Garbage Wall

Environmental Engagement and Transdisciplinary Controversies in Contemporary Art: Abraham Cruzvillegas' Garbage Wall in Mexico City

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Abstract

This article revises how garbage is used as a material for a contemporary art installation which unfolds a provocative enviro-political potential, and thus determines different modes of engagement. Such a transformation and stimulation which will be explained with a paradigmatic on-site installation of the Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas who conceived and realized the "Garbage Wall" in the stony desert natural reserve within the territory of the National University in Mexico City (*Reserva Ecológica del Pedregal de San Ángel*, REPSA). Four itemizations of actors and key terms of engagement will be analyzed: first, the artist as the principal actor; second, the support of the university administration; third, the criticism and resistance of some scientists at the REPSA; and fourth, the discursive intermediation of art historians, guided by the contents and methods of environmental aesthetics. The selected case study shows how epistemic routines can be broken by transdisciplinary debates on contemporary eco-art.

Garbage is an often neglected, but nonetheless essential substance of human civilization. It is a material which reveals the consequences of production and consumption. Its accumulation in garbage dumps, landscapes, and cities forms a new stratum on the surface of planet Earth. This makes garbage an emblematic material and a philosophical issue for the (still unofficial) geological era known as the Anthropocene.[1] Examined in terms of the so-called geological turn[2], the aesthetic dimensions of garbage also claim discursive importance, not only because of the widely circulating eco-critical press photography, for instance, of plastic trash in natural landscapes and oceans, but also in contemporary works of art. In this article, I present a paradigmatic artistic installation as a micro case study which allows us to make deductions about the enviro-political potential of contemporary art and determine its modes of engagement: the "Garbage Wall" which the Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas conceived and realized (together

1 Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415, no. 3 (2002): 23; Bernd Scherer and Jürgen Renn, eds., *Das Anthropozän: Zum Stand der Dinge* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2015); Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015); Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin Waters, and Mark Williams, *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit: A Guide to the Scientific Evidence and Current Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Earth After Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Bruno Latour, *Où atterir? Comment s'orientier en politique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017).

2 Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, eds., *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2013); Davis and Turpin, *Art in the Anthropocene*, 256.

with the architect Pablo Pérez Palacios) in 2015/2016 in the Pedregal de San Ángel Ecological Reserve (in Spanish: *Reserva Ecológica del Pedregal de San Ángel*, or REPSA), within the vast campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), located in the southern part of Mexico City.[3]

This micro-site can be contextualized on different scales: the non-sustainable 20-million-plus-inhabitant megacity that sprawls across the volcanic highlands of central Mexico, or as the University City (*Ciudad Universitaria*), planned and realized in the mid-twentieth century on a lava stone desert (*Pedregal*), and integrated into the REPSA, which in 1983 became a protected site for autochthonous flora and fauna. The "Garbage Wall" is an unfinished process-based work, 300 meters long and 10 meters high. The base was erected during the construction of the *Ciudad Universitaria*, when a surveyor made an erroneous topographic calculation while tracing the limits of the University's territory. Cruzvillegas used the abandoned foundations of this Kafkaesque ruin, overgrown with wild vegetation, and bricked up the contours of the wall with cement, lava stone (*tezontle*, in the native Mesoamerican language) and garbage collected at the site: cans, condoms, cigarette filters, construction rubble, plastic bags. When the budget ran out in 2016, 270 meters of the planned wall remained unfinished. Since then, the "Garbage Wall" has lain in an incomplete state. But the fragmentary presence of the "Garbage Wall" still provokes questions and stimulates multiple modes of engagement. It deploys an epistemic potential, fosters (sometimes difficult) transdisciplinary coworking at the university, and even stimulates environmental and political debates about the condition of Earth in the Anthropocene.

In order to understand the discursive impact of this site-specific work of art, I will itemize the complex interrelations of the actors and the key terms linked to engagement.

