

Abraham Cruzvillegas: *Autocontusión*

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**SCRAP METAL GALLERY
TORONTO
MAY 26 –
AUGUST 27, 2016**

In the summer of 2016, Scrap Metal Gallery and Art en Valise organization invited Abraham Cruzvillegas, a Mexican conceptual artist, to install a portal of transnational experience inside their gallery located in Toronto's Junction neighbourhood. Entitled *Autocontusión*, the installation referred to a unique experience and resembled emotional bruises, caused by physical displacements that are common among Toronto's diasporic communities, including the Latino community to whom the exhibition directly addressed.

The experience of contusion was created with an explosion of miscellaneous objects suspended throughout the gallery. To illustrate the sense of multi-locality that immigrants in Canada often experience, Cruzvillegas scavenged discarded house parts from Ajusco, Mexico, painted them green and pink, and sent them to Toronto. Once they arrived, they were paired up with items collected from either the gallery's scrap yard or local stores. Cruzvillegas then arranged the objects into two triangles conjoined at the tops, forming a figure eight. This cluster of floating objects was centred with a pair of winter boots, anchoring them down to almost floor level. The items constellating around the centre included a taxidermy goose, a garden hose, snowshoes, a kettle, avocados and chouricos, reflecting the neighbourhood outside the gallery. With *Autocontusión*, Cruzvillegas's aim is to contribute to the discourse of space and identity by contextualizing a compound identity shaped by two places - namely Mexico and Canada.

Entering the figure-eight maze from the two bases located at either end of the gallery, visitors found themselves in an infinite process of automatic construction and destruction. *Autocontusión* expanded on Cruzvillegas's long-time intellectual investigation of an aesthetic paradox: autoconstrucción (self-construction) and autodestrucción



(self-deconstruction). The concept views architecture as a network of independent dynamics inherent to a site's circumstance.¹ A person's attachment to a place often involves stories and narratives, in which the characteristics and architecture of the space can condition how the protagonist acts as well. It is not uncommon that archaeologists and historians often hypothesize identities and how people of the past lived by examining remnants of their dwellings and architecture. Growing up in the Ajusco area of southern Mexico City in the 70s, Cruzvillegas' impression of housing differed greatly from the predetermined modern housing models popular in the southern part of the continent. The architecture surrounding the young Cruzvillegas was uniquely diverse and highly personal. Houses here start out with essential spaces such as living quarters, and spaces for washing and cooking; extra spaces are added on later as the occupants' living situations change. In response to extreme poverty, architecture in Ajusco is the product of construction modes that rely on scavenging and recycling existing material. By removing outgrown spaces, the house is reconfigured and mutates in order to adapt to new circumstances. This is a negating process that uses improvisation, transformation and decaying to recalibrate structural conflicts in order to become stabilized amidst the chaos. Similar to how one's perception of selfhood is rooted in the ability to situate oneself in a place, or many places, *Autocontusión* highlighted the volatility of identity construction in the current time of mass migration. Not only do the formal appearances of the houses in Ajusco reflect the progressive stages of construction, they are also a clear representation of their occupants.

Autocontusión extended the effect of re- and de-construction from a locally bound identity to a transnational one. By suspending the objects at eye level, Cruzvillegas created a visual disruption that emulated this sense of uncertainty. Through various combinations of found objects and architectural parts, the multiple locals in the exhibition established a system of transnational references. Travelling from one end to the other of the figure-eight maze, visitors engaged with a myriad of object composites. After each encounter, they turned away from the familiar composite, and moved on to the next one nearby. As they repeat the process, the installation prompts the visitors to reflect and ponder, stimulating them to imagine the places that the objects have passed through, encouraging visitors to engage with the work's many material narratives. The constant oscillation of changing stories emphasized the tight relationship between automatic deconstruction and reconstruction, challenging the physicality of the built environment. In negotiating the space, visitors and the objects engaged in a highly personal simulation of nostalgia, wherein the recognition of different items and their combinations acknowledged the visitor's journey to Canada. The installation's minimalist aesthetic asked whether architectural and artificial mnemonics would be sufficient to establish one's understanding of selfhood. Acting as symbols, the fragments from renovated houses not only reflect the unstable circumstances in Ajusco, they also speak of the emotional hardship that many immigrants have to endure when they leave their homeland behind.

In *Autocontusión*, Cruzvillegas' idea of architecture extends beyond the constructed environment of physical buildings. Much like the houses in Ajusco, Cruzvillegas' installation stands in for the people, their destitution and their precarious daily life. For Cruzvillegas, the formation of identity is a dialectical outcome of a complex exchange

of paradoxical forces such as construction and destruction, separation and inclusion, a departure and ultimately a return, full of affirmation, negation and contradiction.² Walking through the installation, visitors become aware of the constant reforming of their identity influenced by their newly acquired understanding of the environment. Cruzvillegas' compositions of incongruous objects, scavenged in Ajusco and Toronto, highlighted the psychological ruptures that accompany physical displacement. As the visitor's body moves between the processes of auto-construction and auto-deconstruction, the local artifacts are grafted onto the visitor's memory, making transparent the development and formation of identities, and the network of relationships. Cruzvillegas' coalescence of imported and local items created an international sentiment of displacement, one that is very prevalent in a multicultural city such as Toronto.

1. "Abraham Cruzvillegas," Art 21, accessed July 10, 2016, <http://www.art21.org/artists/abraham-cruzvillegas>
2. Chris Sharp, "Abraham Cruzvillegas," ArtReview, January and February 2013. Accessed July 10, 2016, http://artreview.com/features/jan_feb_2013_feature_abraham_cruzvillegas/

Tak Pham is a Toronto-based curator, art writer and architectural historian. His work focuses on the multiple forms of post-internet art, and their relationships to contemporary urban and architectural histories. His curatorial works have been seen at Art Toronto 2015, Montgomery's Inn, OCAD University's galleries, Y+ Contemporary gallery and Xpace Cultural Center. He holds a BA Hons. in History and Theory of Architecture from Carleton University, and an MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice from OCAD University.