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Tertiary

On Workers, Pictures, and Power


Austro-Hungarian photographer Leonard Nadel was the son of immigrants. Upon moving to Los Angeles in the mid-1940s, Nadel studied at Art Center College of Design and was hired shortly thereafter by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) to document the living conditions in the city's slums and new post-war housing projects. On a recent research fellowship at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, I dove into a collection of photographs Nadel made in California, Texas, and Mexico on assignment for the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Republic. Beginning in 1956, he photographed the results of the Bracero Program, a set of 1940s-era laws (initiated by the loss of so many American workers to the war) in which Mexican workers were promised housing and a minimum wage of 50 cents per hour in exchange for their temporary labor in the United States.

Nadel's images from this project depict Latinos and workers as objects; things to be handled, moved around, and squeezed for productivity. The pictures are a painful reminder of our role as Latinos in the labor market and society at large. As I combed through his archive, I thought about the radical difference between Nadel's approach to social documentary compared to those

of Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange, photographers who were hired in the late 1930s under the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a New Deal agency formed to document rural poverty in an effort to lift the country out of the Depression. The 11 FSA photographers produced some of the most iconic images in American photographic history, building an impactful visual archive of the nation's economic reality. Yet, these photographs were circular, government-sponsored propaganda—their role, by design, was to help justify the New Deal legislation—that ultimately shifted the focus away from the source of the economic issues at hand and onto the resiliency of individuals. Images like *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange or *Fleeing a Dust Storm* (both 1936) by Arthur Rothstein (an image that was actually staged) created a sense of national identity, nearly romanticizing an economic crisis that was in fact produced by Wall Street. By contrast, Nadel's work is profoundly unromantic and feels like a more sincere document of the time period.

Documentary projects that don't meaningfully address power are intrinsically flawed. The FSA was involved in propagating a manipulative, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps American identity and a certain kind of poverty nostalgia,

Rodrigo Valenzuela



and many of the approaches to documenting the economic downturns of today are damaging, as they tend to image the effect and not the cause. Under the illusion of awareness and visibility, photography can remark on facts while doing very little to shift responsibility or chip away at existing power imbalances. Rather than focusing on the housing market collapse of 2008 or the vast populations affected by unemployment during the pandemic, a project documenting how the uber-rich live in times of crisis might actually spur riots or inspire real change. Between 1935 and 1944, the FSA photographers produced some 175 thousand black-and-white film negatives in the name of creating a visualized national identity but zero images documenting what the wealthy did with their bailout money.¹

In the following pages, I have presented cropped versions of Nadel's Bracero photographs, honing in on isolated details to highlight the power struggle between Americans and immigrants, workers and bosses, land and personal space. These crops are paired with my own images, which each propose an object or weapon that the working class could build in times of oppression. These images are accompanied by my poem "Tertiary," which speaks to the film industry's notorious use

of people of color as set dressings to make a scene feel more real or vibrant without considering their actual role or meaningfully developing their storylines. Nadel's photographs, which depict the broad objectification of individuals in real life, mirror this longstanding blind spot within even fictitious, "Hollywood" media representation. As we move forward in an era of rampant image proliferation, we must continue to seek out the subtext behind every picture, and trace the nuanced power structures behind our visual culture.

—Rodrigo Valenzuela (as told to Lindsay Preston Zappas)

1. Sarah Boxer, "Whitewashing the Great Depression," *The Atlantic*, December 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/12/whitewashing-the-great-depression/616936/>.



In a small place of their imagination
I am transformed into an object
Each time put in the right place
Heir of an appearance and presence that dissolves
I am sample, similarity
Parts, only parts—

Money, keys, license
I identify with my routine
To be intercepted by questions, my body
Determined by association to others as if
We were brothers, nephews, cousins,
Things of blood and meat missing each other
more with each connection, producing
nothing I recognize





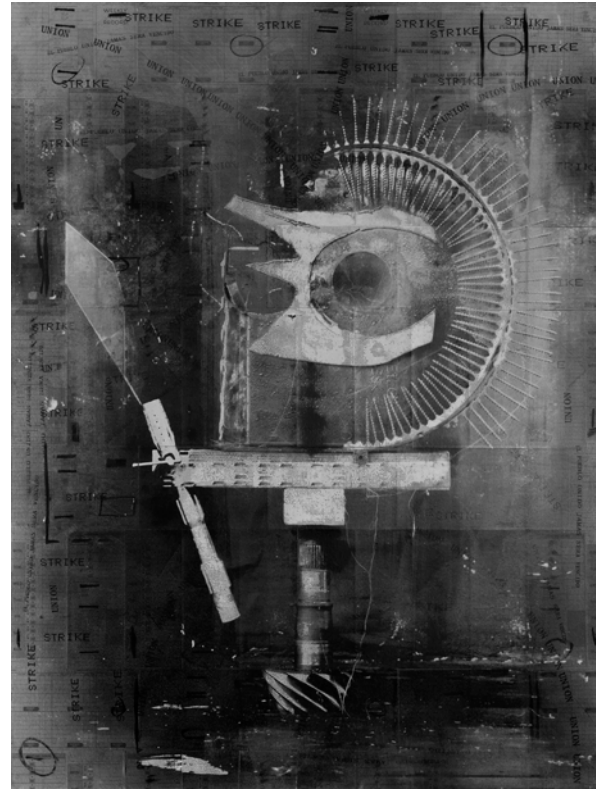
I almost always remember to forget
That the movie started without and around me
I'm out of focus and off camera
Not the darkness of the screen nor its reflection

