

Viva la Mexiko



Thomas Kellner
Mexiko



Hotel Mexico

Thomas Kellner: contacts of an infinite city

The way human vision works is better modeled by one of the composite photographs of Thomas Kellner than by say, a painting by Johann Moritz Rugendas (1803-1858), a German traveler who visited Mexico around 1832. This claim is not based on the difference between the two media, but between them and human vision. The photographic camera is a misleading model for human vision, and vice versa. It is only an illusion generated by our synthesizing brain that human vision captures an entire scene at once the way a photographic camera does. In fact, by adding rapid eye scans that fix on small portions of the visual field at a time the brain constructs a 'scene' that never really 'holds' but is constantly being 'reconstructed' as we shift the locus of our attention. The technique of composing with multiple photographic images that Kellner has been using since 1996 to make us see anew the most iconic architectural structures in the world—from Stonehenge to Teotihuacán—closely parallels that visual process.



Mexico Palacio Nacional

In a sense, film photography, the material means of Kellner's technique, is rapidly becoming as historical as the buildings he photographs. Kellner constructs a scene by a succession of photographic 'shots' that are arranged in a grid of columns and rows. Once developed, the photographic film is contact-printed so that a composite scene comes together from the small rectangular frames. Along the edges of each film strip one can read the information for the brand and kind of film he used, and for the number of each "frame." At least these two elements—contact printing and film information—would vanish if Kellner were to continue the project with digital photography. Its fragmented look could remain the same, but the means of delivery would have to be other than that very intimate way of delivering images by having film 'touch' the photographic paper: contact printing. Thus Kellner's technique, aesthetic, and project have the overtones of a swan song for they come at a point of transition in the medium. Moreover, in the entropic look of his depictions there is something both archaeological and calamitous.



Mexico Catedral

That elusive quality is partially addressed by his choice of "Ozymandias" for the title of one of his earlier books. "Ozymandias" is an alias of Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II and it is generally associated with the vanity of power blind that it is doomed to collapse. The name transfigured into literature in the 1818 poem Ozymandias by the Romantic English poet Percy Bisshe Shelley (1792-1822).¹ To be sure, Kellner's aesthetic is not Romantic, but rather a post-modern tour-de-force that takes on the challenge of re-presenting architectural landmarks that have been copiously photographed by both amateurs and professionals since the invention of photography and continuing that tradition with more recent buildings. By its very technique though, the aesthetic of the project connotes breakdown. Although it is an aesthetic that certainly diverges from the documentary tradition to which it alludes, it does not negate it altogether. So in engaging his work there is still some leeway and indeed, reason, to speak not only about the depiction but also about its referents. Thomas Kellner is not the first or only artist to have used this technique, but he is the only one to have turned it into a personal poetics.



Mexico Munal

Although not quite the same, an important counterpart to his work is the one the English painter David Hockney explored in the 1980s. However, Hockney did not contact print but collaged small prints guided by the alternative sense of space and time with which he wished to nuance actual scenes. He also used Polaroids that he arranged on a grid somewhat altering their vantage point to produce a sort of photographic Cubism. As we will describe later, Kellner does not change vantage point and he is not always concerned with a congruent space or with fitting the visual puzzle so that the pieces fit exactly together. Moreover, Hockney's subject matter (swimming pool, telephone pole, Zen garden, bedroom, etc.) is either commonplace or domestic whereas Kellner is generally iconic.

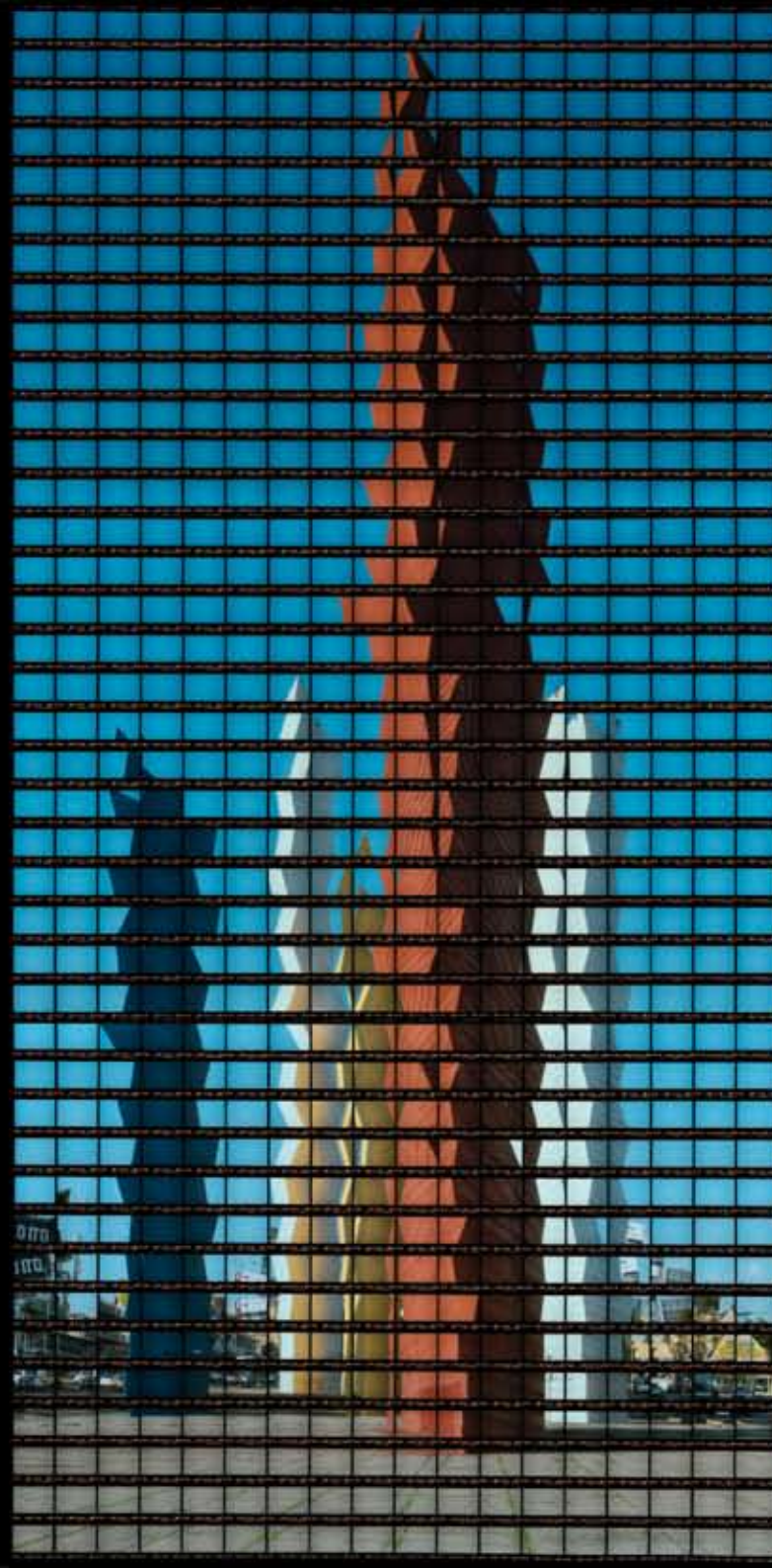
By and large Thomas Kellner's oeuvre has focused on iconic architectural structures. The buildings he depicts are transcendent in a secular sense for they are structures that we regard with awe and/or even yearn to visit in that modern type of pilgrimage we call "tourism." Many of these buildings are great works of art themselves and as such they impart a unique kind of wisdom and knowledge.



