains a close engagement with the material world, immersing himself in the ongoing transformation of personal and collective identities. In addition to arranging and rearranging found objects in striking and poetic juxtapositions, he has been writing song lyrics and texts about art, politics, and culture as another means of self-analysis. And most recently, he's been collaborating with dancers and musicians who

Installation view
of Hyundai
Commission:
Empty Lot, 2015.

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interact with his sculptural elements to produce surprising results that, like all of Cruzvillegas's works, keep evolving "in a very organic way."

Robert Preece: *Since we last spoke in 2014, what has changed in your practice?*

Abraham Cruzvillegas: I have been working more and more with dancers and musicians, some from a more traditional background, others using more contemporary tools and languages, like microtonal theory. Together with other friends and artists, including poets, ceramicists, and skateboarders, they interact with my sculptures in various environments, including museums, galleries, and cultural centers, improvising and eventually transforming them. The performances evolve in a very organic way, almost always with no score at all, but always through lots of complicity and communication derived from friendship and comradeship.

The results are always surprising to me, and it's me who learns more, witnessing transformation and dialogue as common strategies. Since I started writing lyrics for songs in 2008 and giving them to musicians and bands to create sounds for them, recording and

THIS PAGE,
FROM TOP:
**Esculturas
pendientes, 11,**
2019.
Wood, metal, stone,
synthetic fiber, natural
fiber, ceramic, oil, soil,
and living organism,
311 x 283.5 x 130.5 cm.

**"The Water Trilogy 2":
Autodefensión
microtonal obrera
campesina estudiantil
metabolista descalza,**
2017.
View of installation
at the Fondation
d'entreprise Hermès,
Tokyo, Japan.



having concerts, my sculptural work has been changing into something else; it is becoming more convivial and party-like, involving local communities that activate the exhibitions with their own interests and skills, besides the musical or dance aspects. This again leads me to listen and to learn, to witness, just like any other visitor.