3 To see the photographs of the "Garbage Wall," please try the following web link: https://www.perezpalacios.mx/es/arte-instalacion/milpa-ritual-imprescindible/.

First, the artist as principal actor, operating within the conceptual framework of eco-art. Abraham Cruzvillegas represents the figure of an artist educated in the Global South who won recognition and success in the Global North, trespassing in this way the frontiers of the globalized commercial art world with its traditional centers of Europe and the US. His artistic trademark, which he calls "Autoconstrucción," and which has developed since his first international exhibitions in 2007 (New York, Jack Tilton Gallery) and 2008 (Glasgow, Centre for Contemporary Arts), refers to self-built, informal housing. In his sculptural work, Cruzvillegas transforms his own experience growing up in Mexico City's slums in a house consolidated over many years into a stable place of residence via "improvisation and instability, and a constant process of learning: about materials, people and himself."[4] His autobiographical writings reveal his cultural entanglement and social engagement with the slum dwellers. Yet biographical truth and fiction, attractive for the art market in the Global North, merge together[5]—a well-known discursive construction for many artists both historical and present-day.

The artist appears as an ethnographer[6] who claims authenticity as the conceptual basis of his art production. Cruzvillegas' assemblages of local material (repeated with modifications in many other exhibitions of the "Autoconstrucción" series all over the world during the last decade) fulfill the expectations of the Global North public: they materialize the stereotypes of a violent, dirty, chaotic mega-city in the Global South. His trademark operates both with the artistic notion of ingenuity and the artisanal criteria of truthfulness.[7]

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4 Chris Dercon, "Foreword," in *Hyundai Commission: Abraham Cruzvillegas. Empty Lot*, ed. Mark Godfrey (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 11.

5 Franz Krähenbühl, *Depicting Mexico City: Eine Untersuchung zur Darstellung der Stadt* (Masterarbeit IKG Universität Bern, 2010), 76.

6 Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

7 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 96–97. Originally written in German: *Handwerk* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2008).

In the case we are examining here, the "Garbage Wall," the artist also bolsters his concept with empirical experience. When the eastern part of the Pedregal area was invaded by thousands of squatters in September 1971 in the wake of a presidential speech which announced the toleration of illegal settlements[8], its eco and geo-diversity was thoroughly erased. Cruzvillegas' family participated in this material transformation by installing their home and related infrastructure on the volcanic rocks. However, the "Garbage Wall" is neither an apology nor a plea for repair. Returning to the western part of Pedregal and installing an eco-critical work about the contamination of a highly valuable ecosystem reactivates a site-specific tradition of artistic engagement.

Until the late 1940s, when architect Luis Barragán began planning a residential quarter in Pedregal which promoted the preservation of certain landscape features such as lava stone and cactus vegetation, this zone was regarded as badlands (*malpaís* in Spanish).[9] Barragán invited Mexican poets (Carlos Pellicer), painters (Dr. Atl[10] and Diego Rivera), and photographers (Armando Salas Portugal[11]) to the area and together they discovered the sublime beauty of the harsh and complex lava formations. Through artistic sublimation, they even proposed a nationalist codification of these badlands.[12] With the construction of the University City,

8 Ale Betán, "El Pedregal de Santo Domingo. La invasión de territorio más grande de América Latina," January 17, 2019, https://savinarte.com/2019/01/17/el-pedregal-de-santo-domingo-la-invasion-de-territorio-mas-grande-de-america-latina/?fbclid=IwAR0EpnUXH2p6dJP6y7oxcex_vowvCqUo_SkZwfgO-8A-k5EJ8cTQrp0dY4E; Francis McKee, "Mutable y mutuo," in *Textos sobre la obra de Abraham Cruzvillegas* (Mexico: Secretaría de Cultura, 2016), 48–54; Abraham Cruzvillegas, *La voluntad de los objetos* (Mexico City: Sexto Piso, 2014), 16–17.