Mexico Candela at Bacardi

A case in point is the Eiffel Tower, the most visited architectural structure in the world and one that holds no practical purpose but to have a modern aesthetic experience by placing a secular axis mundi in the middle of Paris from which to admire the city and for people to admire it from the city. ²

Kellner began his photographic voyage in Europe, photographing such landmark buildings as the Brandenburg Gates, the Roman Coliseum, the Parthenon, the Alhambra, et al; and later moved on to Asia and America. In the United States he photographed the Brooklyn Bridge, the Flat Iron Building, the Lincoln Memorial, and the White House. These are buildings packed with history. For each of the frames that compose Kellner's renditions of them, one could provide at least one fact that would enrich their significance and by implication, ours, as human beings and image makers and/or consumers. It is no coincidence that Kellner's works should look like assembled puzzles because they engage the thoughtful viewer into unraveling—both visually and intellectually—the meaning of these architectural structures.



Mexico Los Satelites

We decode the scenes from the fragments he puts together, from the automatic expectations submitted by our brain, and from the more or less vague memories we have of the structures.

In 200X Thomas Kellner went to Mexico City and photographed many architectural structures whose history extends from Pre-Columbian to contemporary times. He also photographed the Popocatépetl (Nahuatl for "smoking mountain") volcano whose geological age is logarithmically longer. Although Kellner seldom photographs landscape per se, he did photograph that mountain in the vicinity of Mexico City under whose unpredictability the largest city in the world has endured from about 1325 AD to the present. This uncharacteristic gesture reaffirmed Kellner's links to Alexander Von Humboldt (1769-1859) and Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802-1858), two German explorers who also depicted Popocatépetl albeit for mostly for geological reasons. All the other structures in Kellner's explorations in Mexico City have at one point or another felt the seismic effects of Popocatépetl.



Mexico Basilica

Some have even been built with the volcanic rock produced by it, Iztaccíhuatl, or other volcanoes in the region. Kellner's two views of Popocatepetl are similar except that in the one in the 14x18 grid smoke, fog and clouds conceal the top of the mountain, whereas in the one in the 20x36 grid, the haze has cleared and the summit is visible. Time has passed between the two depictions, the air has warmed, the clouds have risen, and the apu of Popocatepetl has granted the artist a view of its zenith.³ Given a cataclysmic reading of Kellner's works, one cannot but regard his depictions of Popocatepetl not only exceptional but central in his Mexican oeuvre.

If one were to put Kellner's Mexican works in the chronological order in which the buildings were built, his rendition of the Pyramid of the Sun at the ancient city of Teotihuacán would come first. He laboriously constructed three depictions of the pyramid. Although Kellner's technique seems simple, carrying it out is painstakingly complicated and requires a great deal of calculus and pre-visualization. His first pyramid, on a 20x26 grid, is a frontal view of the face facing the so called "Avenue of the Dead."



Mexico Basilica

The other two are sideways views along the diagonal of its square base --taken from approximately the same vantage point. They differ in the size of the grid: one is only 8x9 and the other 24x26. These facts imply that Kellner changed the magnification of his lens in order to execute them. If the viewer focuses on the frame that shows the vertex of the pyramid with the climbers who have reached it, he/she can easily realize the difference in the relative size of the people. The referent of the two depictions is the same (i.e. the Pyramid of the Sun) but the two works are semantically different. The larger and more intricate grid is congruent with the labor-intensive construction of the pyramid itself and the complexity of its history and cultural significance. The depiction of the pyramid in the smaller and simpler grid emphasizes a modern perception of the structure as the very basic polyhedron that —for example— architect I.M. Pei recognized in designing his controversial addition to the Louvre Museum, Paris. In pre-Columbian times, the ascent to the top of the pyramid was probably restricted to rulers, priests, and sacrificial victims; today it is accessible to anyone with a valid ticket.



Mexico Bellas Artes

It is important to note that Kellner's depictions do not exclude the presence of tourists on the pyramid. The implication is that his re-presentations of the pyramid include its current interaction with its visitors. 4 The square pyramid is believed by those mystically inclined to possess supernatural powers. Whether their belief is true or not, it certainly has the power of luring people to its vertex, for no visit to Teotihuacán would be complete without reaching it. Perhaps it is the occurrence of pyramids in many important ancient civilizations that makes their appeal so widespread. It is even part of the "Great Seal of the United States" that appears on the one-dollar bill showing a truncated pyramid with the single eye of "Providence" hovering over it. More often than not, climbers who make it to the top of the Pyramid of the Sun –as in Kellner's depictions– will witness some kind of esoteric ritual being performed there. Those who do not make it, can buy miniature marble pyramids from the knickknack vendors at the Avenue of the Dead. A more practical result of reaching the summit is to be able to spot the Wal-Mart store that opened in 2005 in the vicinity of the ancient "birthplace of the Gods" in spite of widespread protests.



