

[Join the New Social Environment — our daily conversation with artists, filmmakers, writers, and poets](#)
[Join us.»](#)

[« NOV 2022 Issue](#)

[Q](#)

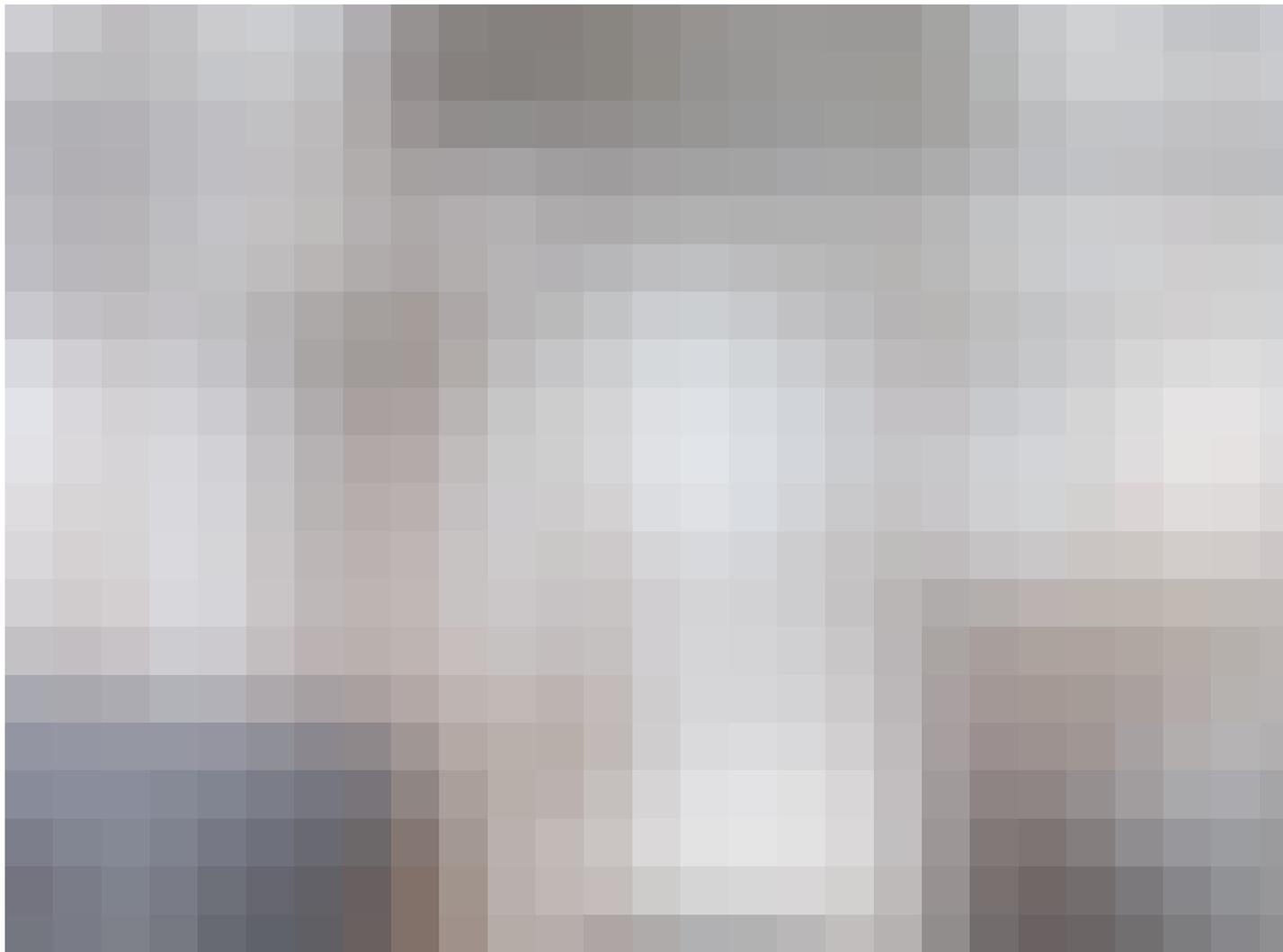
[Donate](#)

[ArtSeen](#)

Rodrigo Valenzuela: *New Works for a Post Worker's World*

NOV 2022

By Robert R. Shane



Installation view of *Rodrigo Valenzuela: New Works for a Post Worker's World* at BRIC House, September 22–December 23, 2023. Courtesy of BRIC. Photo Credit: Sebastian Bach.

