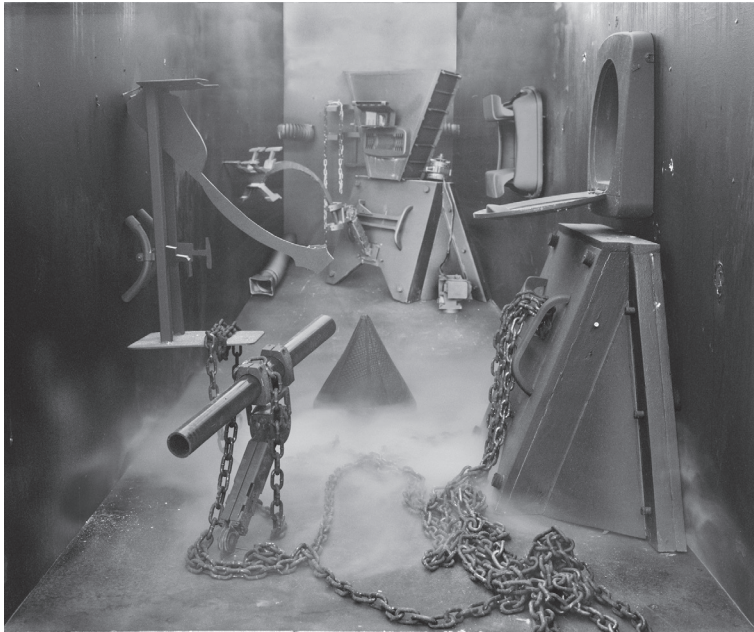


**Rodrigo  
Valenzuela**

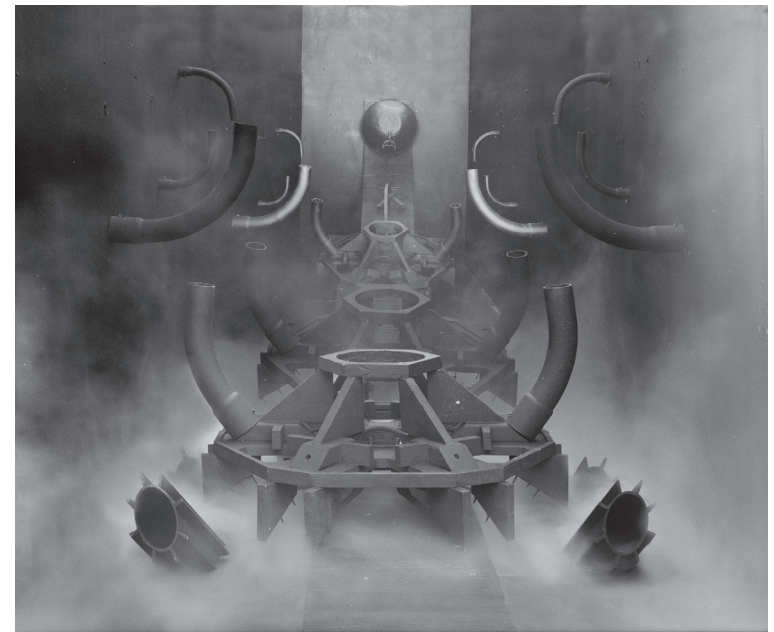
**Workforce**

# **Rodrigo Valenzuela: Workforce**

April 15 – July 15, 2023  
The Print Center, Philadelphia



Afterwork#26, 2021, inkjet print, 20" x 24"



Afterwork#24, 2021, inkjet print, 20" x 24"

## Rodrigo Valenzuela: Workforce

The Print Center is pleased to present **Rodrigo Valenzuela: Workforce**, a solo exhibition of new and recent work by the Chilean-born artist. The exhibition is co-curated by Liz K. Sheehan, Independent Curator, and Liz F. Spungen, Executive Director, The Print Center. *Workforce* is Valenzuela's debut showing in Philadelphia.