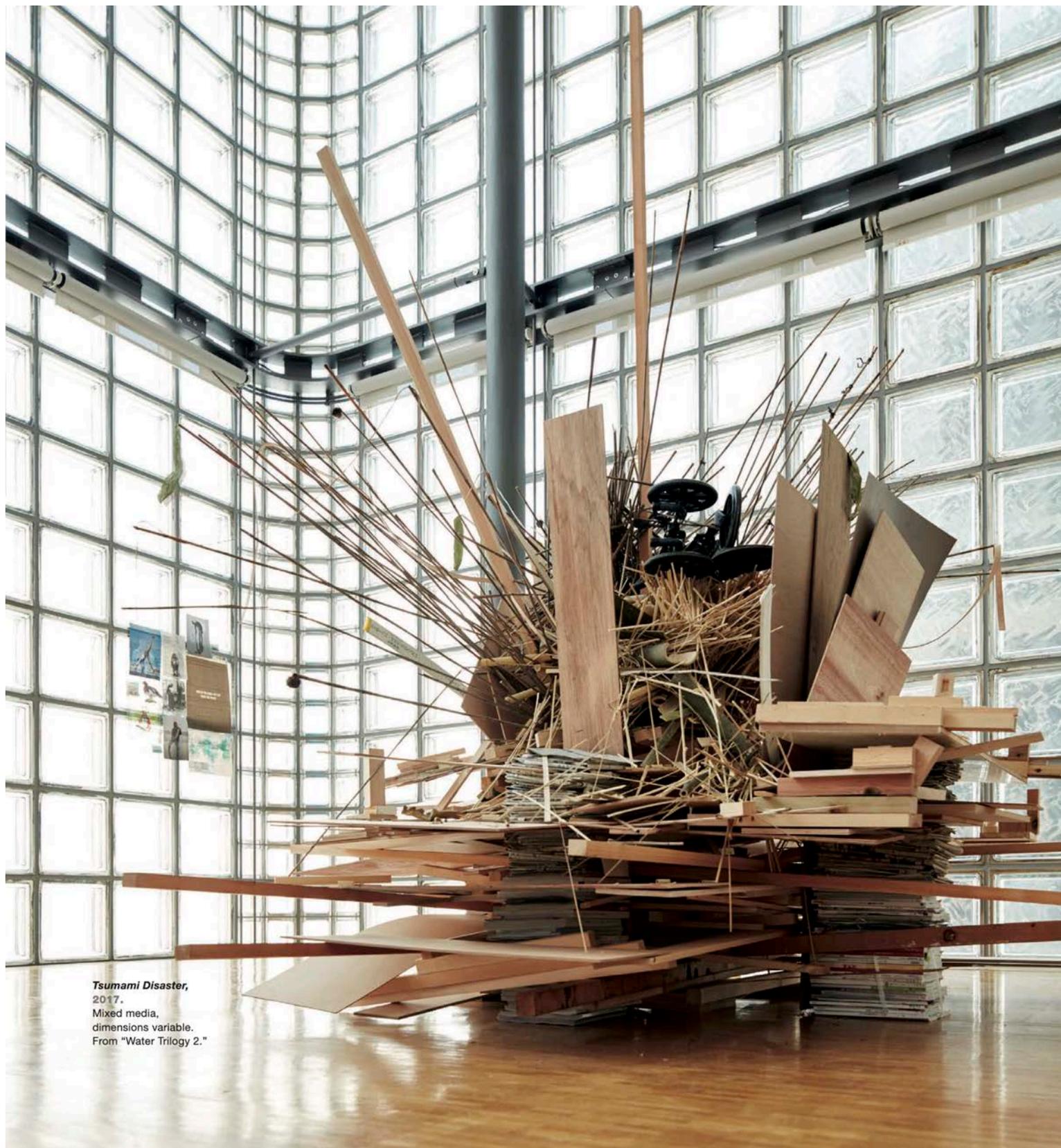
RP: *What planning did you have to do for Empty Lot (2015) at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall? How did the growth progress over time?*

AC: After the invitation, I thought I needed to summarize all of my previous work, but in a very simple way. I wanted to produce no metaphors or allegories about anything, neither representations nor propaganda. Taking note of the main concepts, forms, materials, tools, and references in my past work, I decided to construct a floating wooden platform, standing on standard scaffolding and holding planters with soil from different outdoor spaces in London. My idea was to plant nothing, to sow nothing, just provide water and artificial light during the six months of the show.

Many plants grew, mostly from whatever was in those diverse patches of earth, but also as a result of people's activity. Sometimes seed grenades were thrown into the planters. People also threw garbage: cans, food leftovers, and other litter. At the end, we collected samples from some 200 species, almost none of them native to the U.K.



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Tsunami Disaster,
2017.
Mixed media,
dimensions variable.
From "Water Trilogy 2."

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“ **My sculptural work...** is becoming more convivial and party-like, involving local communities that activate the exhibitions with their own interests and skills. ”



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RP: Could you talk about the “Water Trilogy” installations? How did this project play out across the three sites in Paris (2017), Tokyo (2017), and Rotterdam (2017–18)?

AC: It started as a coincidence. I had invitations to make projects in those cities. Then, I found a common thread with a link to a subjective circumstance happening at the time in the neighborhood where I was born and grew up in Mexico City—water scarcity. Cultures have always developed near water sources like lakes, rivers, and streams. For me, constructing dams, expanding land overseas, or just creating political figures from left and right banks became material for a free, autonomous art project, using traditional music from the Huasteca region in Mexico. Three new lyrics were written as a starting point, addressing environmental, political, social, historical, economic, and aesthetic issues. An *axolotl* [salamander], a water hose pipe, and a Namazu fish separately recount, in first person, three different events: struggling to save a lake from pollution, battling leaks in a building, and reconstructing a city after a tsunami. My writing used the traditional tunes of three old Huapango songs—“El aguanieve,” “El sacamandú,” and “El llorar”—and was accompanied by a different set of sculptures at each of the exhibition sites: Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris, the Hermès Foundation in Tokyo, and the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam.

