



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN: THE FILM

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Gallery Hours: noon-6pm or intermission, closed Mondays
Always free

INTERVIEW WITH ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS

By Clara Kim

Translated by Clara Kim

Clara Kim: The notion of autoconstrucción has been instrumental to both methodology and form in your recent practice. Can you talk about the origins of this word as it relates to your practice and how it has led you to examine your childhood home in Ajusco?

Abraham Cruzvillegas: The autoconstrucción concept comes from a house building dynamic that is led by specific needs from a family and by the lack of economic funds for constructing a house at once. People build their own homes slowly, as they can, with limited money, with the collaboration of the all the members of the family, and with the solidarity of neighbors, relatives and friends, sporadically. Houses evidence the process in layers, through which it’s possible to watch this strata of experience and the transformations, modifications, cancellations and destruction of the structures, according to family changes and new needs. Aesthetic decisions are intertwined in a piling that shows also the ability of the constructors to use any material available or at hand, depending of the place, situation and circumstance. Hybrid combinations of materials and constructive strategies are very rich and diverse. Autoconstrucción is not a weekend hobby as bricolage or DIY culture, it’s a consequence of unequal wealth distribution. Opposed to massive building projects, autoconstrucción points to an autonomous and independent architecture that is far from any planning or draft: it’s improvised.

Even when autoconstrucción happens all around the world (like in Brasilian favelas or shanty towns abroad), in my personal experience I lived the entire process of autoconstrucción in my parent’s house in the South of México City, which is a land of volcanic rock, that was settled beginning in the early 1960s by immigrants from the country side, looking for a better life in the big city. Slowly people started building their houses with lava stones and recycled materials gathered in other neighborhoods. For many years, there was no water and no general services at all. Fighting for the property of their lands became an everyday activity, as well for the access to electricity, pavement, etc. Women became leaders in those movements, along with young guys and children, while men were working, many of them as construction workers in so-called modern Mexico.

Autoconstrucción means a structure in which everything is possible, as it has infinite and diverse ways to take a shape. It is a way of thinking more than a method or a technique, it’s a way of life. Improvising, testing all kind of combinations, according to specific needs (like expressing one self) is a rule, that provides absolute freedom. Autoconstrucción is for me the most authentic way of creativity, as it blooms in the most adverse circumstances, it’s pure ingenuity and will. Whatever the shape, language or format of autoconstrucción may adopt, it never can be mistaken or misunderstood, hermetics, use, function and/or contradiction are its fuel.

Clara Kim: Thank you very much.

CK: How does autoconstrucción influence your working strategy, the materials you use? And when did you first start using this concept to describe your practice?

AC: I used to work in a very intuitive way, even when some of the production stages could be called ‘conceptual’, so I start with impulses or ideas, and there is a need that appeals to the possibility of transforming them into shapes. I work with materials that could be used and normally I never question what is usable or not. Instead I choose them from surrounding reality, from anywhere I find myself, with indifference, which means

that I don’t choose materials because they are nice or ugly, they must have the potential to be used. Materials by themselves are not important, their quality or status of fragments is very important as parts of a whole. Wholeness is unstable, conceptually, physically. Meaning is meaningful only in terms of the whole, including the use of the whole, which means interpretation. Simple or elaborate constructions are analogous and absolutely different at the same time, depending on the level of complexity of the inherent processes to make them, their final status should be simple and accessible to inhabit, watch, read, touch, listen, re-build or deconstruct them. Geometry and chaos are depicted according to the diverse needs that demand their construction, and stages of construction can be frozen as well, to show specific transparent moments of the process as definitely unfinished. They can be rearranged in different ways depending on the context, situation, circumstance, including displacement, replacement or shift as part of their permanent change. So, autoconstrucción is freedom, contradiction, transparency, simplicity and change.