*The Print Center is honored to bring the work of this outstanding artist to Philadelphia for the first time. I know his work will resonate powerfully with our audience, and will make a meaningful contribution to our conversations on immigration, privilege, labor and unions, as well as current photographic practice.*

– Elizabeth F. Spungen, Executive Director

**Rodrigo Valenzuela** has developed a distinctive and unique practice situated at the intersection of photography, architecture, immigration and labor. Drawing on life experience as well as his study of photography, art history, literature and philosophy, Valenzuela creates work using a wide range of media, from analog and digital photography to screenprint, photogravure, lithography, collage, film, ceramics and sculpture – all of which are often combined in site-specific installations. The work interrogates the literal and figurative foundations of our built environment and its influence on democracy, identity, labor and immigration. Over the past decade Valenzuela and his body of work have received extensive recognition and accolades, from Core and Guggenheim Fellowships to a prestigious position teaching photography at the University of California Los Angeles.

Raised in Chile during the repressive dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, Valenzuela was aware of the politics of representation from a young age. The power of silence, public demonstrations and



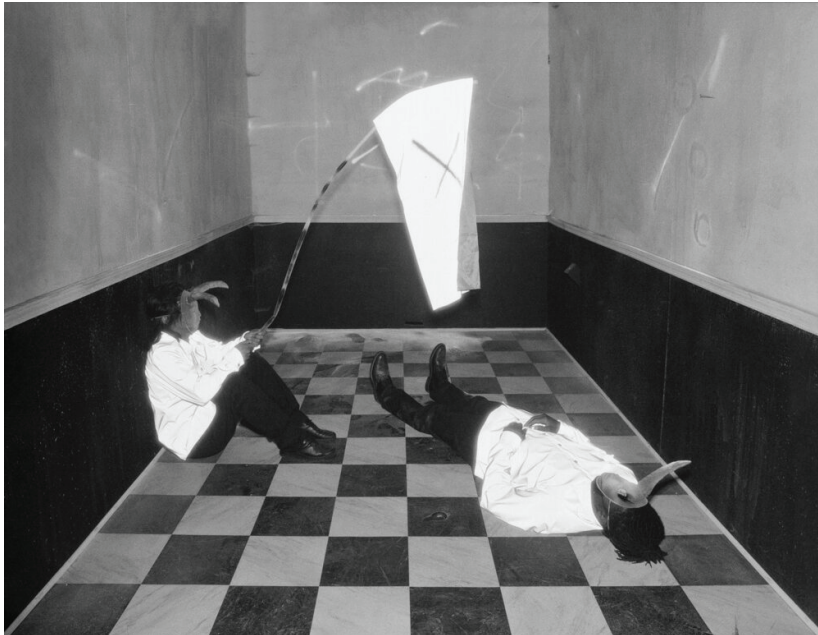
Afterwork#1, 2021, inkjet print, 32" x 40"

visual manipulation, as employed by both the Chilean government and the press, made a lasting impression on him. He was also deeply affected by the experience of attending union meetings with his father, who was a postal worker. Valenzuela's aspirations to become an artist were rooted in the esteemed cultural status and international reputation held by Chilean poets, inspiring him to seek an artistic path to move "beyond his homeland's limitations through intellect and poetic gestures." He saw art as a tool for reflection and change. Receiving a prize in a film competition in his senior year of college offered him the means to emigrate to Canada. Eventually he arrived in the United States, where he worked as a day laborer for several years while pursuing undergraduate degrees in art history and philosophy, followed by an MFA in photography. His experience as a day laborer underpins his artistic practice.

While Valenzuela formally studied photography, there are numerous echoes and quotations in his work from many other sources. In her