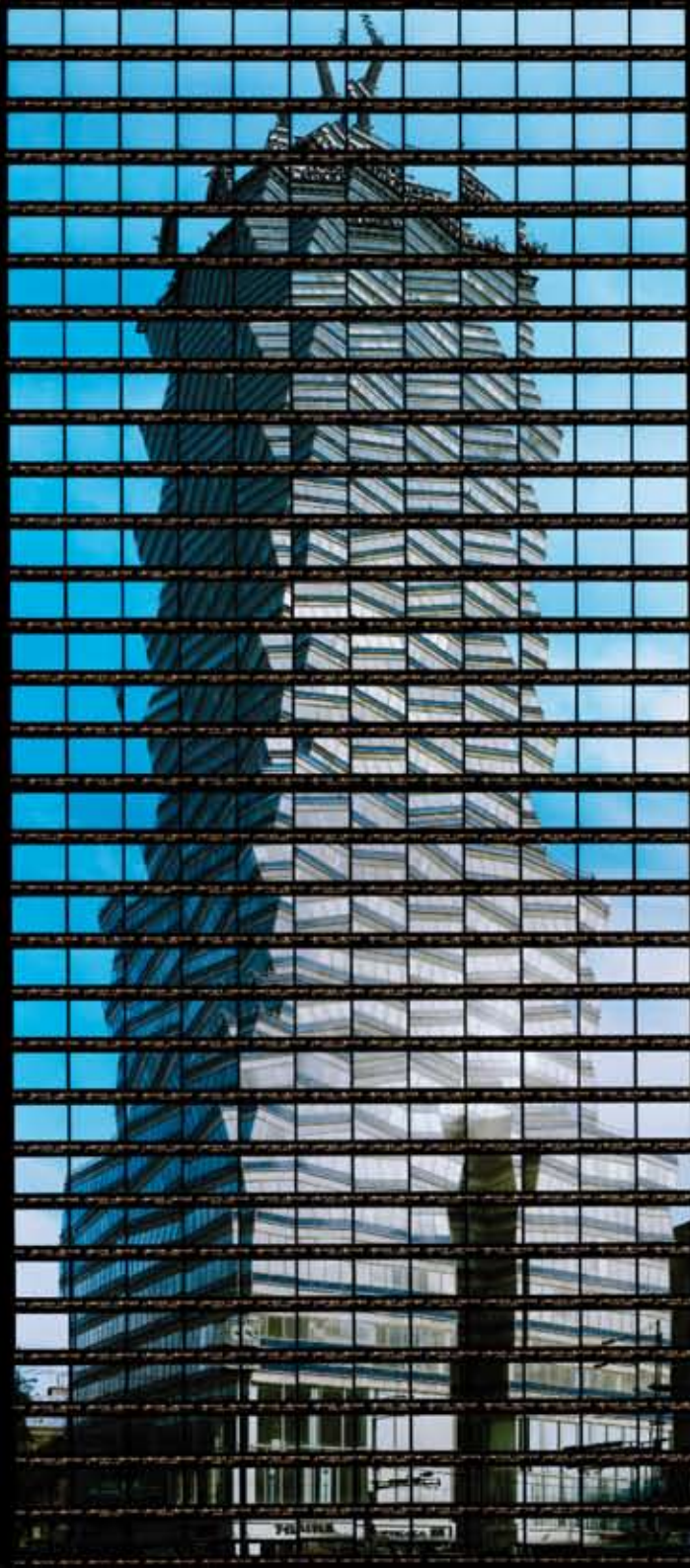
Mexico Angel del Independencia

Kellner photographed two buildings that are emblematic of Mexico's relationship with Christianity. One is La Catedral de México and the second one is the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Both of them are at the core of current Mexican culture. The cathedral was built at the place and from the materials of an ancient indigenous temple of either the god Xipe Totec (Nahuatl for "Our Lord the flayed one") or Quetzalcóatl (Nahuatl, for quetzal (feather) and coatl (snake)). Xipe Totec's similarities with Jesus Christ are uncanny. He is the god of rebirth and flayed himself to give his skin to feed humanity. As reenactment of that deed, every year slaves were meticulously flayed to produce skins that were worn by priests in fertility rituals. Quetzalcóatl, on the other hand, represents masculinity, a twin, or a navel. So the place where Mexico's cathedral was built is an omphalos, a point of connection of the world with its origins. La Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe has a mythology whose origin is in Tepeyac, a sacred hill dedicated since pre-Columbian times to the adoration of the goddess Tonantzin.



Mexico Biblioteka

In Christian mythology the hill became the site where the dark-skinned Virgin Mary (La Morenita de Tepeyac) allegedly appeared to the humble indigenous peasant Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin. The Huei tlamahuiçoltica („The Great Event“) narrative describes how in 1531 the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego at Tepeyac and spoke to him in Nahuatl. When Juan Diego reported the apparition to the incredulous Spanish bishop, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, the latter asked for proof of the miraculous apparition. The Virgin then asked Juan Diego to gather flowers at the top of the hill even though it was winter. When Juan Diego went there, he found Castilian roses, and gathered them. The Virgin herself arranged them on his tilma (cloak). When Diego presented them to Bishop Zumárraga, the latter was unimpressed, but as the roses dropped, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe miraculously appeared imprinted on the tilma. Tepeyac has since been a place of religious pilgrimage and that image of the Virgin Mary has become the most widely reproduced image in Mexico.



Mexico Torre Latina

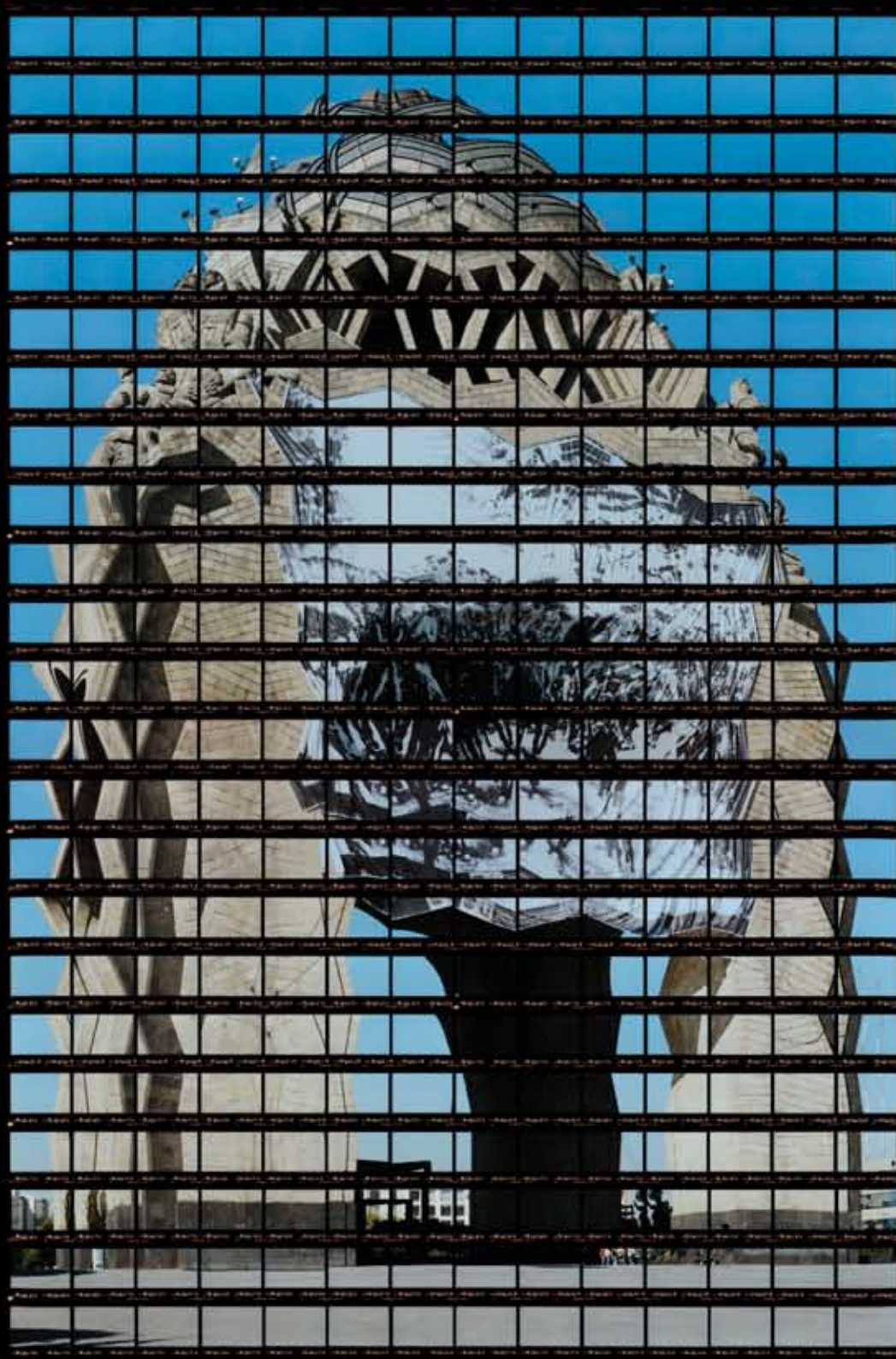
The state-of-the-art basilica whose interior and exterior architecture Kellner deemed worthy of photographing was designed by the Mexican architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez in order to celebrate that prodigious apparition. Completed in 1976, it is the second most visited Catholic shrine in the world. Even though already in 1611 the Dominican Martín de León, 4th viceroy of Mexico, denounced the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a disguised worship of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin, Mexican Nobel-prize winning writer Octavio Paz once stated that, "the Mexican people, after more than two centuries of experiments, have faith only in the Virgin of Guadalupe and the National Lottery."

