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# ArtNexus



**Adrián Villar Rojas**

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PhotoEspaña 2013 • Vik Muniz



## SEFT-1

# Iván Puig & Andrés Padilla

DANIEL GARZA USABIAGA

One hundred years ago, the landscape of the railroad system in Europe was very different than today. The network was growing and featured, as part of its grid, important examples of world-class engineering. The railroad was a symbol of progress; a forward march that seemed to be conquering, by means of rails and cross ties, the entire country. Proof of this is an 1881 painting by José María Velasco

which featured a train, pulled by a steam locomotive, traversing the Metlac Bridge (the structure that gives the painting its title) with a wilderness landscape in the background. Around 1910, the railroad acquired a new significance thanks to the crucial role it played in the Revolution. The post-revolutionary state created a myth around these machines, connecting it to social change. This perception of the railroad was disseminated through art as well as through literature and

movies. The myth has survived until our own era, as demonstrated by the commemorative banknote emitted by Banco de México in 2012, featuring a heroic image of a locomotive. That same year, as the Bicentennial of Mexico's independence and the Centennial of the Revolution were being celebrated, Iván Puig and Andrés Padilla began the earliest explorations for their SEFT-1<sup>1</sup> project, evaluating, through several study trips to the ruins of what had been that wondrous railroad network,

*Seft - 1 at the Metlac Bridge, Veracruz, Mexico. \**





Seft - 1 in Marte (Mars). Coahuila, Mexico.



Geologic Collection from Marte (Mars).



Seft - 1 in Marte (Mars). Coahuila, Mexico.

PROJECT

Since the beginning of his career Iván Puig has created a series known as *Historias de América Latina*, where he revisits historical experiences that are shared by countries in the region.

investigation and visual arts. Century, who combined scientific worked through the Nineteenth activities of traveling artists who communications technology, of the an updating, using contemporary as This strategy can be understood as authors, via the project's web page. they were found or recorded by the the public almost immediately after ments were open for consultation for throughout the route. These docu- ganized objects and materials found country, and they collected and or- railroad lines that criss-cross the their explorations on the various (using photography and video) of and Padilla kept logs and records ing never-before-seen terrains, Puig planets. Like scientists investigat- the surface of satellites and other to vehicles used for traveling on refers to a Sci-Fi aesthetic, mainly, appearance, both inside and outside, both on expressways and on rails. Its Puig and Padilla, capable of moving acronym) is a vehicle designed by Exploratory Probe," in its Spanish The SEFT-1 ("Manned Railroad marginalization.

of impoverishment and increasing ment and "progress," but a process- as a whole a continuity in develop- seen in the final results of the project two eras does not reveal as can be initially, the contrast between these tury. Against the ideals formulated train at a distance of at least a cen- that are contained in the figure of the progress and revolutionary change the course followed by the ideas of

The result of several months traveling through the remains of Mexico's railroad system can be seen, in large measure, as possessing a documentary character. The artists interviewed numerous people who explained how life was in their communities before the 1990s, the decade when the network was entirely privatized and large-scale passenger trips came to an end. Remote villages not accessible by highway, previously connected via the railroad, were suddenly left isolated. A network that at some point had represented progress, change, and material abundance began to undergo along its entire length a process of impoverishment, decay, and disintegration; precisely the opposite of the promises and ideals contained in the image of the train. Puig and Padilla deploy multiple

solutions beyond the documentary record in order to emphasize the contrast; in this way, they formulate a critique of the current state of affairs. An example of these strategies is their quote, using photography of Velasco's painting *El Puente de Metlac*. The artists positioned the SEFT-1 at the same angle Velasco had placed the steam locomotive in his composition. The final image produced a feeling of estrangement, as we discover the futuristic-looking machine in the midst of the tropical landscape. Above all, the photograph spotlights the current state of the structure, victim of disuse and decay, and contrasts it with the practically brand-new version depicted in Velasco's 1881 painting.

Since the first exhibition of the results of the project at the Museo

Nacional de Arte in 2011, the artists have developed an installation featuring some of the photographs and videos of their explorations, computers with access to the web page, graphic interventions on the walls, as well as an arrangement of the material samples collected along the way. With these, they create an information-loaded space that, among other things, presents a panoramic vista of the current situation of the country through the ruins of a railroad system that covers it from north to south and from coast to coast. In this way the project puts on display everything from the convulsive geography of the country's northern region, marked by conflicts between organized-crime groups, to the spectacular and manic architecture erected in the central area of

*Moon Landscape.* Salt mines at Las Coloradas, Yucatan, Mexico.