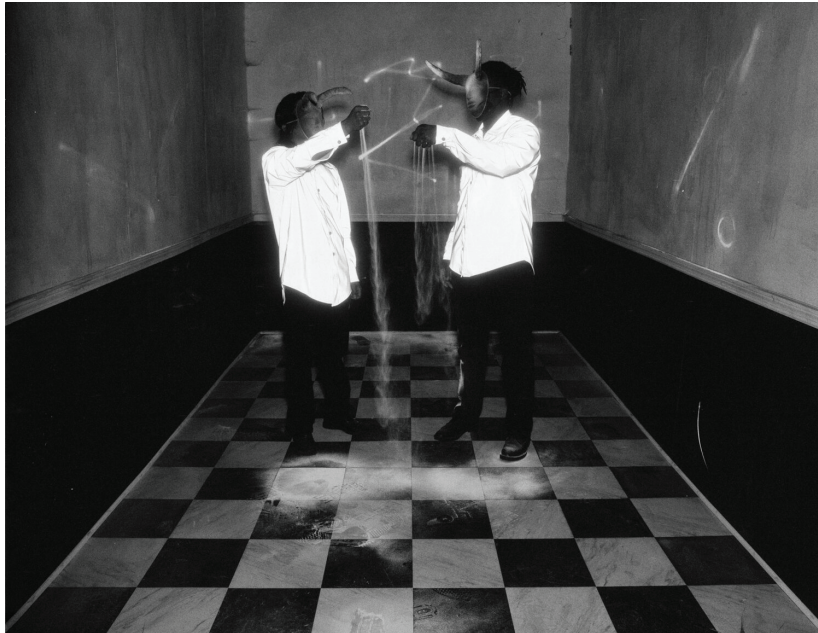
essay, Paula Kupfer outlines connections to two of Latin America's most celebrated surrealist painters, Wifredo Lam and Roberto Matta. Valenzuela also references the tortured figures of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) as well as that artist's surreal, monumental figures set in empty landscapes such as *Nude Standing on the Beach*, (1929, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY). The spoke-like forms and implied movement in Valenzuela's "Weapons" series recall Alexander Calder's mobiles and Mark di Suvero's monumental, minimal sculptures. There are echoes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1918) in the pieced together monstrous forms of "Weapons," and dystopic science fiction, such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and the film *Mad Max* (1979), also looms large.

The medium of photography itself is also his subject. In his early photographs, Valenzuela played with ideas of two- and three-dimensional space, time and veracity in a way that is inherent and singular to the medium – he created illusionistic depth, while simultaneously contracting it. He gave us an anti-heroic landscape, offering views of humble and meager memorials which were replaced in later work by his own constructed frameworks and monuments. Those photographs were blown up and reproduced using a Xerox machine – the ubiquitous tool of bureaucratic image-making – then installed as backdrops on stage-like sets, where they were re-photographed behind a re-creation of the original built structures. The resulting images exist in a feedback loop of space, temporality, scale and illusion that challenges the line between reality and fiction. Valenzuela's alchemical magic, wherein he creates potent imagery from the most common trade materials of artists and builders, continues through to his current projects.



## Workforce

At The Print Center, the exhibition features work from three recent series: “Afterwork,” “Weapons” and “Devils’ Union.” At the heart of *Workforce* is Valenzuela’s imagining of new futures for the working class. He says, “in science fiction it’s easier to imagine a world where you can point out the problems of our neoliberalism... Maybe a kinder, more ethical capitalism can become the product of science fiction.” *1984*, Orwell’s classic novel of life under totalitarianism, is a touchstone for the dystopic aura of Valenzuela’s photographs, films and collages, and the unseen but ever-present structures of power upon which he comments. Valenzuela has drawn titles from the book, such as *Prole* and *Airstrip*, and explains, “gestures of alienation and displacement are both the aesthetic and the subject” of his work: a retro-futuristic worldview that offers a similar warning for our time.



From the series “Devils’ Union”

For the photographs in “Afterwork,” presented on the first floor, Valenzuela built structures from found industrial and construction materials, then photographed each of them in a box partially filled with steam. In these black and white images, the sculptural forms take on the appearance of trapped machinery, paused mid-production in a factory of unknown industry. A subtle narrative emerges, playing out in a space that the artist describes as “a post-worker world... a place where production happened but there are no longer bodies there.” Whether the workers have been made obsolete due to the advent of automation, or are missing for some other nefarious reason, is unclear.

On the second floor, Valenzuela has built a room-filling, site-specific, architectural shell that supports a variety of artworks, including many from the series “Weapons.” The raw-hewn structure echoes the framework of a building project as well as the scaffolding that often effectively becomes a temporary living space for laborers. The “Weapons” have a menacing tone, with their spiky and ominous creatures formed by an accumulation of knives and other sharp-edged metal components. For this series, Valenzuela once again

