



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

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Hemispheric Conversations

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Industrial and Post-Industrial through Site-Specific
Graffiti Practice at the Carrie Furnaces

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About the Author

Caitlin Frances Bruce's research is in the area of visual studies, affect studies, and critical theory. She is currently investigating the relationships between public art in urban spaces in transition within a transnational milieu. Largely focusing on graffiti and muralism, Bruce argues that such public art creates spaces for encounter between different publics, and between publics and central, peripheral, or marginal spaces. Her research takes her to Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, Paris, Perpignan, León Guanajuato, and Mexico City. She is currently working on a manuscript on transnational public art.

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In this article, I briefly discuss a project I co-organized this year in collaboration with Oreen Cohen, Shane Pilster, Rivers of Steel, the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts, and the American Studies Association. For “Hemispheric Conversations: Urban Art Project” (HCUAP), we facilitated a collaboration among artists in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and León Guanajuato, Mexico, as a platform for conversation about how to reimagine our shared urban spaces. In a political moment that might be a cause for despair, collaborative art

practice in urban spaces can serve as one way of reigniting a shared sense of possibility and energy.¹ My central argument is that public art highlights the relationship between the fundamental fluidity and permeability of spaces and cultures and the possibility of creating spatial practices for encounters that allow us to imagine the city and our relation to it, and each other, anew.

The Carrie Furnaces are a site of industrial patrimony. By industrial patrimony, I refer to the national historic landmark designation that protects abandoned industrial infrastructure in the name of maintaining and celebrating the region’s industrial history and identity. The Furnaces are located in the borough of Rankin, a short drive from Pittsburgh. Rising against an often slate grey sky abutting the Monongahela River, just a turn off the highway, they offer a surprising landscape of ruin and might that contrast sharply with the smooth lines of the highway and the sheen of the big box stores at the nearby Waterfront Mall. The towering smoke stacks and the elongated funnel of the furnace creates an almost post-apocalyptic vision against vibrant green growth and blue or grey sky. In many ways, the furnaces are a synecdoche for Pittsburgh. The site’s status as a ruin is part of the attraction it holds to tourists and commercial users who situate it as a romantic backdrop for music festivals, advertisements, and photo shoots. For those who come from multiple generations of steel workers who suffered extreme job loss, it is not a romantic ruin—it is a complex site of pride but also of loss and mourning (for lost jobs, for injuries sustained on the job, etc.).

Changing from a major center for metal casting in the 1940s and 1950s to a closed site for scrap metal collection in the 1980s, the dormant site became an unofficial center for urban explorers, guerilla artists, and graffiti writers. Now, it is a national heritage site that combines industrial history with postindustrial culture to create an evolving relationship to the past and present.² In this way, the Furnaces can be perceived as a site where the fluidity and permeability of spaces and cultures to transformation is on display.

Modern graffiti culture also emerged during this postindustrial moment—in the 1960s in Philadelphia and in the 1970s in New York City.³ In New York, urban denizens witnessed the decimation of places like the Bronx. In response, youth took up spray cans to use the city as a canvas making the simple but powerful claim: “I am here.” “They make something out of

¹ On the potential of public art, see W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Violence of Public Art: ‘Do the Right Thing,’” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990): 880–99; Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of The Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997); Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

² “Rivers of Steel,” Rivers of Steel website, accessed July 1, 2018, <https://www.riversofsteel.com/>.

³ Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

nothing,” Stef Skills from Chicago explained to youth, during one of her workshops at Brashear High School.

Carrie Furnaces: How an Industrial Site Becomes a Graffiti History Display

When the Carrie Furnaces were abandoned in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they were an informal gathering place for guerilla artists, urban explorers, and graffiti artists. Because they are not within walking distance or on a bus line from Pittsburgh, the works created by the artists from the 1990s to the early 2000s were largely left untouched—which is often impossible in more traditional graffiti ecologies where permanence is not an expectation and city-run graffiti squads routinely erase graffiti works. As a result, the Furnaces have also organically become a regional graffiti museum showcasing evolutions in the style over the last three decades.

In 1988, Rivers of Steel (ROS) took over as caretakers and managers for the site, seeking to transform it from an urban ruin to one node in a larger network of industrial patrimony. Adopting a fairly open perspective toward the present and the future, the goal of ROS has not been to “freeze” the furnaces but make it a safe and significant part of an evolving process of Pittsburgh’s identity. As a result, they not only offer tours about the process of producing steel, but also serve the site for music festivals, weddings, photo shoots, and a sculpture biennial. It was also the temporary home for the Mobile Sculpture Workshop in 2017.