There is another important fact about Kellner's works that is very well exemplified in his Mexican series. As he constructs a scene frame by frame, it is not always his aim to keep a continuity of lines and forms. Cases in point are his renditions of the Palacio Nacional, which houses the Mexican executive power, and the Palacio de Bellas Artes, a center for the performing arts (theatre, opera, music and dance).



Mexico Tequila

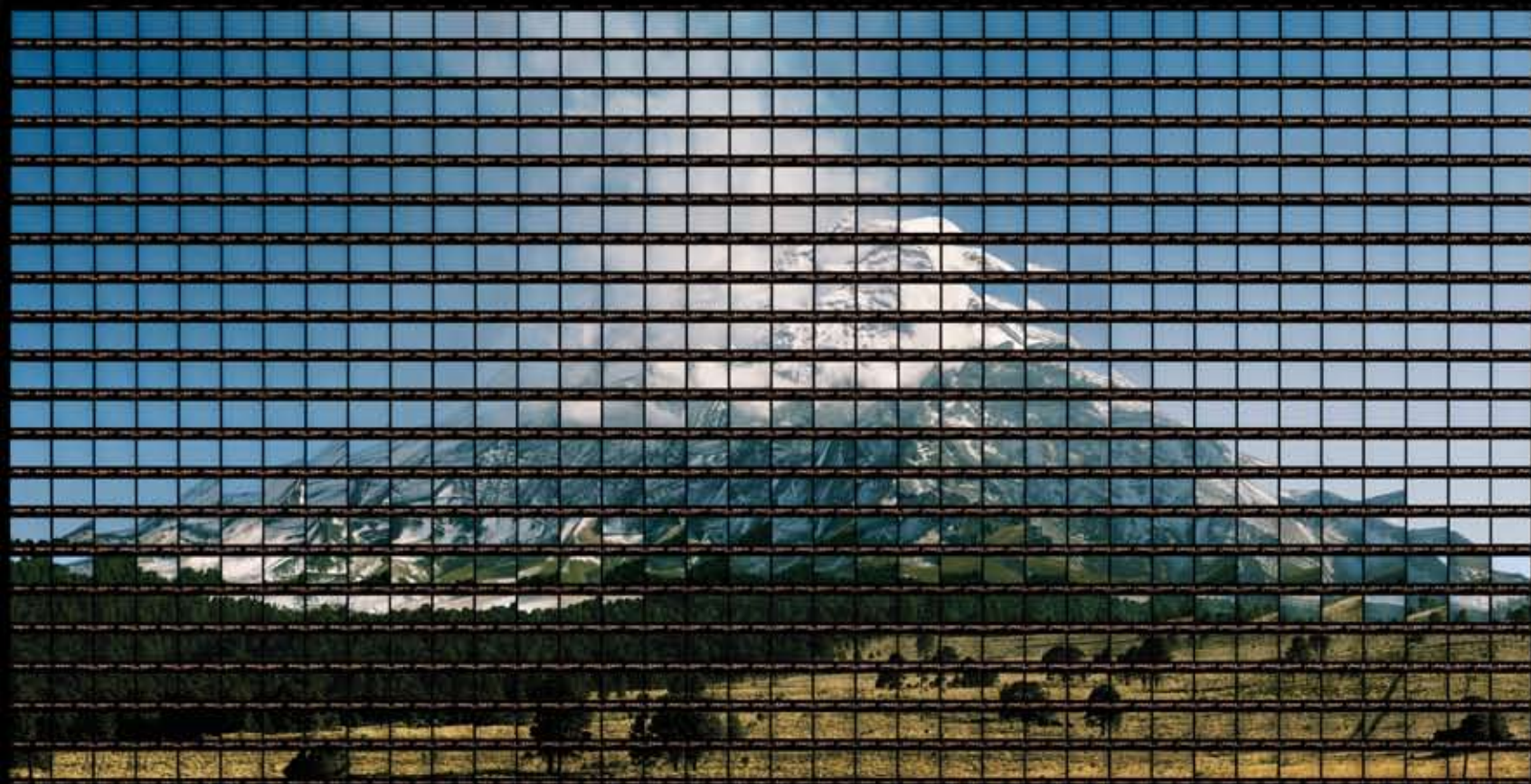
The latter building was commissioned by president Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915) towards the latter part of his thirty-year rule to the Italian architect Adamo Boari (1863-1928). Its construction was started in 1904 during the Porfiriato, was interrupted by the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, and was finally completed in 1934 under the aegis of Mexican architect Federico Mariscal. In both buildings Kellner has kept the horizontal and vertical lines at their ground floor horizontal and vertical, whereas in the upper levels he has photographed in such a way that the horizontal lines undulate and the verticals tilt. This intentional misalignment is a strategy that he has employed in many other works—hence a recent Kellner book was titled *Dancing Walls*, a metaphor that in the case of the Palacio de Bellas Artes brings out the fact of the building's functions. The wavy lines also put a cheerful spin on the otherwise ominous seismic and unstable reality of the terrain where Bellas Artes is located. When applied to the Palacio Nacional, however, the reading is of an uncertain political atmosphere.