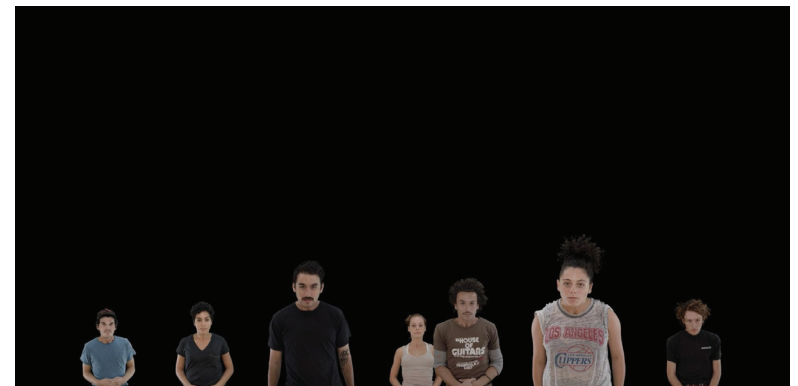


Installation view, *Rodrigo Valenzuela: New Works for a Post Worker's World*, 2022, BRIC, Brooklyn, NY. Photo: Sebastian Bach. Courtesy of BRIC.

constructed sculptural forms and photographed them in the studio, but here, screenprinted those images in large-scale onto collaged timecards, which provide evidence of the absent workers and symbolize bureaucratic control over employee time. Collectively, these images suggest a catalog of types that Valenzuela imagines exists in the “aftermath of the workers leaving the factory and creating weapons out of precarious materials.”

Also on the second floor are works from Valenzuela’s newest series “Devils’ Union.” People rarely appear in Valenzuela’s photographs, and when they do they are masked, as they are here. These cinematic images feature two uniformed, horned figures interacting in a confined, stage-like room. The series title plays on the dual meaning of the word union – both a joining of two individuals and the term for a labor collective. Like much of Valenzuela’s work, “Devils’ Union” is grounded in scholarship around systems of labor: in this case, an ethnographic study of the belief among South American workers that the devil plays a role in capitalist development.

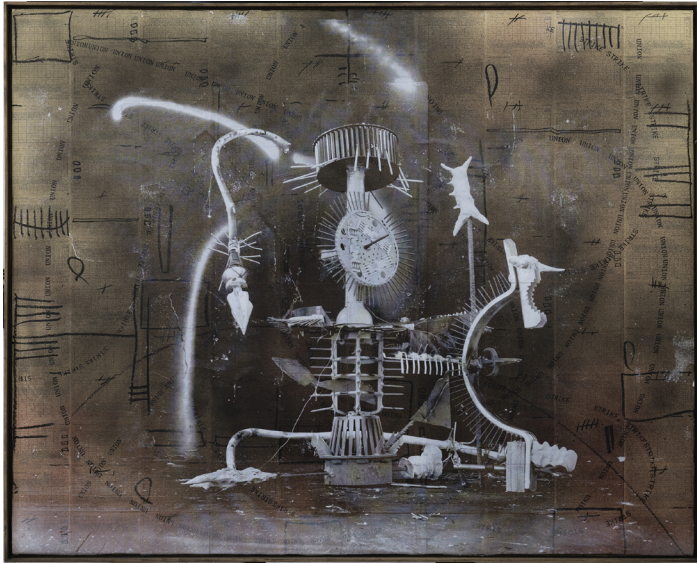
In the Zemel Family Gallery, the artist’s films *Prole* (2015) and *The Unwaged* (2017) are screened. They address issues and questions of labor in both scripted and unscripted narratives, and are another facet of Valenzuela’s commentary on the value of labor, the benefit



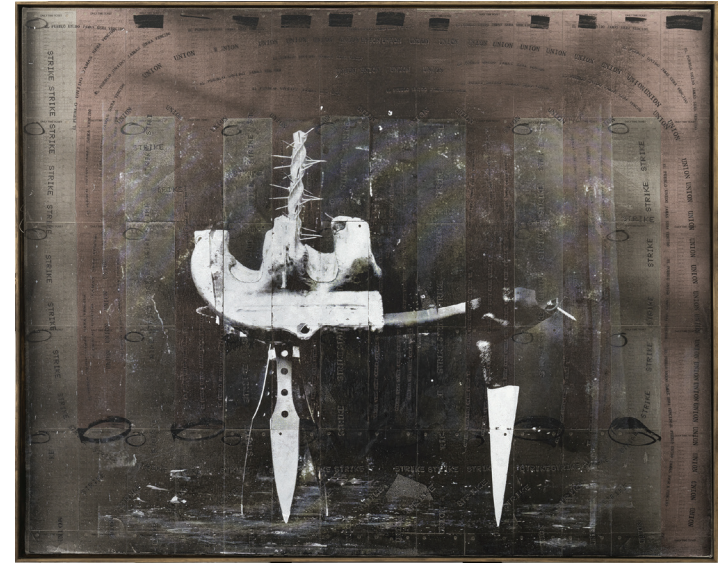
Video stills from *Prole*, 2015 (top) and *The Unwaged*, 2017 (bottom)

offered by unions and the contemporary reality experienced by working-class immigrants and people of color.