9 Alfonso Pérez-Méndez, "Conceptualización de la ocupación del Pedregal. La teatralización del espacio público en el plan maestro de la Ciudad Universitaria," in *Habitar Ciudad Universitaria 60 años: 1954–2014*, ed. Salvador Lizárraga Sánchez and Cristina López Uribe (Mexico City: Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM, 2014), 49–53.

10 Peter Krieger, "Las geo-grafías del Dr. Atl: Transformaciones estéticas de la energía telúrica y atmosférica," in *Dr. Atl, Rotación Cósmica: A cincuenta años de su muerte* (Guadalajara: Instituto Cultural Cabañas, 2015), 12–47. English translation "Dr. Atl's Geo-graphies: Aesthetic Transformations of Telluric and Atmospheric Energy."

11 Felipe Leal, ed., *Morada de Lava: Armando Salas Portugal* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2006).

12 Rocío López de Juambelz and Alejandro Cabeza Pérez, "Ciudad Universitaria, un paisaje con identidad," in *Habitar Ciudad Universitaria 60 años: 1954–2014*, ed. Salvador Lizárraga Sánchez and Cristina López Uribe (Mexico City: Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM, 2014), 292; Amaya Larrucea Garritz, "La construcción cultural del paisaje del Pedregal de San Ángel," in *Habitar Ciudad Universitaria 60 años: 1954–2014*, ed. Salvador Lizárraga Sánchez and Cristina López Uribe (Mexico City: Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM, 2014), 86.

where the *tezontle* stone was used for many of the façades, and then, in the late 1970s, with the extension of the University Cultural Center (*Centro Cultural Universitario*), where a vast work of land art emerged from the wilderness[13], the Pedregal became a catalyst for artistic engagement with environmental protection, at least in terms of the aesthetic production of collective consciousness. In this sense, the "Garbage Wall" is ecological art, if we follow the popular standard definition used by Wikipedia as "an art genre and artistic practice that seeks to preserve, remediate and/or revitalize the life forms, resources and ecology of the Earth."[14]

Cruzvillegas' "Garbage Wall" — and this is my second point in the itemization of actors and key terms of engagement — was made possible by the university administration. Special units and commissions of the UNAM are responsible for all artistic works on the campus and its extensions. The original architectural concept of the campus buildings in the early 1950s proposed painting murals on the modular façades, such as David Álfaro Siqueiros' mural on the Rector's Building. However, since the 1970s, a drastic conceptual shift, promoted by artist Mathias Goeritz, towards abstract sculptures in open spaces occurred. With Cruzvillegas' "Garbage Wall," conceptual art was introduced to the University City. This artistic intervention was inserted into the Ecological Reserve in 2016.

On October 3, 1983, the then Rector declared 124 hectares of the lava desert to be a protected zone where no new construction was permitted. To date, this reserve has been extended to 237 hectares, which is about 33 percent of the entire University City and about 7 percent of the original Pedregal. It is a unique example of an ecological reserve in a mega-city, as well as in a university campus, and has one of the highest levels of biodiversity in Mexico. The UNAM authorities created a legal instrument for protection within the limits of the autonomous territory (i.e.

13 The Espacio Escultórico is a circle with a diameter of 120 meters, structured by 64 modular concrete elements, 9 x 3 x 4 meters, which reveals the solidified lava flows. http://www.fundacionunam.org.mx/donde-paso/conoce-el-espacio-escultorico-de-la-unam/ (accessed September 1, 2021).

14 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_art (accessed September 1, 2021).

the Mexican state has no legal power in the University City). However, there is permanent pressure to expand the existing buildings, even if this means invading the protected areas.[15] As a result, the construction of a wall as a work of art raised legal questions, which were resolved by the authorities in favor of this artistic expression. The "Garbage Wall," which takes the existing environmental problem of using protected wilderness as a garbage dump as its theme[16], is an installation which inspires ecological consciousness and engagement, but is made possible by complex administrative and legal processes.