Mexico Monumente
de Revolucion

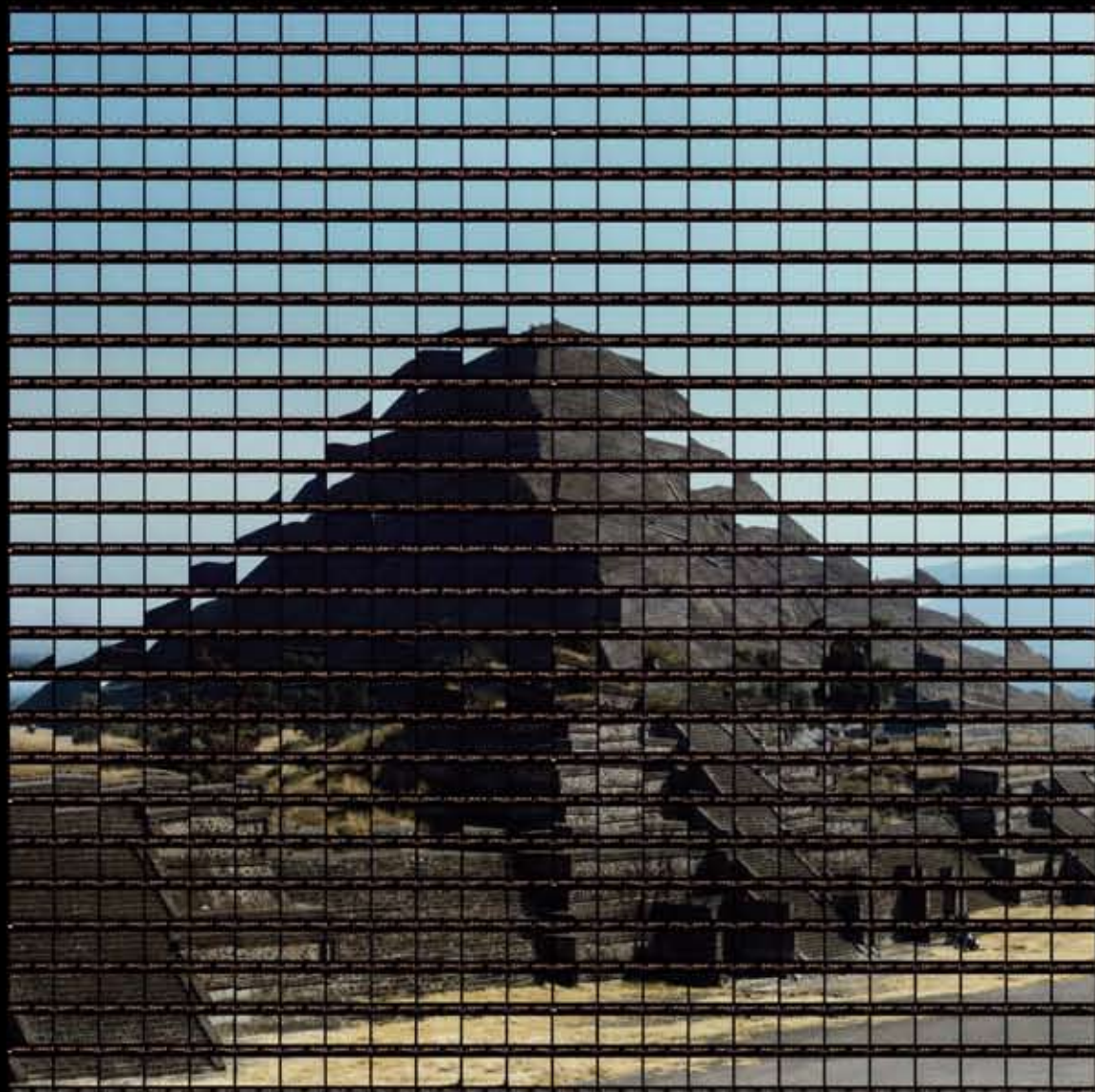
Indeed, the massive Palacio de Bellas Artes is slowly sinking into the unstable swampy soil of Mexico City and the executive power's legitimacy is arguably soiled.

Adamo Boari was responsible for yet another palace photographed by Kellner: el Palacio de Correos de México. Designed in the style of a Renaissance palace, the building is better fit for the royalty that independent Mexico has twice rehearsed than for plebeian mail clerks and stamped envelopes. Kellner photographed the gilded interiors of this magnificent post office whose lavishness easily matches that of the Castillo de Chapultepec (Nahuatl for "grasshopper's hill"). In this castle, Kellner photographed Empress Carlota's bedroom. First built in 1785 by Spanish Viceroy Bernardo de Gálvez, the building was remodeled and in 1864 it became the home of Mexico's royal couple: His Imperial and Royal Highness Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph, Prince Imperial and Archduke of Austria, Prince Royal of Hungary and Bohemia, alias Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico (1832-1867), and Princess Marie Charlotte Amélie Augustine Victoire Clémentine Léopoldine of Belgium, better known in America as Empress Carlota of Mexico (1840-1927).



Mexico Popocatepetl

In contemporary republican times, the omphalos of Mexico City has not been a sacred but a profane spot on the Paseo de la Reforma (formerly, "Paseo de la Emperatriz, after Carlota"); namely, the monument whose official name is Columna de la Independencia. It is usually miscalled El Angel de la Independencia on account of the 6.7 meter-tall statue of Winged Victory by Italian sculptor Enrico Alciati that crowns it. This seven-ton female bronze statue covered in gold holds a laurel crown on her right hand (symbolic of victory) and a broken chain on her left (symbolic of liberation). During the 1957 earthquake the statue fell off the column and broke in several pieces. After a year's work, Mexican sculptor José Fernández Urbina restored it. The rehabilitated "Angel" has since become the rallying point of political marches and celebrations of football victories. Kellner's ladder-like depiction of the column disconnects it from the tradition that assimilates such columns to the religious notion of axis mundi, and places it in the secular world where human events occur in a timely fashion—one step at a time.