From the start of Valenzuela’s career, video has provided a democratic way to share an intimate conversation with the masses and to give workers a platform: “I really wanted to move to the United States to be a filmmaker. Of all the arts, [video] has the capacity to change the ideological apparatus of society in some way...a good movie can really transform people’s perceptions of a subject matter.”



*Weapon#33*, 2022, screenprint, acrylic, collaged timecards and cardboard on canvas, 48" x 60"



*Weapon#39*, 2022, screenprint, acrylic, collaged timecards and cardboard on canvas, 48" x 60"

## Machine Lives

Paula V. Kupfer

At the height of early industrial steel production, workers were treated as engines of sorts, their bodies wrung out of vitality, transformed into glowing steel bars, sweat and capital. As one steelworker told the writer Hamlin Gardland in Homestead, PA, in 1894, "You start in to be a man, but you become more and more a machine." Another worker said, of the physical labor, "It sweats the life out of a man."<sup>1</sup>

The smoke in Rodrigo Valenzuela's series "Afterwork" (2019–20) invokes the blazing steam and flaring white heat of steel in the process of formation, but also the perspiration of labor indefinitely suspended in the air. The hazy constructions recall old photographs of iron and steel mill factory floors, but they do so without the workers who brought the huge engines to life and lent them, by way of contrast, their colossal scale. In Valenzuela's depopulated

photographs, viewers are left to their own imaginative devices, prompted to envision alternate possibilities to that of a future of obsolescence. The photographs' silvery tones recall the sheen of W. Eugene Smith's photographs of Pittsburgh in the 1950s, of that decade that preceded the precipitous decline of the steel industry (in the United States, in particular), and of the photographic assignment that nearly drove Smith to madness. Valenzuela's contemporary Frankensteinian contraptions are ominous, uncanny, and some have a sinister edge, embodied by the threat of metal chains and hefty hooks. Others are delicate, almost sympathetic. By allowing the recognition of some of their parts—such as the spidery legs of a repurposed umbrella—the artist offers a glimpse of his ingenious process of reuse. Photography, the medium so attached to reality, is here put to the task of world-creation, generating visions of afterlives in which the ills of capitalism might be tempered through imagination.

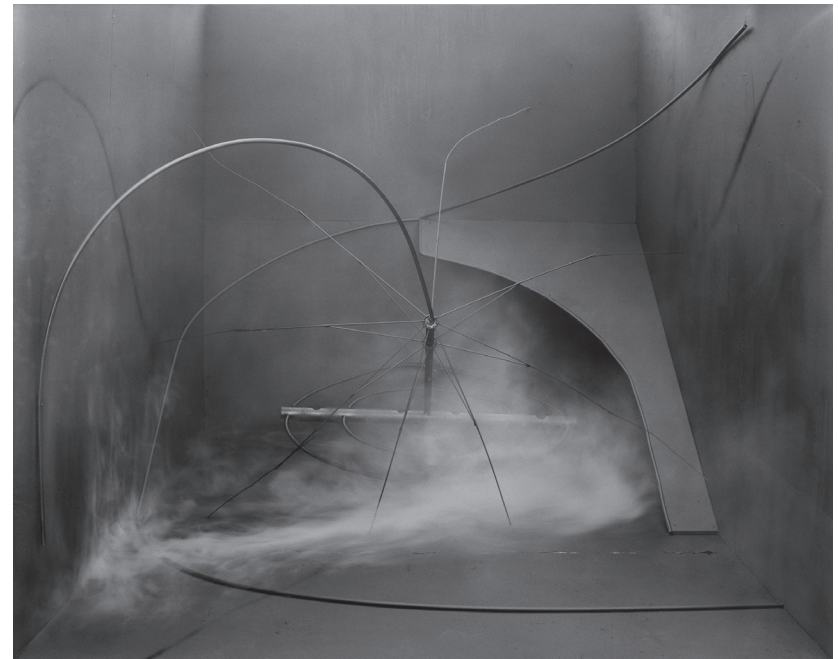
Valenzuela's series "Weapons" (2021–22) expands upon the images in "Afterwork," offering expanded and grainier views of the imaginative performances that might take place on a job site once workers depart. Here, knives, screws, rope and chains—the spiky