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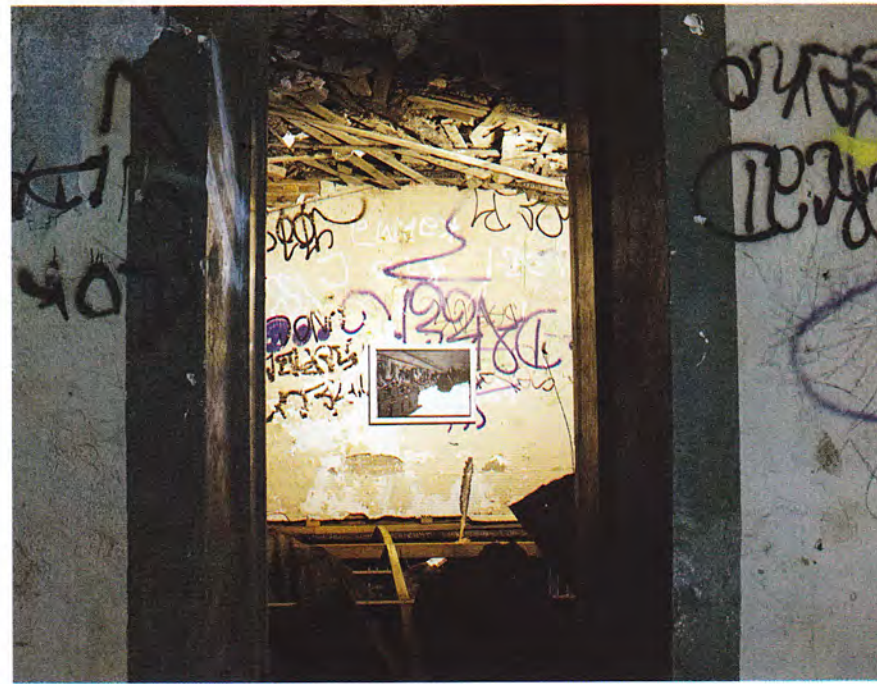
\* All images illustrating the text are a courtesy of the  
 artists and Artoniz Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico.

NOTES  
 1. SEFT-1 has been developed from 2010-2013.

Puig and Padilla recently presented the SEFT-1 project in the city of Cuernavaca, in the Mexican state of Morelos. For the first time on this occasion they set aside the installation strategy commonly used to display the results of their investigation. Exhibiting in an abandoned railroad station, the artists opted for a solution that included intervening the site. The Cuernavaca station, abandoned for over a decade, was left in a total state of blight after a fire couple of years ago. After years of inactivity, the artists restored the building's electrical connection, lighting and showcas-ing its now-ruined architecture like never before. They also intervened the

line in Puig's work. Were this project to travel to other Latin American countries, the results are very likely to be similar. Besides contemplating local histories, the SEFT-1 project highlights the region's shared historical processes, in this case bringing to the fore the privileging of highway development at least since the post-war period, as well as the consequence of neo-liberal policies implemented on a regional scale since the 1980s.

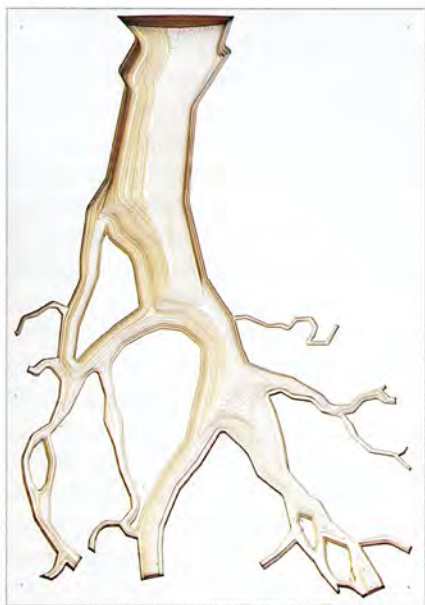
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Intervention at the Cuernavaca Station, Mexico.

the nation's territory in celebration of the Bicentennial and the Centennial. Similarly, the project's installations reveal with greater clarity the connection that the artists seek to establish with a science-fiction narrative. The artists present their findings like explorers after an expedition to a remote, unknown place: objects that are subjected to a classificatory system of the artists' own invention, and put on display in the manner of old cabinets. The objects lend themselves to an interplay of free associations on the part of viewers, although they mostly coincide with representations of ruins, waste, detritus, obsolescence, and death. The objects—technologies in disuse, merchandise rendered useless by the effects of weather, animal bones—reinforce the intention of signaling the way in which, over the course of the last 100 years, the idea of progress has not brought along any advance, welfare, or development. This reflection is also engaged through humor, as can be seen, for instance, in a photograph of a sign indicating the name of a village, "Marté," used to tie down a donkey.