On View**Gallery At Bric House**

Rodrigo Valenzuela: New Works for a Post Worker's World

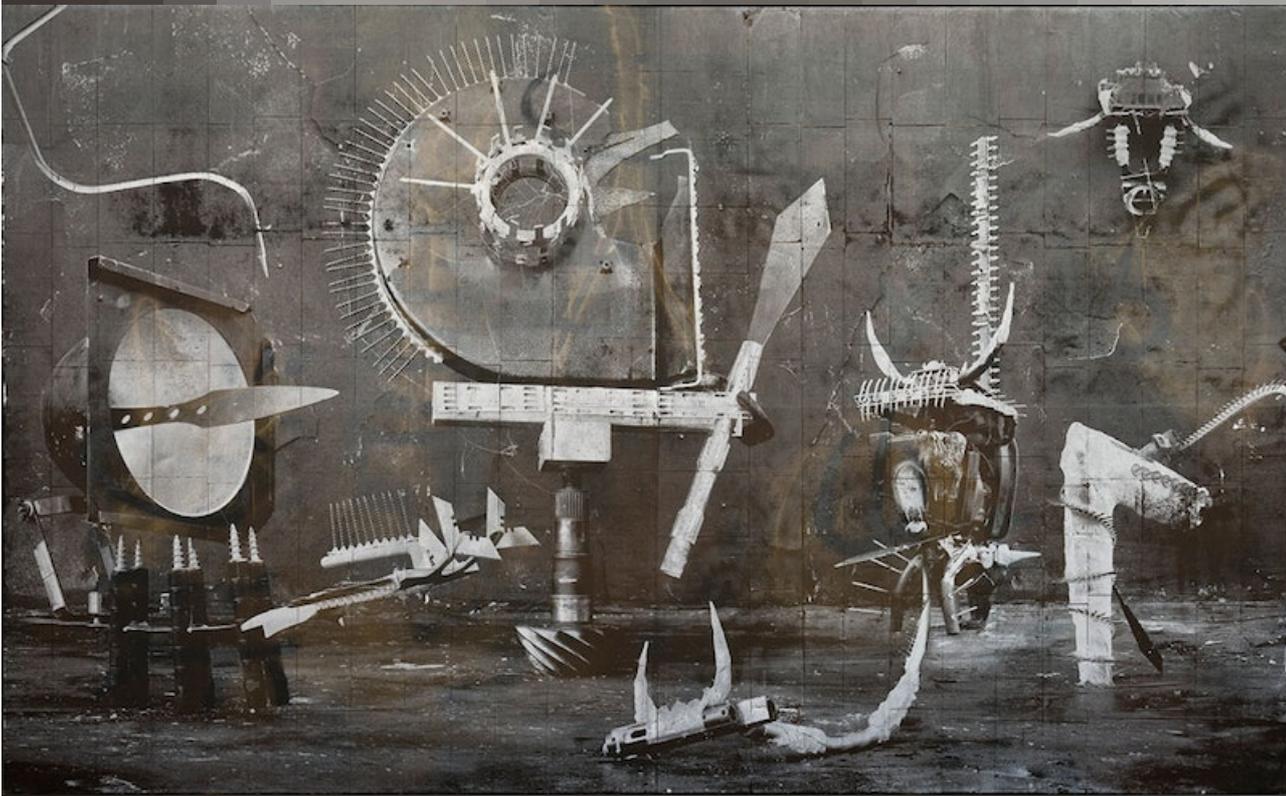
September 22–December 23, 2022

Brooklyn

Steaming machines or spike-laden devices crouched like metal reptiles populate the staged industrial spaces pictured in Rodrigo Valenzuela's two black-and-white photographic series "Afterwork" (2021) and "Weapons" (2022). In scenes devoid of any human presence, the dynamism of criss-crossing pipes and whizzing turbines suggests the machines maintain their activity without any intervention, as if the worker's body, so long exploited in the age of industrialization and replaceable in an era of automation, has been fully disposed of. Here Valenzuela simultaneously explores the ever-shifting concepts of work and labor in our day, references past images of industry, and offers a disquieting sci-fi vision of the future. Indeed, the "post" in the show's title *New Works for a Post Worker's World* primes viewers to be sensitive to such questions of temporality.