I appropriated the term to name all my work since 2007, when I improvised a whole exhibition in New York, working only with materials found around a gallery, and attempting to reproduce the dynamics of autoconstrucción (not representing it, but activating it). Anyway I started working with the idea as a personal fact (and not as a chosen subject matter) that has informed my work since the year 1999, when I took many pictures of houses in my neighborhood, the volcanic rock there, some details of my parent’s house. Then I wrote a text telling that story through my own experience, what I witnessed during all those years without a nostalgic approach: just facts. This text was just finished last year and became a book accompanied by many images, including some lent by neighbors, shot in the early years of the autoconstrucción. It was published in Glasgow, when I was invited to do a project at the Centre for Contemporary Art by Francis McKee. I’ve made sculptures, drawings, paintings, videos and now a film—commissioned by REDCAT—under this name. Maybe it’s time to move to ‘autodestrucción’.

Clara Kim: Thank you very much.

CK: Recently, in a lecture at CalArts, you talked about autoconstrucción as a platform—an ideological framework as well as an economic system of production. Can you talk more about this idea?

AC: It’s very easy to perceive the origin of the materials composing an autoconstrucción; fragments evidence themselves their economic/cultural sources. The clash of the diverse economic systems and production contexts produce complex reading/living systems according to the viewer/inhabitant. The will to construct with any material—any or all of them—or even without materials, is more important than the aesthetic or economic value of them. The platform on which autoconstrucción operates is very often a collaborative one, exchange value then is a fluctuation between monetary capital, work capital, speculative capital and waste. When an object is discarded by a person it’s valueless, for autoconstrucción it could be seen as prime matter. Autoconstrucción does not deal with garbage, but with prime matter. Recycling is a common practice now, but for centuries in so-called underdeveloped countries, scavenging and harvesting used materials and objects has been a normal activity. Pepenadores in México pick cardboard, metals, and discarded furniture, cans, bottles, paper, etc, in order to give them a new life. They collect, classify, accumulate and resell to transform.

Then a new cycle starts. When I make an artwork with found objects or materials (i.e. aluminum, wood, a forgotten bicycle, my own hair, shark jaws, a cowbell, teeth, a chair, wax, coins, plastic or sheep shit) they remain and keep their original qualities and defects. At the end, if the piece is dismantled, the fragments, remain the same: there is no alchemical transformation, there is no trick or magic. Transformation occurs only in the viewers mind. And in my hands, of course. So, a stone is a stone before, during and after the art/architecture approach, it does not represent anything else but a stone being a stone as a stone. When the same stone is taken from the paving to thrown over a police barricade, or to the window of a government office, it will be a stone anyway. But a happy one. Autoconstrucción meant for me, for many years, before making art, a constant struggle with authority, not only because of the situation of growing in a challenging context, learning to deal with scarcity, solidarity, roughness and resistance to the environment, to the local governors, and to self indulgence. Now it’s more an ideological consequence in which all my acts involve my own genealogy and trying to arrive at a future, to a certain degree of consciousness based in all the mentioned above. Autoconstrucción is not biographic or anecdotic, is not narrative, it’s not thematic or communicative. It is the very expression of survival and work. It’s also humorous, ironic, paradoxical and delirious.

Clara Kim: Thank you very much.

CK: In the work for REDCAT as well as for Glasgow, you were also interested in exploring narrative constructs. In Glasgow, you asked local bands to compose and play music using the lyrics you wrote about your neighborhood, Ajusco. For REDCAT, you developed a feature length film—though a non-linear one without dialogue—that attempts to convey a kind of abstract portrait of Ajusco. Can you talk about this as it relates also to the collaborative or cooperative spirit you employ in your working process?

AC: I have approached diverse platforms, tools, materials and techniques in order to accomplish a process. Depending on the context, I choose what I think is the right tool necessary for each occasion. Narrative is one of these tools. I like to make my work transparent, so anyone who sees it can reconstruct the whole process of making it, it becomes a narrative, a tale or a story about interpretation, in the mind of the viewers. But this narrative can’t be fictitious, it must be ‘real’ in terms of time and space. Facts. Anecdotic issues or dynamics can arrive to be part of this, but it’s not as important as the activity itself of constructing narratives.

