

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Spence, "Abraham Cruzvillegas: Empty Lot, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London," *Financial Times*, 13th October 2015



Abraham Cruzvillegas' 'Empty Lot' installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Photo: Lauren Hurley/PA

Even the poster which advertises Abraham Cruzvillegas' new installation at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall demands a double take. It's not an image which arrests our attention. It's the title. In a city where wasteland and wilderness have never been more precious nor more threatened, the phrase "Empty Lot" calls to Londoners with the promise of disappearing Eden.

The three-dimensional reality does not disappoint. Enter the Turbine Hall on the lower level and *Empty Lot* rears up above you like the prow of a vast ship, its triangular foredeck perched on a keel of scaffolding, its perimeters bordered by willowy lights that loom above it like illuminated masts.

The mezzanine level delivers a different perspective. Fore and aft of the viewing platform immaculate rows of triangular plots filled with soil, bordered by wooden frames, stream back through the hall's magnificent volumes on stepped terraces.

Squint out the detail and you are gazing at a contemporary, minimalist cousin of the Russian constructivists. Those tidy, blank triangles cannot but evoke the Utopian politics of El Lissitzky as he sent his "red wedge" boldly among "the whites".

A similar idealism animates *Empty Lot*. Each of its allotments has been filled with soil scavenged from a different locale including a shoal of London schools and parks, Hampton Court Palace, the Horniman Museum and Garden, London Wetland Centre and even the gardens of Tate staff. With quiet ingenuity, Cruzvillegas has brought the city's green spaces within one of its most popular cultural ones.

If our times were less out of joint, *Empty Lot* would lack the air of vulnerable yet hopeful melancholy which makes it so powerful. But when land is being gobbled up for oil, property development and industrial farming with such alarming disregard for social and environmental consequences, the sculpture is a clarion call to the consciences of developers across the world.

With a major exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis behind him and a host of showings at international biennales, Cruzvillegas made his name via the *objet trouvé*. He is best known for his *autoconstrucción* series, which assembles improbable rooms — as if Heath Robinson was channelling the Freudian uncanny — from scavenged junk. Influences behind *Empty Lot* include the

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Latin American protest movements which called for ordinary people to be granted decent land rights, the *chinampas* — cultivated agricultural islands created by Aztecs when what is now the city of Mexico was essentially a large lake — and pioneering contemporary land artists such as Walter De Maria.

Like De Maria, whose 1977 installation “Earth Room” covered the floor of a Manhattan building with earth, Cruzvillegas has chosen not to plant anything in his soil beds. Yet green shoots are already sprouting. Someone has thrown down an apple. Undoubtedly, guerrilla gardeners will scatter their own seeds over the coming months. The result is a work of art which works on more levels than the Shard: as process, as performance, as politics and as spectacle. Cruzvillegas says he hopes it will be somewhere “that something can grow out of nothing”. Like a green-fingered Beckett, his less-is-more philosophy makes him a seer for our times.

‘Hyundai Commission 2015: Abraham Cruzvillegas: Empty Lot’ runs to April 3, tate.org.uk

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/182600d6-71b0-11e5-9b9e-690fdae72044.html?siteedition=intl>

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