

# BOMB

## The Value of Labor: Rodrigo Valenzuela Interviewed by Forrest Muelrath

Films and photographs that address the future of work.

July 6, 2021



Rodrigo Valenzuela, *Afterwork #2*, 2021, archival inkjet print, 40 × 32 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

The economy needs far fewer workers than it did in previous generations. By some estimates, nearly fifty percent of many US jobs are at risk of being automated within the next decade. When I first came across the work of Rodrigo Valenzuela, a Chilean artist whose films and photographs often deal with labor themes, the record-high unemployment and an increasing reliance on technology brought on by the pandemic placed the often staggering statistics about the future of work in the front of my mind.

Primarily a photographer and filmmaker, Valenzuela creates many of his images by constructing sculptural objects out of found material and then photographing them. For example, the black-and-white photogravures I saw in his exhibition *Stature* at Asya Geisberg Gallery in New York City in late 2020 were created by casting plaster in discarded consumer packaging. However, without the wall text, I may have only seen obsolete machinery from woodshops or farms. When I found Valenzuela on Instagram and saw his photographs of new work “for a post-worker world,” I knew that I wanted to talk to him.

—Forrest Muelrath

**Forrest Muelrath:** I was drawn to the Instagram post you captioned “Post-worker world.”

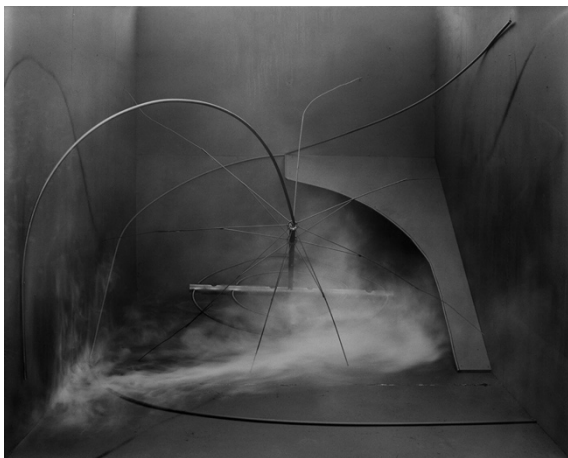
**Rodrigo Valenzuela:** It’s something I chose as the work has been drifting more toward science fiction. I never really liked science fiction, but I’m growing to like it more. I really love *cinéma vérité* and filmmaking that is attached to real life, like Carlos Reygadas in Mexico City, Lucrecia Martel in Argentina, or the Dardenne brothers in Belgium—very realistic cinema that deals with working-class issues. But nowadays it feels like the only way to imagine an alternative to capitalism is through sci-fi. In the real world there doesn’t seem to be a lot of room for metaphor, whereas in science fiction it’s easier or possible to imagine a world where you can point out the problems of our neoliberalism. When you see that things are being made by hand, you can tell there are flaws; but you can also tell that there is intentionality in the flaws. You can see in my work that there are a lot of problems, but the problems also make it unique. I think understanding the value of labor has been a problem for a long time in contemporary society; it is especially a problem for people who have a lot less power. This gave me the idea for my video *The Unwaged* (2017) and also the project I’m currently working on.



Rodrigo Valenzuela, *Afterwork #1*, 2021, archival inkjet print, 40 × 32 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**FM:** When you sent me photos of the new work, the first thing I thought of was the Fritz Lang film *Metropolis* (1927). This seems like a departure from your previous work. With your early work, I get the sense of world building that is very much based on our world. Do you have a world in mind when you create your work, or is it more like a different world is possible?

**RV:** The first thing you have to be aware of is that you can only imagine scenes when there is some reference already. It's first about eliminating certain facts from your mind. So you can imagine a world proposing an alternative to capitalism or against the things you already know. I don't want you to read this like another artist making superficial Marxist work because there are only a few ways to escape the transactional nature of our society. Maybe a kinder, more ethical capitalism can become the product of science fiction. This is one of the reasons why I build my own sets. In the case of *Stature* it starts with a box made of concrete. I think through the material. I've spent a lot of time working with concrete while working construction in Boston. But concrete is also a material that you usually associate with institutions, with structures of power. You won't see a bank or a hospital made out of wood. The institutions that we respect are made out of concrete. So to portray the feeling of an institution I have to build the box first. In the case of my work now which features a lot of smoke and steam, it's kind of a living machine; it's like living in this factory where the workers are no longer there. What happens in fifty years after people are no longer working there? I think it's very important to remark on the conditions that facilitated the rise of the middle-class when people were advocating for the forty-hour work week, for the right to sit-down, for minimum wage. These are things we're going to lose when we don't go to work. You're not going to know if there are other workers who are in need.