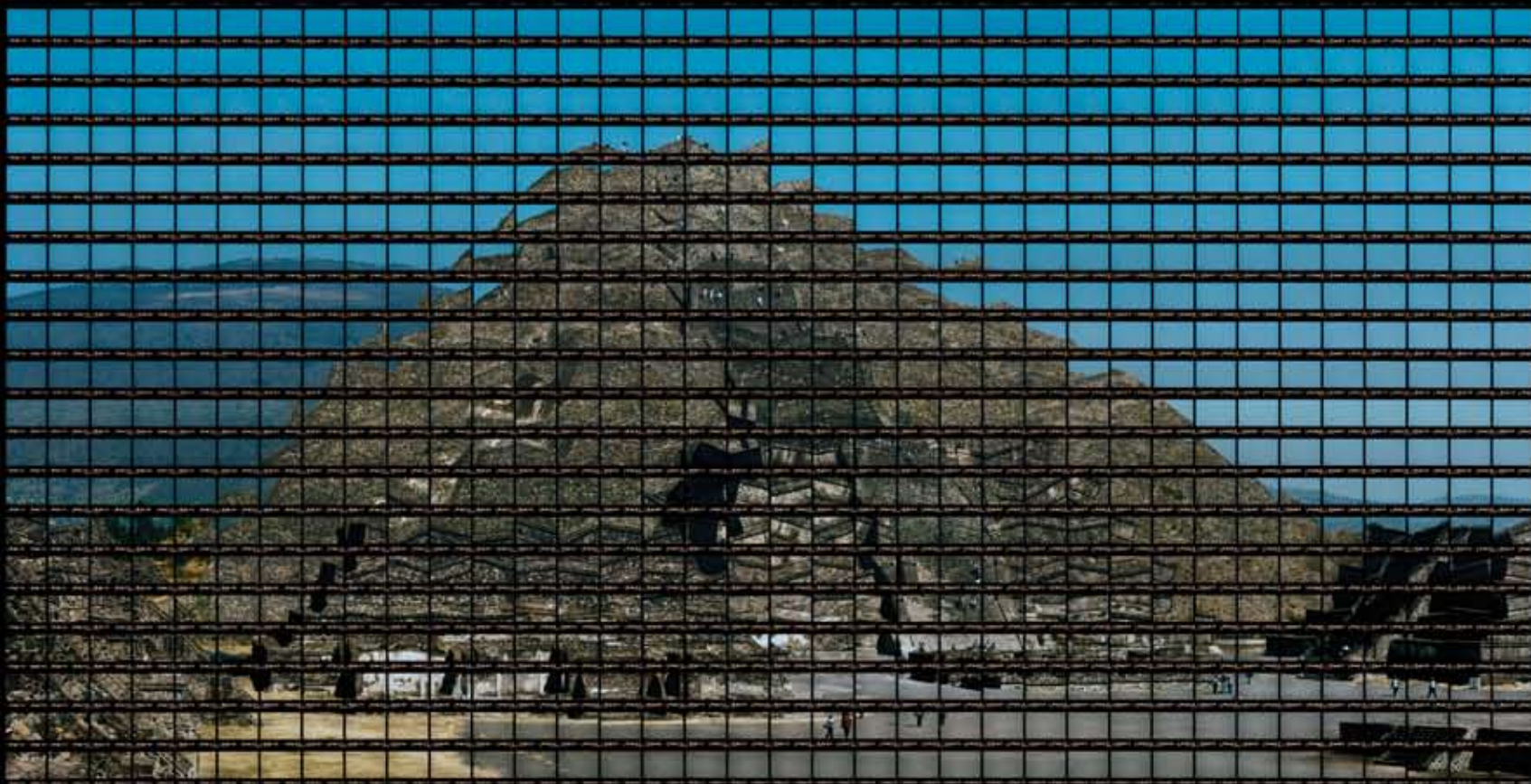
Mexico Teotihuacan El Sol

Of the many ancient and modern architectural landmarks in Mexico City, it is the campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) that stands for true intellectual freedom. The epithet “autonomous” in its name attests to that fact. Built on a lava layer six to eight meters thick deposited by the Xitle volcano two thousand years ago, the campus of this university was designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage site in 2005. Better known in Mexico simply as “C.U.” (Ciudad Universitaria), its grounds are a popular weekend destination for families that wish to visit its notable buildings, sculpture gardens, and extensive lawns. Kellner focused his artistic efforts on the UNAM’s Biblioteca Central, a chocolate-colored cubic building that geometrically echoes the Kaaba in the Great Mosque of Mecca —except the viewer need not pray when facing it. The four outer walls of the Biblioteca Central display a mural by Juan O’Gorman bearing Aztec and Spanish motifs together with the coat-of-arms of the university. Once again, Kellner has two renditions of the building; one on a 5x7 grid and the other on an 18x20 grid.



In Kellner's Biblioteca it is not only the architectural structure that "dances," but the details of the mural itself —giving it the appearance of a layered cake.

It is appropriate that Kellner should have photographed El Monumento a la Revolución when a huge photographic banner of the revolutionary cavalry headed by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata was hanging from it. This unusual art deco three-legged building located at the Plaza de la República was commissioned by Porfirio Díaz to the French architect Émile Benard with the notion that it would serve as the legislative palace. It was started in 1910, the year the revolution flared up and for this reason it stood uncompleted for over twenty years even running the risk at some point of being dismantled. Once again the vanity of King Ozymandias comes to mind and once more a Mexican architect came to the rescue of the project of a European architect. Indeed, during revolutionary times Carlos Obregón Santacilla proposed that the building should honor the Mexican Revolution. Thus the building was completed between the years 1933 to 1938.



Mexico Theotihuacan La Luna

Currently it is a Museo de la Revolución and also a mausoleum that hosts the tombs of Mexican revolutionaries whose legendary names now designate parks and streets: Francisco Madero, Venustiano Carranza, Francisco "Pancho" Villa, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Lázaro Cardenas. Some of these men ride on horseback in the banner that Kellner photographed. Curiously, today on the monument and in the surrounding plaza several cultural events take place; among which is Tecnogeist, an important international festival of electronic music and multimedia.

When the Torre de Latinoamérica was completed in 1956, it was the tallest building in México and the 45th in the world. Many experts considered it sheer folly to erect a skyscraper on such unstable soil and seismic region. But its designers, Leonardo and Adolfo Zeevaert, used a steel frame and deeply seated pylons that would be able to withstand the weakness of the soil and the strength of earthly tremors. The building was only one year old in 1957 when it was tested by a major earthquake. It withstood the onslaught unscathed.