They write their story with the sign of the infinite
I draw, from outside, the round world
Spit it out in pieces they call "There"
But I am both adjacent and distant, each time inside and never,
in each position keeping my hands visible



I almost always remember to forget
That the worst would be to turn on the lights and realize
Everything is fine because everything is in its place
My body, my feet, my head, my hands
To be used, on the edge, hands
Like saws I can never pocket

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I followed the crumbs,
conversations that fill the public without
touching the collective, that place
I infiltrate with my secret, looking
at everyone, everyone, while biting
the apologies off my tongue
for being a monument
of chance destination

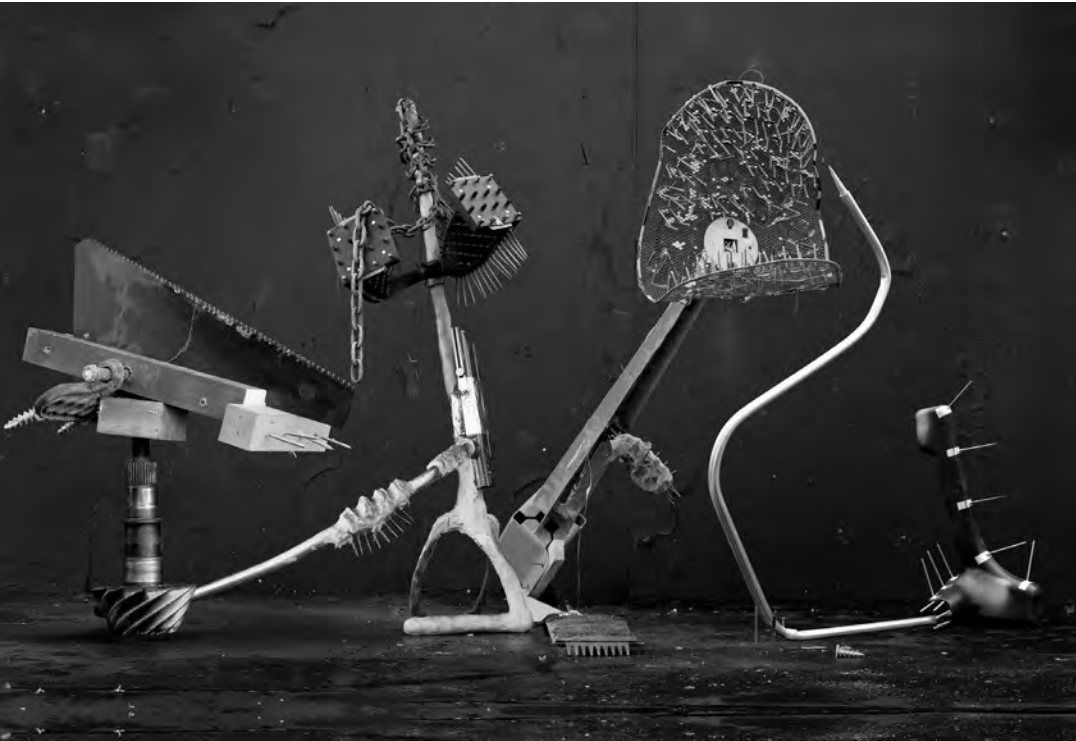




And what then when I get tired of building
the conditions for my voice to be heard,
my presence understood,
where do I go next if the question every time insists
on where I come from, on "Here" not existing
for me, or you, no casual breath



They insist, and I come
They insist, and I fall
like bricks from the wall that leaves me
outside, missing you, carrying
my parts and forgetting



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the words without language
where I live

Rodrigo Valenzuela, *Weapons #1*, *Weapons #11*,
and *Weapons #19* (all works 2021). Screenprints
and acrylic on collaged time cards on canvas;
48 × 36 inches, 48 × 60 inches, and 48 × 60 inches.
Images courtesy of the artist.

All photographs by Leonard Nadel are details
from his documentation of the Braceros Program and
were sourced from the Leonard Nadel Photographs
and Scrapbooks, Archives Center,
National Museum of American History.