RP: How did the “Autorreconstrucción: Social Tissue” installations work? These were also installed at three different venues: the Kunsthau Zürich (2018), The Contemporary in Austin, Texas (2019), and the Aspen Art Museum in Colorado (2019–20). The first iteration was titled *Autorreconstrucción: Social Tissue*, while the second two shared the title *Hi, how are you, Gonzo?*.

AC: This project evolved, with different titles and situations, from earlier, similar proposals related to the possibility of approaching local communities and people for the activation of the work. In Zürich, we arranged a very smooth program with skateboarders, refugees, cooks, and dancers, but everywhere else, the sculptures made after my instructions, from super simple doodles, were just things to be used, or to navigate around, for multiple activities. This total freedom also happened at Galería Macchina in Santiago, Chile, and at MUCA, at



the National University in Mexico, where there were no instructions or scripts, with an expanded community of friends and colleagues.

RP: For *Autorreconstrucción: To Insist, to Insist, to Insist* (2018) at The Kitchen in New York, you combined sculpture, dance, and music. How did this combination work in New York, and how did it compare to the earlier version in Mexico City?

AC: This started as a very spontaneous exchange with choreographer Bárbara Foulkes and the musician and dancer Andrés García Nestitla “Cuácharas.” We assumed we could do something that drew from parallel or tangential elements in our diverse practices and discourses, putting together the possibility of improvising in a relaxed encounter; it easily became something more related to interdisciplinarity than to anything else.

We just planned to construct a hanging sculpture made with found objects that would be destroyed during the performance, through its own inertia and weight and the action of dancing. There was a resonating dialogue between the music and the dancing, moving in a spiral of ascending energy until everything collapsed, with no metaphors or allegories involved. This happened first at La Pista in Mexico City, where Bárbara used to work. It’s an abandoned restaurant that she restored and adapted as a dance classroom with the slow choreography of an archaeological rescue in terms of furniture, forgotten cooking tools, fridges, and the space itself. Most of her work is related to the observation of balance, or its absence, in human

OPPOSITE:
Definitely unfinished poethical self portrait (with a rusty belt), 2017.

Wood, plastic, lead, steel, rope, wire, newsprint, Styrofoam, fabric, glass, felt, cast iron, brass, Plexiglas, leather, ceramic, nylon moving straps, paper, porcelain, paint, string, PVC, mirror, and deer antlers, 563.9 x 469.9 x 408.9 cm.

THIS PAGE:
Hi, how are you, Gonzo?, 2019.
View of installation at the Aspen Art Museum.

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bodies and objects hanging from ceilings. Andrés, with whom I had collaborated before, approaches traditional music and dance as a contemporary possibility for activating sculptural practices.

At The Kitchen, we were invited to re-present the same thing, repeating the performance over a weekend. But Cuácharas didn't get a U.S. visa, and it was impossible for him to travel to New York. So, with the help of some friends and the team at The Kitchen, we succeeded in arranging an online transmission: he could watch Bárbara live online, and we were able to hear his musical interaction from Mexico City. For me, this was preceded by some months of the kind of interaction that we became familiar with during the Covid lockdown, learning not to depend on political or economic boundaries, state frontiers, and bureaucratic limitations. It was a lot of learning for me. We presented it twice more: in Miami, during the art fair, as a set of three sculptures, three dancers, and three musicians, and at the Tallera in Cuernavaca, the celebrated former atelier of the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, with additional participants.

RP: Could you tell me about *The Five Enemies I and II* (2018) at the Sydney Biennial?

