

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Mark Hudson, "Abraham Cruzvillegas: Empty Lot, Tate Modern, Turbine Hall, review: 'mega-art in a mega-space'," *The Telegraph*, 12th October 2015



AN INDUSTRIAL-CATHEDRAL OF A SPACE: ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, WITH HIS NEW TURBINE HALL INSTALLATION 'EMPTY LOT'
CREDIT: RAY TANG/REX SHUTTERSTOCK

Tate Modern's Turbine Hall commissions have given rise to a new kind of art: mega-installations large enough to make an impact in this vast industrial-cathedral of a space. Following on from previous Turbine installations Olofur Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, in which the sun appeared to set indoors in 2003, and Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*, which covered the floor in 10 million porcelain seeds in 2010, Mexican conceptual artist Abraham Cruzvillegas's *Empty Lot* takes its inspiration from Mexico City's unplanned urban sprawl, in which rural incomers build their homes on whatever land they can grab, with whatever materials they can lay their hands in. But if the work's inspirations are haphazard and improvisatory, there's nothing remotely anarchic about the resulting piece.

Entering the hall from the west, a pointed prow of wood and scaffolding looms towards you, with rows of tall lights on the top receding in neat perspective. Everything is rigidly symmetrical, and it's impossible from this angle to discern the structure's purpose.

From the hall's raised bridge you look down on the two ends of an enormous elongated diamond shape, sloping downwards towards one end of the building and upwards towards the other. Tiers of planks are laid out with triangular mini-gardens, each about eight feet long, which form striking diamond patterns over the surface. Each is filled with earth from a different park or garden in London, from Buckingham Palace to Hackney Marshes, which is watered and lit by the rows of lamps and more makeshift lights rigged up from junk found in skips. Nothing has been planted, but seedlings already in the earth are allowed to grow. Some areas are already sprouting weeds a foot high, others remain barren and stony. By April, when the commission comes to an end, we could be seeing a veritable forest rising towards the roof, or it may all look much as it does now. Cruzvillegas, born in 1968, claims he will be equally happy with either outcome.

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The piece is in a way a kind of summation of London, with tons of earth from all over the city, brought together in one place. But it's very much an outsider's view. Coming from a society where land ownership and its uses are desperately contested, Cruzvillegas was intrigued to learn how many words we have for our open spaces – heaths, commons, play grounds and the like – each with its long-established rights and usages. To the British viewer, such points feel a touch arcane: when did you last try to put a tent up on Peckham Rye? There are apparently allusions to the absurd value placed on every inch of the capital – something every Londoner is acutely aware of – but these remain vague.

As a piece of gigantic sculpture, Empty Lot is one of the more dynamic and exciting of the Turbine Hall commissions. It feels suspended like a geometric island, perfectly poised in the immense space. It references Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes and the grid-structured gardens of the Aztecs, while bringing to mind the impromptu vegetable gardens crammed into every unused inch of developing cities and the ingenuity of people trying to feed their families from them. Cruzvillegas hails himself from a zone of "autoconstruccion" or shanty town, as we probably shouldn't call it these days, and he could have gone a lot further in introducing that sort of "unofficial" ethic and aesthetic into the Turbine Hall. It would have added a subversive edge if he'd gone out and purloined earth from dual carriageway verges, say, at four in the morning. But this being a Tate commission, every granule of soil will have been accounted for and subjected to health and safety protocols. That's the price you pay for making mega-art in a mega-space.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/tate-modern-turbine-hall-abraham-cruzvillegas/>