Once, when painter José Clemente Orozco was asked to explain his work—one of the polemic murals he made in the U.S.—I don’t remember which one—he wrote a beautiful essay in which he recalls exactly, step by step, the process of making the work: the amount of water, each specific brush, size, material, etc, hand used to paint, colors and combination of pigments, gesso in pounds, centimeters of painted wall and time of drying. This is the kind of narrative I like.

Collaboration is another tool, an important one.

Through collaboration I’ve learned a lot, it’s an educational process that can be as long as you live. Collaborative projects allow people to talk and share, to exchange experience and knowledge. Then this last one changes and enriches itself: it evolves. I’ve collaborated with children, students, craft makers, artists, workers, writers, filmmakers and with my parents, even.

When reminded of the process of collaboration or when looking at a work made in a collaborative way,

narrative appears as a natural component for finishing the piece. Collective memories are much more precise and rich, as everyone has a different story to tell. Subjectivity and invention are key elements for narrative, only when it does not aspire to become a true for all. Works of art should be independent from the person who made them. If they succeed in that, then narrative and collaboration can be forgotten. But the fact that they were part of the process or the need will lie inside them, there forever.

When I wrote lyrics for songs, it was because I was in a very specific environment, rich in music and bands: Glasgow. I thought about how to get involved while standing on my own very subjective and personal platform. Then narrative came in the form of short tales intended to be appropriated by musicians who, in order to record an album, created music for them, standing on their own very subjective and personal platform. Then, with the help of a skilled technician in bicycles, I built a sound system to play the music in the streets of that city. The construction of the mobile sound system implied a learning, making the music and recording the album meant more learning. Narrative is present in this moment, but it’s not absolutely necessary to listen to the music or to ride the pentacycle. It’s pure joy.

Making a film with professional people has been a deep learning as well. Approaching a language totally unknown for me enriches the whole process of making this project. But it came from a specific need: challenging myself to make a movie—without big budgets or even without a script or a real film structure—for REDCAT, in LA, land of cinema, the Mecca of porn. So we did. An abstract portrait of my neighborhood, describes its own narrative. It’s to be deciphered or decoded by viewers freely, there is no chance for mistake or misunderstanding. I think for me that’s one of the best issues of this film, that it’s not traditionally narrative, it does not tell a story with a beginning, a climax and an end, it follows infinitely, silent and mineral. But people are there as well, in the most human and animal of the circumstances. Basics. Then you invent your own narrative, you build and construct your own thing.

Clara Kim: Thank you very much.

Abraham Cruzvillegas

Born in 1968, México City
Lives and works in México City

Education/Educación

1990
B.A., Pedagogy, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), México City

Solo Exhibitions/Exposiciones Individuales

2009
Abraham Cruzvillegas, Thomas Dane Gallery, London
The Exhibition Formerly Known as Passengers: Abraham Cruzvillegas, California College of the Arts, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco

2008
Autoconstrucción, The Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow

2007
Abraham Cruzvillegas, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

2006
ici, Château de Tours, Blandy-les-Tours, France

2005
Abraham Cruzvillegas, The Breeder, Athens
Doktor Lakra & Abraham Cruzvillegas / Los dos amigos, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca (MACO), Oaxaca

2004
Abraham Cruzvillegas, Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles
Abraham Cruzvillegas, Museo de Contemporáneo de Monterrey (MARCO), Monterrey

2003
Perspectives 139: Abraham Cruzvillegas, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston
Abraham Cruzvillegas, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

2001
Abraham Cruzvillegas, Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte (MUCA), México City
EL Currículum Oculto, Galería La Esmeralda, México City
El Silencio De La Borregada, LAAL Vaca, Cholula, México

Selected Group Exhibitions/Exposiciones Colectivas

2009
Grito e Escuta, 7ª Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre, Brasil
2nd Trienal Poli/Gráfica de San Juan - América Latina y el Caribe, San Juan, Puerto Rico
Integración y resistencia en la era global, 10th Bienal de la Habana, Havana, Cuba

2008
Exposición inaugural del nuevo espacio, kurimanzutto, México City
iUrgente!, 41 Salón Nacional de Artistas, Bienal de Cali, Colombia
Art TLV_08, Open Plan Living, Helena Rubinstein Pavilion, Tel-Aviv
An unruly history of the readymade, Fundación/colección Jumex, Ecatepec, México