However, and this is the third item in my analysis, there was criticism and resistance from a number of scientists involved with the REPSA. This reserve serves as a vivid laboratory for the UNAM's biologists and geologists, where they can study the evolution of endemic plants and animals in the dark basaltic lava rock formations. This specific geological condition evolved after the eruption of the nearby Xitle volcano in the fourth century of the Common Era.[17] However, as a consequence of hyper urbanization in Mexico City[18], the original extension of about 80 square kilometers was reduced to a mere 2.37, delimited and preserved by the university campus. Confronted with external and internal pressure of development, i.e., the increasing number of nearby office buildings, the expanding

15 Some statistical data may illustrate this pressure of expansion: originally, in 1954, Ciudad Universitaria was planned for 25,000 students, when Mexico City had about 3.5 million inhabitants. In 2021, the university has 366,930 students and 41,542 academics (http://www.estadistica.unam.mx/numeralia/), while the city (including the peripheries) has more than 20 million inhabitants. The UNAM maintains campuses in other parts of the country and in the US. At present, Ciudad Universitaria consists of one-third educational buildings, another third sports complexes, and the last third is the Pedregal.

16 The topic of my forthcoming book.

17 Claus Siebe, "La erupción del volcán Xitle y las lavas del Pedregal hace 1670 +/- 35 años AP y sus implicaciones," in *Ciudad de México: Biodiversidad del Pedregal de San Ángel, UNAM* (Mexico City: Reserva Ecológica del Pedregal de San Ángel y Coordinación de la Investigación Científica, 2019), 43–49; César Carrillo Trueba, *El pedregal de San* Ángel (Mexico City: UNAM, Coordinación de la Investigación Científica, 1995), 22–49.

18 Peter Krieger, "Ecohistoria y ecoestética de la megalópolis mexicana—conceptos, problemas y estrategias de investigación," in *El historiador frente a la ciudad de México: Perfiles de su historia*, ed. Sergio Mirando Pacheco (Mexico City: IIH/UNAM, 2016), 257–277.

zones of illegal settlements, and the recent new university buildings[19], the biologists working in the REPSA are defending their "island" under the motto "not a single sack of cement more" — and that included the cement used for Cruzvillegas' "Garbage Wall." They saw the artistic intervention as a threat to the autopoietic ecosystem.

In the debates on the construction and completion of this work of art, the opposed biologists were forced to acknowledge the contradiction inherent in the notion of "preserving" nature when it is undergoing a permanent process of evolution[20], as well as the fact that the Reserve is already suffering multiple interferences from the outside world: in the 1950s, exogeneous trees, such as the eucalyptus and the Australian pine, were planted at the site and the African grass from the main campus has expanded into the REPSA. The wide urban avenue of *Insurgentes*, which cuts through *Ciudad Universitaria*, produces acoustic and atmospheric pollution in the Reserve. And, worse, for a long time, the Pedregal was abused as an illegal — i.e. cost-free — garbage dump. Amid the wilderness, many traces of building rubble and other waste can be spotted. In fact, the Faculty of Medicine dumped its trash, such as gauze bandages and syringes, in these adjacent natural territories until 1983.

Trash and air pollution are inevitable human interferences, as they form part of the so-called technosphere which now weighs more than the entire biomass of planet Earth in the era of the Anthropocene.[21] These traces can be observed in

19 Peter Krieger, "Ciudad Universitaria al límite. Implosión y explosión de un patrimonio sobresaliente en la megalópolis," in *Habitar Ciudad Universitaria 60 años: 1954–2014*, ed. Salvador Lizárraga Sánchez and Cristina López Uribe (Mexico City: Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM, 2014), 261–271.