<sup>1</sup> Hamlin Garland, "Homestead and Its Perilous Trades — Impressions of a Visit," *McClure's Magazine*, June 1894.



*Weapon#42*, 2022, screenprint, acrylic, collaged timecards and cardboard on canvas, 60" x 48"

tools of many trades—appear reconfigured as sinister phoenixes, ramshackle sculptures and animistic creatures of dreams. As the main characters of these tableaux, the hybrid creatures appear to be both latent objects for an armed uprising and formidable, beast-like apparitions. With haunting presence, the “Weapons” hold the center stage of mural-like compositions that echo the hybridity of Afro-Cuban painter Wifredo Lam’s (1902–82) syncretic creatures,



*Afterwork#4*, 2021, inkjet print, 32" x 40"

and in scale and spirit are reminiscent of the fantastic, often narrative compositions by Chilean painter Roberto Matta (1911–2022). Both artists are key references in the history of modern art from Latin America, and important representatives of transnational surrealism, whose metaphysical compositions relayed distinct visions of modernity. Valenzuela’s works are similarly animated by a dream-like quality and driven by an urgent human and political exploration: that of global economics and the human dimensions of labor, considered in the wake of neoliberalism.

While both Lam and Matta were painters, Valenzuela works most frequently with photography, continuously pushing the possibilities of an expansive photographic practice. Both series involve the labor-intensive construction of objects and scenes, which Valenzuela photographs and then destroys; however, their presentation varies greatly in texture. While a certain slickness characterizes the silver-gelatin prints in the “Afterwork” series, the “Weapons” series are





*Weapon#37*, 2022, screenprint, acrylic, collaged timecards and cardboard on canvas, 48" x 60"

screenprinted onto various supports, resulting in unique pieces whose material condition recalls the dirt and soot of spaces of manual labor. This emphasis on toil is echoed in those very supports, often composed of repurposed timecards, some bearing red imprints that spell out the word "STRIKE."

The assemblages also implicate the fantastic, in the idea of overlaps between body and machine. Have the laboring bodies indeed become spiky engines, alchemized through the repetitive, perilous work into rattling, thunderous machines? Or is it that the machines have turned oddly sensuous, and, desiring more than disuse and oblivion, come alive in a raucous carnival, pushing into each other, transpiring profusely—not from toil but release? Valenzuela beckons the viewer to partake in the fiction, in the possibilities of what might happen when the workers are gone: condensation filtered by pulsating lights, drudge melting into ecstasy and abandon. In their projection of a post-worker's world, the series speaks to the elimination not only of individual laborers but of the idea itself of the work force, pushed aside by the very shapes we see here: odd

machines and automation, engines that no longer require an operator, but that rage, rally and organize when no one is watching.

In a time of increased struggles for unionization, including among art and museum workers, these works commemorate and reinvigorate some of the ideas that animated union organizers and surrealist artists alike, while introducing the issues of work conditions and renewed collective action that are specific to the post-industrial present. The workers have left the factory. For tonight, or for good?

**Paula V. Kupfer** is a doctoral candidate in art history at the University of Pittsburgh, specializing in the history of photography and modern art in Latin America, with an emphasis on the ecological and political dimensions of lens-based practices. She curated *Rodrigo Valenzuela: Creatures of the Grind*, for Assembly Gallery, Houston, TX in 2022 and was the Managing Editor of *Aperture Magazine*.