The SEFT-1 vehicle has also operated in Ecuador's railroad system, where the artists explored three networks in 2012. Although caused by particular and specific circumstances, the current state of the Ecuadorian railroad system is similar to that of Mexico's. This can be seen in the documentation and record of the routes, which can be perused via the SEFT-1 web page. Since the beginning of his career Iván Puig has created a series known as *Historias de América Latina*, where he revisits historical experiences that are shared by countries in the region, as in *Parallantos*, which can apply both to Mexico and Colombia (where it was first exhibited in 2009) with its focus on an analysis of the violence suffered in both countries as the State and organized crime clash. Through its explorations in Ecuador, SEFT-1 connects with this



Miller Lagos, *Amazon Tree (negative)*, 2013. Laser cut paper relief, 28 1/2 x 40 1/2 in. (72.4 x 102.2 cm.).

This is a rich collection of artworks done on the form of cut trees. to mimic the shape of certain lakes and take their surface that have been carved by Lagos stacks of paper with graphic renderings on one realizes that these trunks are actually of aged tree trunks. Upon closer inspection on the contours densities and appearance is a grouping of sculpted forms that take appearance of tree rings. And on the floor terns to emerge which give the circles the series of seemingly abstract concentric patterns whose uniformity of layout allows for a newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*, constructions are comprised of various mounted on the walls; these shaped paper of folded paper shaped into circular forms sculpted-paper projects. One involves reliefs Perhaps most visually arresting are two

diverse spaces of the missing trees. "valleys" or "river beds" created by the negative tabletops, presenting a topographical view of deep paper-cut reliefs that are mounted on of these drawings Miller executes a series of ing branch and root systems. In an inversion affect the appearance of great tress, including

the body's circulatory system and that rivers one realizes that they are also analogous to When one looks at the tree/river renderings river analogy, which expands into the related-ness of all life and organisms on this planet. Together by the related themes of the tree/ing exhibition. They are of course threaded in disparate styles and techniques, any one set of which would have made for an intriguing exhibition. They are of course threaded

At the same time, a single quality, such as a scent or a sound, can represent an object, or recall its absence. The animal sounds in the gallery are collected from the British Library Sound Archive and present species that are near or at extinction. These sounds, then, represent these creatures as accurately, perhaps more accurately, as a photograph and, within the lifecycle of the animal, allowed it to exist, reproduce and sustain itself. The smells represented here, collected and preserved by International Flavors and Fragrances, Inc., form another building block in perception.

Consider *Empty Smoke*. The strong smell of wood near and around this object causes us to consider the idea of smoke while at the same time understanding what wood is, what it feels like, and what happens when it burns. If smoke were "empty" it would be invisible, however here in this piece it is present in our perception. From the sound loop of *Cynic* we know of these species that are disappearing, or gone, but we "know" them.

Of course, the intellectual and philosophical substance of this exhibit is much deeper and more complex than the above simplification. Along the walls are rich graphite works on paper depicting various rivers such as the Selenga and the Lena. By rendering them in graphically removing their context, and displaying them vertically on the wall these bodies of water do

cohere into a greater installation. There are four main sections in this show. Along the walls are rich graphite works on paper depicting various rivers such as the Selenga and the Lena. By rendering them in graphically removing their context, and displaying them vertically on the wall these bodies of water do

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like the Amazon are in fact the lifeblood of the planet. Of course the choice to employ paper in each project hardly seems accidental or arbitrary, given that paper is an evolution of a tree's existence. It is also noteworthy that the two projects that make most use of paper, the tree rings and the sculpted trunks, use paper to present trees that have been cut down—an unfortunate necessity for paper production and also a matter of great concern regarding sites such as the Amazon Rain Forest today.

With his second solo New York exhibition Lagos ties together mythology, spirituality, and ecological concerns in artworks that are intellectually layered and masterfully crafted. He is proving to be an artist whose talents match his ambitions

John Angeline

## Aldo Sessa

Throckmorton Fine Arts

To describe Aldo Sessa it becomes essential to address his many facets: as a photographer who is passionate about the urban theme, as an author with a predisposition toward angular and elegant compositional tendencies, and as an artist who values volume and in-between spaces as if they were musical zones and silences. In a prolific and perfectionist artistic production, Sessa has focused his attention less on people and storytelling than on those aspects that convey the strong personality of New York. Although his work has also approached other cities like Buenos Aires, his talent reaches the heights of the Manhattan skyscrapers when it comes to rendering New York.