Valenzuela set the exhibition on a towering, skeletal stage, recalling the interior frame of a house, which he constructed with stained two-by-twos. Reaching sixteen feet high, its elements crawl up three walls, project into the gallery space, and stand freely and stilt-like in the center of the gallery's cement floor. The symmetrical layout can lead viewers clockwise or counterclockwise through a labyrinthine loop in which artwork surrounds them on all sides. Photographs appear at eye-level, overhead, and down by the knees—fully immersing viewers in this post-worker's world.

On the central structure hang the three largest works in the exhibition, forming a triptych consisting of *Weapon #31*, a vertical panel, flanked by two angled, horizontal panels, *Weapon #29* and *#30*. These photographs show sculptures constructed by Valenzuela that appear as dangerous, resourceful creatures who have seemingly self-mobilized and assembled themselves from found objects: razors, roller chains, hedge trimmers, talon blades, screws pointing outward forming rings of spikes. The vertical figure in *#31* looms over us—standing on legs of blades and a wood saw, swinging its two tentacle arms. In *#29* and *#30*, groupings of creatures pose in shallow, gritty industrial spaces. All the weapon-creatures in the series display their violent potential and their agency, but they are not yet on the offensive. Patient, they warn would-be exploiters not to provoke them.

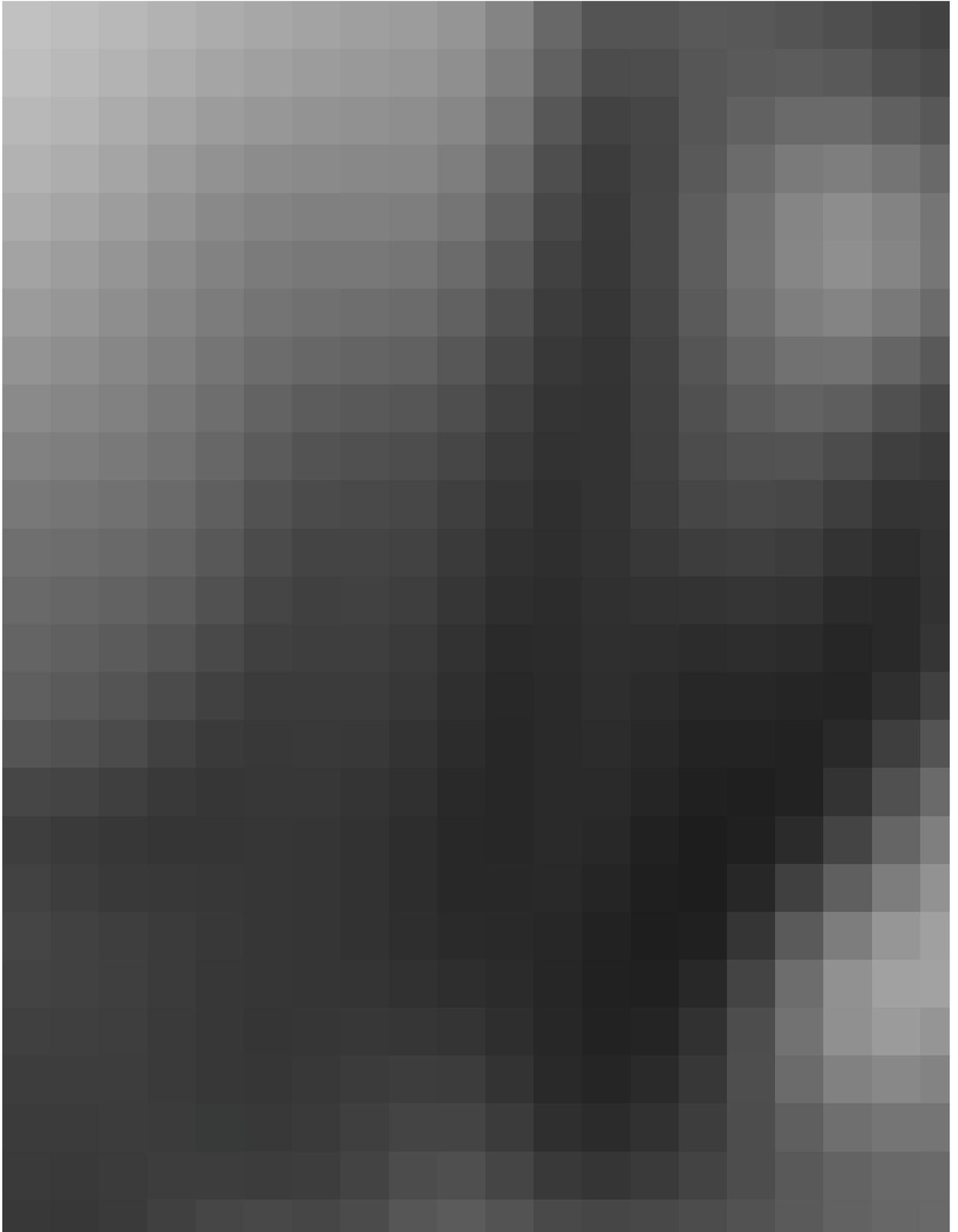


Rodrigo Valenzuela, *Weapon #29*, 2022. Silkscreen, acrylic on collage cardboard and canvas, 96 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery.

All of the photographs in "Weapons" are screenprinted onto collaged surfaces consisting of a grid of timecards. Against that compositional grid and the ruled lines within each card, Valenzuela has emblazoned words like "STRIKE" and "UNION" in different iterations: stamped, printed, or defiantly tagged like graffiti. Other handmade gestures strike-through select words on the cards—"weekly time record"—or form lines and circles as if mapping strategies for a battle. In this context the weapon-creatures become revolutionaries in a temporal revolt against the quantification and commodification of workers' lives.

The setting shown in the "Afterwork" series contrasts with "Weapons": a clean, industrial, box-like room, illuminated by an unseen, even overhead light. The pristine surfaces of these silver-gelatin prints allow us to see a world animated by machines and structured by the classical perspective of the cube. In *Afterwork #1*,