20 Hansjörg Küster, *Das ist Ökologie: Die biologischen Grundlagen unserer Existenz* (München: Beck, 2005), 65–71.

21 Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "Scale and diversity of the physical technosphere: A geological perspective," *The Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 1 (2017), http://doi.org/10.1177/2053019616677743; Jan Zalasiewicz and Mark Williams, "Anthropocene: human-made materials now weigh as much as all living biomass, say scientists," *The Conversation,* December 9, 2020, https://theconversation.com/anthropocene-human-made-materials-now-weigh-as-much-as-all-living-biomass-say-scientists-151721, accessed August 28, 2021; Emily Elhacham, Liad Ben-Uri, Jonathan Grozovski, Yinon M. Bar-On and Ron Milo, "Global human-made mass exceeds all living biomass," *Nature* 588, no. 7838 (December 2020): 442–444.

the REPSA, where natural processes are entwined with human-made impacts. In any case, a preserved natural site is an artificial human construction grounded by an ethical imperative to attend to its ecology; this conceptual argument can be supported by the humanities.

The fourth item is the discursive intermediation of art historians, guided by the contents and methods of environmental aesthetics, also referred to as "eco-criticism." The REPSA is not an isolated biological laboratory; rather, it is a cultural construction. Establishing a reserve in a polluted mega-city is an act of human understanding, political intention, and agentive capacity. It needs conceptual justification, not only biological and geological expertise. Thus, art and visual historians may explain the concept of landscape as a human construct[22], and categorize the historical dimensions of the "Garbage Wall" in the preserved eco-system, tracing artistic, sculptural constructions with garbage as topic and material. To give just two (of many) examples: in April 1970, the New York artist Gordon Matta-Clark compressed urban detritus in a wall raised in front of St. Mark's church in the East Village of Manhattan. His critique of the American "throw-away society" remained for three days and was then disposed in a container, trash again — an ephemeral, metamorphic installation which influenced Cruzvillegas' concept for the REPSA "Garbage Wall." Five years after Matta-Clark's intervention, the British artist Tony Cragg erected a cubic "Stack,"[23] compressing domestic refuse and confronting the visitors of London's Tate Modern gallery with an unappetizing view of their own consumption. The short cycles of the consumer goods industry end up as a pile of trash.

These two examples of an extended conceptual genealogy behind Cruzvillegas' intervention were apt for familiarizing the REPSA scientists with different, and in this case artistic, modes of environmental critique. Furthermore, nearby

22 Peter Krieger, *Transformaciones del paisaje urbano en México: Representación y registro visual/Transformations in Mexico's Urban Landscape: Representation and Visual Record* (Madrid: El Viso/Mexico City: MUNAL, 2012).

23 John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London: Reaktion, 2005), 116.

archaeological excavations of the Mesoamerican Cuicuilco culture illustrated how abundant vegetation and solidified lava flows are interspersed with monumental human artifacts, namely pyramids—thus legitimizing this challenging spatial dialogue of nature and culture.

To conclude with the most vital item: the breaking of epistemic routines in transdisciplinary research is able to generate productive and innovative modes of engagement, in spite of the fact that the vocabulary of artists (item 1), administrative officials (item 2), scientists (item 3), and art historians (item 4) differs considerably. As the selected case study of Cruzvillegas' "Garbage Wall" confirms, trespassing into isolated spheres of thinking and acting gives rise to conceptual stimuli for engagement. Works of art can catalyze such synergetic power. Art historians translate this inherent potential into schemes of interpretation which explain the difference between information about and communication of a provocative installation.[24] Although the concepts, terms, objects, images, and imaginations of the mentioned actors do not completely overlap, and controversies arise and persist, it is undeniable that the insertion of the "Garbage Wall" in the REPSA, when explained by art historians, exhibits an environmental political impact and triggers stimulating debates on the relation between city and nature. The micro-site in the mega-city invites us to initiate a process of transdisciplinary learning and collective engagement in environmental matters.

Finally, as a side-effect: such an installation succeeds in dragging contemporary art and the related art historiography out of their self-referential circles.[25]

24 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

25 Peter Krieger, "*Words don't come easy*: comentarios a la crítica y exposición de las artes plásticas actuales," *Universidad de México*, no. 597–598 (October/November 2000): 25–29.

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