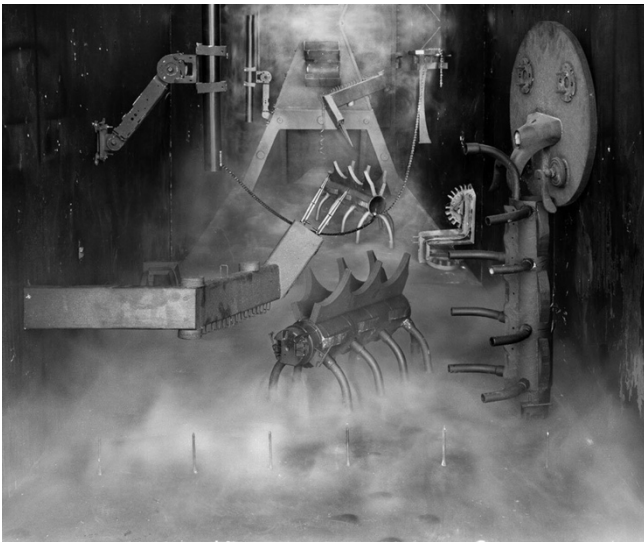


Rodrigo Valenzuela, *Afterwork #4*, 2021, archival inkjet print, 40 × 32 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**FM:** It's impossible to strike now because workers are already so divided in the gig economy. I found the conversation that the workers are having in your video *Prole* (2015) about labor and wages very interesting and similar to conversations I have observed or participated in while working for an Argentinian. It seems to me that in Latin America there is a base level of

sophistication about economics that we don't broadly have in the United States. I'm wondering if there is something to this or if I'm just imagining it. Do Latin Americans inherently understand alternatives to capitalism better than people born in the United States?

**RV:** Certainly there is a fear of socialism in the US that is more of a cartoon version of socialism, more related to a socialist dictator and an autocracy; but there are already a lot of socialist structures put in place here. Just look at the military. People in the military are likely to lean to the right, but they are the only ones that benefit from a socialist structure with health insurance, housing, and even paid college tuition. I think the fear has to do with the more power you give to the people, the more large corporations will struggle. Divide and conquer has been a very successful strategy. There is this singular character in the American narrative, and this is a problem. In the American movie, you are the main character. My movie *Tertiary* (2018) that I showed at the Kitchen in New York City a few years ago is about this place you have in the world when you are a person of color. From the movies to the markets, you are put in a supporting role. When you start off in a supporting role, you already are okay with socialism to some degree. You are already in the position where you are not the protagonist. And on the other hand, you are the one everyone else structures the world around in order to be normal. To come back to my current project, it is not by chance that automatization is tried first on jobs like supermarket cashiers, sewing factories, and transportation—jobs that historically have been held by women and people of color.



Rodrigo Valenzuela, *Afterwork #13*, 2021, archival inkjet print, 20 × 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**FM:** Do you feel like it's the white Americans, perhaps American capitalists, who are the protagonists in a global struggle?

**RV:** They are in two ways. Very literally Chile is one of the most successful neoliberal experiments perhaps in history. We have adopted every possible form of privatization. In the 1970s when Salvador Allende came to power he nationalized everything so that the state came into control of all these incredible resources. This prompted the coup d'état. The CIA stepped in and said that this is communism. But Allende's was a democratic election, and for us it was the right thing because we weren't collecting taxes on our land while the American companies were making all the money. Neoliberalism then became a Chilean project. The government gave scholarships to economists to go to Chicago and study under Milton Friedman—we call them the Chicago Boys. It was a project to slowly institutionalize neoliberalism, and it was a successful project. The current president, Sebastián Piñera, one of the richest guys in South America, was one of the Chicago Boys. Piñera took over our national airline. He also bought all of the ATMs. Slowly, what started out as a privatization project became more of a monopoly.

I think the Americans have been much more successful directing the world's gaze toward American values via foreign policy and pop culture. In the history books we find speculative moral justifications for the bombings and the state terrorism created in other countries. But perhaps the most lasting contribution is building neoliberalism and capitalism as an ideology and a symbol of freedom for all the young people. Whether we like it or not, one of the most important contributions America has made is to impose neoliberalism on the world. So now we really all have to fight because we are all embedded in it.

Rodrigo Valenzuela: New Works for a Post-Worker's World is on view at Patricia Ready Gallery in Santiago, Chile, until July 22.

Forrest Muelrath is a writer and critic living in New York City.