Born in Argentina, Aldo Sessa is an unconventional photographer in the context of his country. He is not an author that focuses on portraying artists or writers from the local scene—as most great modern photographers from Argentina, like Annemarie Heinrich, Horacio Cópola and Sara Facio, have done in Buenos Aires. While Sessa is the author of portraits, in them he emphasizes the maturity of angular volumes, of the street defined by modernist architecture, as he also records the less frequent angles from ballet. He often avoids frontal approaches, and, instead, looks for the hidden places within the urban landscape found between light and shadow contrasts and rides exalted perspectives with the mastery of a daring horseman.

Sessa's ongoing exhibition at the Spencer Throckmorton Gallery consists of twenty-five works. The selection of pieces and the mounting of the exhibition are excellent. About the selection, it is important to mention that the show includes photographs of New York City that were taken by Sessa during his yearly trips to that city. About this, the artist has said, "My passion for New York remains as intact as the very first time I saw the city fifty years ago."

The forms in his work are charged with the symbologies possessed by several of New York City's buildings, statutes and bridges. But it is not through the subject that Aldo Sessa attains his high level of originality—something that would be impossible considering the infinite number of images taken of every element found within this urban landscape—but rather through his unscathed photographic, stylistic and personal approach. Through sharpened forms, like those present in the notable depictions of the *Chrysler Building* (1989), the *Twin Towers* (1991), the *Chrysler Building Rain* (2008) and the *Chrysler Building* (2010), architecture has played the same central role since the beginning of Sessa's career.

Less than half of the works that are part of this exhibition include the human figure, and those images are characterized by the anonymous appearance of the individuals that appear in them. That is, with the exception of one work that pays tribute to the great Hungarian photographer, André Kertész, and to which Sessa gave the title of *Kertész on 43<sup>rd</sup> St. & 6<sup>th</sup> Ave., NY*, an address near the International Center of Photography. In keeping with the Kertészian notion of giving meaning to mundane events, the image by Sessa plays with a succession of three persons and a giant shadow. In both Kertész's and Sessa's works the theme of the shadow becomes in itself a well utilized and enjoyed vehicle—not solely by the authors but also by the spectators. Among the prominent elements at play, the shadow acquires a mysterious, symbolic, authoritarian and evocative place. In 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, NY from last year, Sessa articulates three ruling principles: verticality, oblong or elongated forms and shadows. While most human figures are unrecognizable—particularly due to the lack of physiognomic details—in some of the photographs it is possible to observe a hand or a head masterfully shown in all their detail.

Cosmopolitanism provides a varied language. We are reminded of the international nature of the work when contemplating photographs like *Man & Empire State Building*,

NY—a double exposure image. There are only a few color photographs and most rely on black, white and tones of gray. The expressive force of Sessa's black and white photographs—or B&W, as they are usually known—is highly noticeable.

*Carousel, Bryant Park, NY* is incidentally one of the five printed shots that use a variety of pigments. It is a highly theatrical image, just as the other four color photographs are. The effects caused by the reflections of one type of architecture over another are motifs that are dear to Sessa's aesthetic, as is also the utilization of modules. The perspective generated by his inquiries also represent great technical contributions; the *Statue of Liberty, NY* (1991), being one notable example. While most of the photographs are of an architectural nature, there are also some that set manmade forms in contrast with natural agents, like rain. In conclusion, the images by Aldo Sessa are full of energy and emotion.

Graciela Kartofel

## PARIS / FRANCE

### Sergio Larrain

Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation

After the success of Sergio Larrain's exhibition at the most recent *Recontres Photographiques d'Arles*, in France, the Cartier-Bresson Foundation is presenting, in a very original way and in three levels, an exceptional selection of works by the Chilean photographer, curated by foundation director Agnès Sire.

The career of Sergio Larrain (1931-2012) is unique in that for him photography was inseparable from a profound spiritual reflection connected to the habitual practice of meditation and yoga. Indeed, he used to write that "a good image is born from a state of grace."

Sergio Larrain's nomadic, vagabond life began in 1949, when he left Chile and his bourgeois, cultivated family—with which he did not identify—and traveled to the United States to pursue his studies. After a long trip to the Middle East and Europe, Larrain returned to his native country and settled there. His earliest work had to do with street children in Santiago. His 1959 encounter, in Paris, with Henri Cartier-Bresson was decisive; the French photographer was, in Larrain's view, "the absolute master... a genius... someone who is in a category apart, all of