Passengers, California College of the Arts, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco
GOD & GOODS: Spirituality and Mass Confusion, Villa Manin Centre for Contemporary Art, Codroipo, Italy

2007
Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century, New Museum, New York
Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Stay Forever and Ever and Ever, South London Gallery, London
Altadis Contemporary Art Prize 2006–07, Cosmic Galerie, Paris; Galería Salvador Díaz, Madrid

2006
The Exotic Journey Ends, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw

2005
The American West, Compton Verney, Warwickshire, UK
Universal Experience: Art, Life, and the Tourist’s Eye, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

2004
Perspectives @ 25: A Quarter Century of New Art in Houston, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston

2003
Elephant Juice (Sexo Entre Amigos), kurimanzutto @ Los Manantiales, Xochimilco, México

La Fraternidad universal para la promoción y defensa de M. Bondarchuk, Art&Idea, México City

The Squandered Circle: Boxing in Contemporary Art, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Il Quotidiano Alterato / The Everyday Altered, Arsenale, 50th La Biennale di Venezia, Venice

2002
Inter.play, The Moore Space, Miami; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, San Juan

Sublime Artificial, La Capella, Barcelona

Iconografías Metropolitanas, 25th Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo

2001
Escultura Mexicana: De la academia a la instalación, Palacio de Bellas Artes, México City
Metropolis Mexica: Aspects de l’art contemporain au Mexique, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Mutations: Vidéo mexicaine actuelle, Palais des Arts, Toulouse, France

2000
Cinco continentes y una Ciudad, Museo de la Ciudad de México, México City

Galería kurimanzutto @ Galerie Chantal Crousel, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Permanencia voluntaria, Galería kurimanzutto at Cinemanía, México City

1999
La sala del artista, Galería kurimanzutto in store at Amsterdam 18, México City

Dobles vidas Taller General (Abraham Cruzvillegas, Gabriel Kuri, and Gabriel Orozco), Museo Barbier-Mueller D´Art Precolombi Barcelona; Museo Textil d´Indumentaria, Barcelona

Economía de mercado, Galería kurimanzutto at Mercado de Medellín, México City

1998
Invisible Chase, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York
En Crudo, Museo Nacional de Arte, México City

1996
Four Emerging Artists from Mexico City, Esso Gallery, New York
En Tránsito. Señales Presentes, Fundación Banco Patricios, Buenos Aires; Museo Universitario del Chopo, México City

1995
Contaminación cultural, La Panadería, México City
Continental Discourses, San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio
Configura 2: Dialog der Kulturen, Galerie am Fischmarkt, Erfurt, Germany

Acné, Baños Venecia, Guadalaajara; Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City
It’s My Life, I’m Gonna Change the World, ACME Gallery, Los Angeles
La Liga de la Injusticia, La Panadería, México City

1994
InSITE 94, Tijuana, Mexico; San Diego, California
Beelden Buiten, Jardín de Brabandere, Tiel, Belgium
Múltiples, Temístocles 44, México City
Arte/Sociedad/Reflexión, 5ta Bienal de la Habana, Palacio de las Artesanías, Habana
Jonge Kunst Uit Mexico, Begijnhof, Centrum voor Kunsten, Hasselt, Belgium
Ensayo de estabilidad precaria, Corpus-Callosum, Guadalaajara

1993
The Return of the Cadavre Exquis, The Drawing Center, New York

1992
Temístocles I, Temístocles 44, México City
Quebec-Mexico, Centre d’exposition du Vieux-Palais, Saint-Jerome, Québec

1991
D.E.: Art from Mexico, Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, San Antonio

1990
Aire fresco en el verano del amor, Galería División Arte, México City

Awards & Residencies/Premios y Residencias

2008
Artist in Residence, Cove Park, Cove, Scotland
Smithsonian Fellowship, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

2007
Artist in Residence, Civitella Ranieri Foundation, Umbertide, Italy

2006
Altadis Prize

2005
Artist in Residence, Atelier Calder, Saché, France