## About the Artist

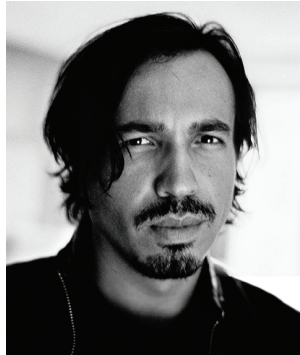


Photo: Zachary Fabri

**Rodrigo Valenzuela** (born 1982, Santiago, Chile; lives Los Angeles, CA) has a BFA in photography from the University of Chile, Santiago; a BA in philosophy from Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA and an MFA in PhotoMedia from the University of Washington, Seattle. His work has been exhibited extensively across the US and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions include BRIC, Brooklyn, NY; Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa, CA; Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene, OR; New Museum, New York, NY; Portland Art Museum, OR; and Lisa Kandlhofer Galerie, Vienna, Austria. His work has also been exhibited at the Kala Art Institute, Berkeley, CA; Tufts University Art Galleries, Boston, MA; Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL; The Drawing Center, New York, NY; Bemis Center, Omaha, NE; The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, KS; artspace, San Antonio, TX; Center for Architecture and Design, Frye Art Museum, Henry Art Gallery and Jacob Lawrence Gallery, all Seattle; Tacoma Art Museum, WA; Hillyer Art Space, Washington, DC; as well as in Austria, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Spain. Valenzuela has received awards and accolades, including an Art Matters Foundation Grant; Artist Trust Innovators Award; John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in Photography; Joan Mitchell Award; and a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship. He has been awarded artist residencies in the Core Program, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX; Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, ME; MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH; Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, NE; Lightwork, Syracuse, NY and the Center for Photography at Woodstock, Kingston, NY. He is Assistant Professor in the School of Art and Architecture at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA).

## Programs

### Gallery Talk & Opening Reception

Friday, April 14, 2023

5:30pm Gallery Talk with the Artist and Exhibition Curators

6 – 7:30pm Reception

### Artist Talk

Tuesday, April 11, 2023

6pm

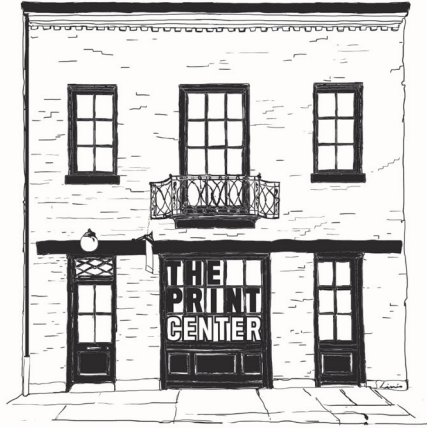
Held at the University of Pennsylvania, Meyerson Hall, Room B-3 and on Zoom.

Additional programs will be announced. For more information and to register for Zoom, visit [printcenter.org](https://printcenter.org). All of The Print Center's exhibitions and programs are free and open to the public.

**The Harpo Foundation has made this project possible, including the creation of a new edition of prints.**

**harpo**foundation

*All images are provided courtesy of the Artist unless otherwise noted.*



## About The Print Center

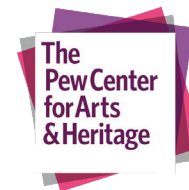
### Mission

For more than a century, The Print Center has encouraged the growth and understanding of photography and printmaking as vital contemporary arts through exhibitions, publications and educational programs. The Print Center has an international voice and a strong sense of local purpose. Free and open to the public, it presents changing exhibitions, which highlight established and emerging, local, national and international contemporary artists. It mounts one of the oldest annual art competitions in the country, now in its 98th year, provides the Artists-in-Schools Program to Philadelphia public high school students and its Gallery Store offers a carefully selected array of contemporary prints and photographs onsite and online.

### Funders

Support for this exhibition has been generously provided by the **Harpo Foundation** and the **University of Pennsylvania's Department of Fine Arts**.

Support for The Print Center is offered by: Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation; Forman Family Fund; Sheila Fortune Foundation; Fund for Children; Allen Hilles Fund; Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Foundation; Christopher Ludwick Foundation; National Endowment for the Arts; William Penn Foundation; Pennsylvania Council on the Arts; The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage; Philadelphia Cultural Fund; The Philadelphia Foundation; Rosenlund Family Foundation; University of the Arts; Henrietta Tower Wurts Memorial; and our Board of Governors, Luminaries, members and friends.





## Notes

# THE PRINT CENTER

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www.printcenter.org

Free and open to the public  
Tuesday — Saturday, 11am — 6pm

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