AC: After a continuous dialogue about animism and Taoism with curator Mami Kataoka, during the days before the opening, I created a group of sculptures using only locally sourced, abandoned objects—taken blindly, with no selection. They were painted in halves with ultra-glossy, pink acrylic paint and matte, school-board green and hung from the ceiling of a big cell in the former prison building, making two rows of crossing lines in a descending X shape. Once the sculpture was installed, I told a secret to each element. I also constructed a large-scale, suspended sculpture. I didn't tell a secret to this one though, because I understood that she knew a lot about me and my feebleness. The title comes from a chapter of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.

RP: With all of this international activity, how did it feel to settle down in Mexico City and focus on the "Esculturas pendientes" series for your solo show at kurimanzutto in 2019? How would you describe these works?

AC: For the "Esculturas pendientes," I gathered many



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OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE:
PAGE:
Autorreconstrucción:
Social Tissue,
2018.
3 views of installation at
the Kunsthau Zürich.

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“The results are always surprising to me, and it's me who learns more, witnessing transformation and dialogue as common strategies.”



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of the questions that have interested me over the years, such as the importance of community in the construction of one's identity. I have admired the resilience of marginalized people and their amazing capacity to reinvent themselves and to create their own spaces within homogenizing urban planning, as well as in its absence.

This specific economy is translated into artworks that may include a critical awareness of the self as part of society and nature. History can be learned not only from written chronicles, but also from the animals and plants that have and have not survived urbanization. Some of the botanical species included in these works are from the volcanic rock area where I was born and grew up. Martina Navarro, a Purhépecha community activist, researched the original materials, tools, and procedures of the pre-Columbian *maque* lacquer technique, using natural earths, oils, pigments, and the fat from *aje*, a Michoacán native worm.

She and her children, Erandi and Irepan de Saint Phalle, have arranged a *maque* workshop that respects traditional processes. For each work in the series, I asked them to include one wooden element ornamented with their technique, using an empty representation of a Venn diagram, among other objects—raw, industrially made plastic, metal, rocks, thread, and fibers. This collaboration, which took the shape of sculptures, could open a discussion about economic, political, cultural, environmental, and social diversity issues, as well as about the possibility of living together, in harmony, in a meaningful and committed way—or not.

RP: How would you describe *The Ballad of Etc. (Molinia caerulea/ Panicum virgatum)* (2019)?

AC: As with the “Esculturas pendientes,” I made some hanging sculptures that touched the ceiling and the floor. In all of them, I used a fixed combination of materials—wood, metal, rock, plastic, a native plant (in this case, from what we now know as Illinois), and a piece of lacquered *maque* from the Saint Phalle family. I wrote new lyrics about milkweed species, which attract Monarch butterflies that fly from Michoacán state in the west of Mexico to mate.

RP: What are *María Lionza* (2021) and *Listening to 'No discutamos' with Lucha Villa, while attempting to deconstruct all possible strategies to recreate my*



OPPOSITE:
Reconstruction:
The Five Enemies II, 20, 2018.
Acrylic, paint, wood, iron, plastic, and cloth, detail of installation at the Sydney Biennial.

THIS PAGE:
"The Water Trilogy 2":
Autodefensión microtonal obrera campesina estudiantil metabolista descalza, 2017.
Newspaper, wallpaper, mixed media, morning glory, moonflower, soil, and plastic pots, detail of installation.

skills to start a scuffle with you (2021) about?

AC: As part of the “Siembra” series, I made some extra sculptures while working on my recent presentation at kurimanzutto gallery. Though they weren't presented, they were made just like those that were exhibited, re-using objects and materials from other dismantled or destroyed sculptures. This produced new arrangements from elements found and used over the course of many years of work, putting together moments and geographies in an unstable and lightweight manner. In these and the “Siembra” works, I tried to connect with the music playing during the process of making, and with more emblematic pieces from my life and identity. They are pieces from an identitarian puzzle, including working in art schools almost non-stop for 30 years. ■■

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