welded I-beams forming a cubic “H” are suspended on a diagonal axis by heavy industrial chains; spraying steam suggests ongoing activity. In *Afterwork #5*, cylindrical washing machine drums mounted on vertical steel beams stand alert and sentient, as chains draped across an inverted trapezoidal stool in the foreground appear to relax. The medium and machine aesthetic subtly recall an earlier era—say, Margaret Bourke-White’s 1930s photographs of American and Soviet industry or Andreas Feininger’s 1940s photographs of workers building airplane components and weapons—but Valenzuela’s omission of human workers remains an unsettling vision of, perhaps, a future that has made them obsolete.





Rodrigo Valenzuela, *Afterwork #1*, 2021. Archival inkjet print, 40 x 32 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery.

The exhibition includes two components besides the photographs: seven black ceramic pieces from Valenzuela's "Airstrip" series (all 2020) and a pair of earlier videos that bear witness to present-day workers' struggles and agency. The "Airstrip" pieces are constructed of geometric forms that simultaneously echo the machine parts in the "Afterwork" photographs and ancient pre-Columbian objects. A video monitor hung on the reverse side of the central "Weapons" triptych presents *The Unwaged* (2017), a silent color video of students—young interns whose time is unpaid—standing upright within a black void. As they stare at the viewer, their bodies tremble and their lips quiver as if they are trying to plead with us; or perhaps simply breathe. Vulnerable, they make explicit what is at stake in Valenzuela's photographs. So too does the monitor at the entrance to the exhibition that presents *Prole* (2015), a video showing conversations with workers who have migrated to the United States.

Whether Valenzuela's imagery engages with present-day workers, utopic visions from a modernist past, or a futuristic sci-fi dystopia, capitalist structures of time come under critique throughout BRIC's exhibition. His work defies the capitalist conceit of linear progress by showing us ongoing labor exploitation that reaches back to the beginning of the industrial era, and it revolts against the structures that systematically control the time of worker's lives.

Contributor

Robert R. Shane

Robert R. Shane received his PhD in Art History and Criticism at Stony Brook University and is the gallery program coordinator at Collar Works, Troy, NY.