Mexico Chapultepec
Recamarade Carlota

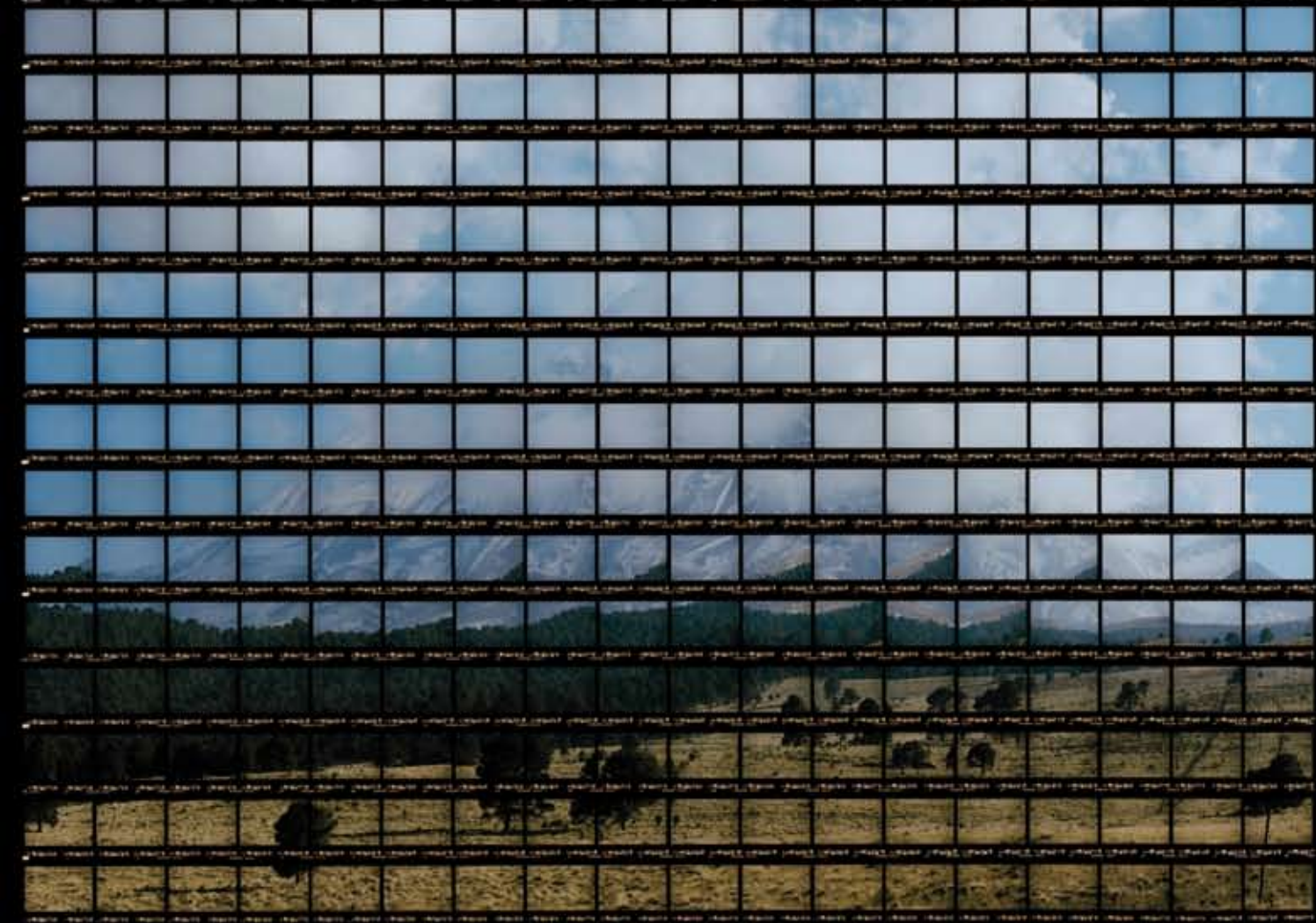
This engineering prowess gained it an Award of Merit from the American Institute of Steel Construction for being "the tallest building ever exposed to a huge seismic force." An even greater earthquake challenged the Torre de Latinoamérica in 1985. Adolfo Zeevaert was in his 25th floor office at the moment of the earthquake and was able to feel the movement inside the building and witness through his window the destruction of many buildings in the city. Documentary photographs show that at the moment of their collapse many buildings did look like some of Kellner's dancing buildings. Although the 1985 earthquake destroyed some 400 buildings and damaged 3,000, the curse of Ozymandias was not to befall the Torre de Latinoamérica, which was not damaged at all. The planning for the five Torres de Satélite began around the same time that the Torre de Latinoamérica was completed. The towers were originally to be seven and much higher than the ones that were actually built. The tallest was supposed to be 200 meters high and due to budget constraints ended up being only 52 meters high. They were a public art project that crowned the expansion of the city towards the suburbs.



Mexico Corros

"Satélite" was one of the many middle class neighborhoods that —like satellites—were part of that urban sprawl. Although the Mexican sculptor Mathias Goeritz is officially credited with the authorship of the towers it is variously adjudicated extra-officially as well to the world-renowned Mexican architect Luis Barragán and painter Jesús "Chucho" Reyes Ferreira. At first, Goeritz wanted them to be painted only in shades of orange, but later gave in to the pressure from developers to use different colors. He chose the subtractive primary colors blue, red, yellow and white. Kellner's very vertical depiction of these towers is the most contiguous of all his Mexican works.

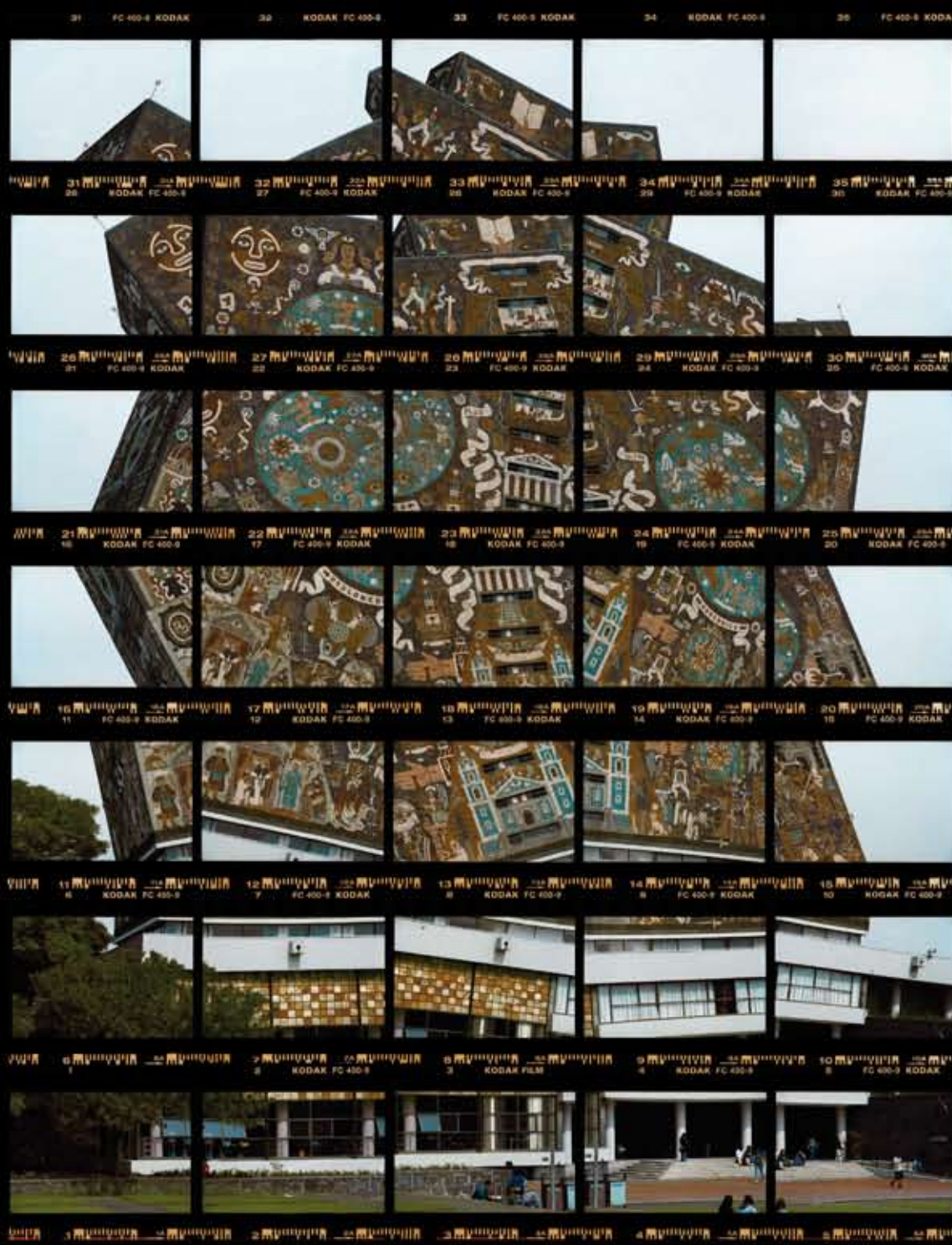
Rayuela (1963) is an unusual narrative by Argentine writer Julio Cortázar that may or may not be a novel. Chapter 68 of Rayuela is an erotic description where many —but not all— the verbs, adjectives, and nouns are words Cortázar himself diligently invented. However, their meaninglessness does not prevent the reader from understanding exactly what is going on. This play with language has come to be known as "gíglico."



Mexico Popocatepetl

Kellner's technique is similar to Cortázar's *giglico* in that many –but not all– of the pieces in his composites are semantically opaque. Nevertheless, the viewer makes sense of the whole scene by assembling the pieces not only following their spatial logic but also from his/her memories and/or expectations. Along his journeys in Mexico City Thomas Kellner has found thousands of meaningful and opaque fragments from a metropolis so vast that even many of its most curious citizens fail to know it completely.

Among these fragments are those from the UNAM's Biblioteca Central. Its skin, which is Juan O'Gorman's mural, is representative of the biculturalism of many countries in America with a strong indigenous and European culture. In ancient Pre-Columbian cities like Mexico City the skin one sees hides the flesh underneath. Although in a more theoretical context, Juan José Díaz Infante Núñez, a notable Mexican architect once said, "One should not speak of architecture but of the skins of space." In countries like Mexico and Peru the prevailing conflict between the two cultures has been ameliorated by a nationalistic ideology that promotes their symbols, but often not its peoples.



Peeling the skins of a city like Mexico –as we have done in this essay–always gets to foundational narratives that remain intact whether they are geological, indigenous or European. Kellner's contact printing and fragmented depictions are metaphors that incite that process of peeling.

Fernando Castro R.
Houston, Texas

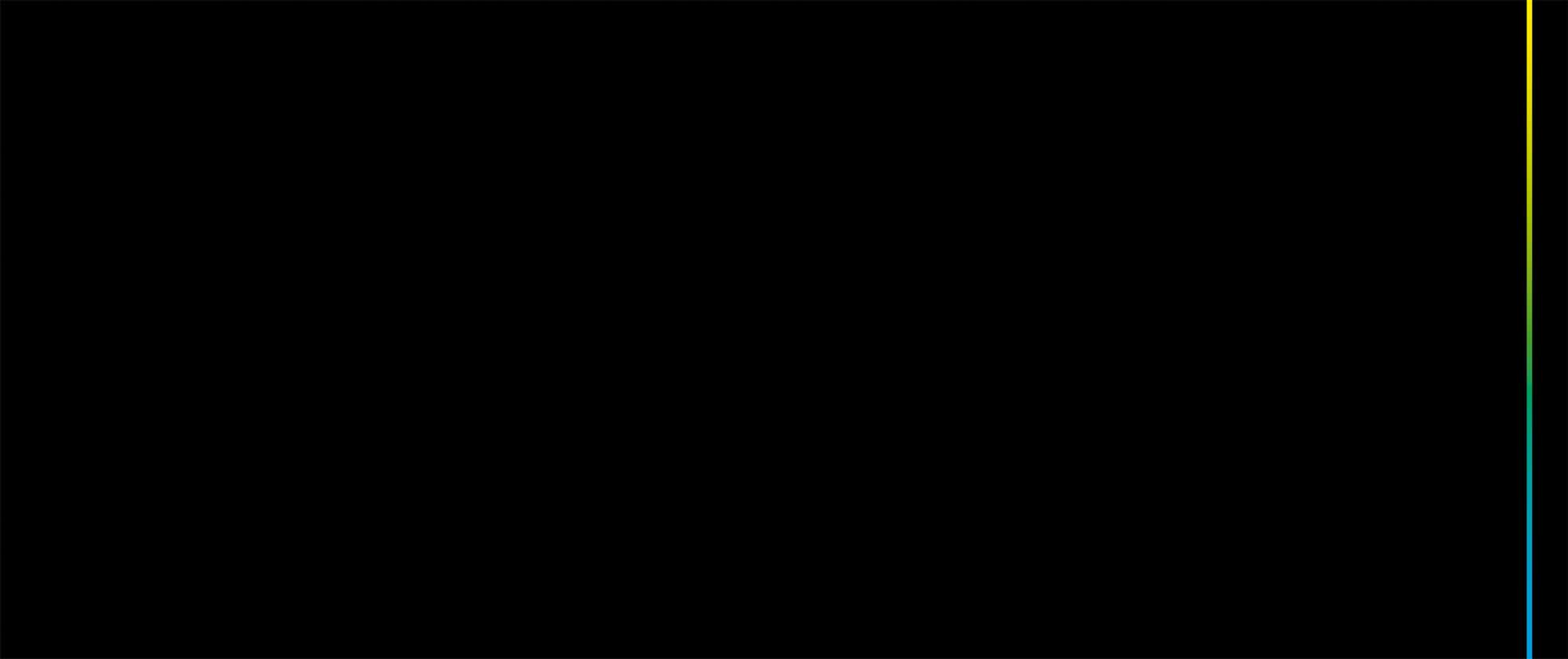
Mexico Bibliotheka

Fernando Castro R.

Fernando Castro R. is a critic, curator and artist. He began his career as a critic in 1988 writing for El Comercio (Lima); since then he has contributed to Photometro (San Francisco), Art-Nexus (Miami), Zonezero.com (Mexico), Spot (Houston), Aperture (New York), and other publications. He is a contributing editor of Aperture magazine. His curatorial work includes „Modernity in the Southern Andes: Peruvian Photography 1900-1930." Since 1996 he has been curator of photography at Sicardi Gallery (Houston) where he has curated „Traces on the Glass: The Photographic Work of Geraldo de Barros 1948-1951 (1998), „The Culture of Books and Light: The Photography of Abelardo Morell" (2001), etc. He was also co-curator of „The Art of Risk / The Risk of Art" (1999) and curator "Stone" (Centro de la Imagen, 2004). His most recent curatorial endeavor was "The States of Pedro Meyer" (2008). Since 1997 his own photographic work has taken a political turn under the title „Reasons of State." His work was included by Spanish critic Paco Barragán in the book The Art to Come (2003). His solo exhibit "The Ideology of Color" (2004) is an on-line exhibition at the Lehigh University website. His works are in the permanent collections of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, The Dancing Bear Collection (New York), Lehigh University (Pennsylvania), Museo de Arte (Lima), the Harry Ransom Collection, etc. He currently lives in Houston and is a member of the art board of FotoFest and of the advisory board of the Houston Center for Photography.

Thomas Kellner

1966 Born in Bonn, Germany
1986 Baccalaureate Degree
Wirteltor Secondary School, Düren
1989 - 1996 Masters Degree in sociology; politics; economics; art and art history for secondary schools University of Siegen
1996 Kodak Award for Young Professionals
2003 - 2004 Visiting professor of fine art photography Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen
2004 Elected member DGPh German Photographic Association, Cologne
2007 - 2008 Taught studio classes Paderborn University
2009 Award of Excellence, Pingyao International Photography Festival Pingyao, China
District of Düren's Fourth Art Award Düren on the Rur
Lives and works in Siegen



Thomas Kellner