In the late 2010s, under the leadership of Shane Pilster, the Rivers of Steel Art program (directed by Chris McGinnis) began to offer urban art tours and workshops. Pilster, a graffiti artist from Los Angeles who relocated to Pittsburgh eight years ago, is able to tell a nuanced story about the personalities and myths behind the markings on various parts of the Furnace walls. He also offers workshop participants the opportunity to make their own works of art, familiarizing them with graffiti technique and practice and, in this way, challenging common preconceptions.

As mentioned above, the site is a place for intense public feelings, memory, and identity. For many of the steel workers and their families who left Pittsburgh with the collapse of the industry—or those who remained—the structure is part of their collective DNA and, as a result, is simultaneously a source of intense pain and pride. Due to this history, the site has different and sometimes competing meanings for its users. Only over time and through ongoing conversation have the docents and stewards of the site come to understand and accept some of the graffiti, and the writers gone through permission processes with Pilster to paint new works.

HCUAP Objectives: Conversations

As noted above, the goal of HCUAP was to foreground graffiti as a crucial means of civic communication, a form of cultural expression that has social, political, and cultural value. During Fall 2016, HCUAP focused on creating public events to showcase the history of the form, thinking about how to integrate graffiti into diverse curricula, and how to rethink or imagine new laws and practices around graffiti through a public debate. Through these public conversations with artists, community leaders, and scholars, we sought to spotlight the pedagogical possibilities for graffiti with a curriculum-brainstorming session led by education graduate students Paulette Vincent Ruz and Øscar Medina. This conversation highlighted histories of youth-driven social movements; aesthetic innovation; mathematic work with scale and design; and a way to create a playful context to reimagine urban spaces.

HCUAP Objectives: Youth Street Art Workshops (YouSAW)

A number of individuals and organizations are using graffiti skill workshops as a form of youth empowerment. Lavie Raven in Chicago, director of the University of Hip Hop, has directed youth graffiti workshops and murals over several years. Miguel Aguilar at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Peyton Scott Russel’s Sprayfingering curriculum series in the Twin

Cities, Words Beats Life in DC, and University of Hip Hop in Chicago are other prominent examples.

In Pittsburgh, where there is only one legal wall (in Homewood) and intense demonization of graffiti, we wanted to offer a more contextual narrative about the history of graffiti and its (legal) potential. In spring 2017, we invited local artists (Jessica DuVall, Jerome Charles, Nick Sardo, and Danny Devine) to conduct a set of free graffiti workshops at festivals (the Center for Latin American Studies Festival on Pitt's campus), afterschool arts programs (Assemble in Garfield), libraries (Hazelwood Public Library), and in classrooms (Manchester Middle School and Environmental Charter School). Four visiting artists, one from Chicago (Stephanie Garland aka Stef Skills), and three from León Guanajuato (Wes, Orion, and Kif) also gave workshops at Brashear High School in a Spanish classroom. These workshops varied to some extent depending on the skills and backgrounds of particular teaching artists. In general, they introduced students (between seven and seventeen) to some of the history of graffiti and its social function and international scope, and to offer them the opportunity to use "graffiti style" practices including stencil work, sprayed paint, name writing, and imagining possible interventions using transparencies with works drawn onto them and then held up against different urban landscapes. The goals were to offer different ways of reimagining urban space; celebrating their names and identities; and experimenting with new artistic forms (stencils, transparencies, lettering forms). For all but the CLAS workshops, we offered students small canvases to work on so they could take their piece home. For one of the two artists who had been prosecuted and fined for doing illegal graffiti, giving the workshops served as community service hours that could be deducted from their sentence. One, Jerome Charles, used his experience as a message to explain to youth the risks of "doing bad stuff." His short lecture was simply called "Don't Do Bad Stuff," and he even made little stickers and buttons for the students to take home with the "Don't" sign. The outcomes were largely experiential: pleasure in producing collaborative or individual works of art; playing with colors; developing nicknames that they felt were representative of themselves.

HCUAP Objectives: Collaborative Murals

Our other goal included creating a collaborative mural at the Furnaces in which the local artists and visiting artists, using archival material, would envision a project with a site-specific twist. To do so, Kif and I consulted the archives looking for old photos of the current site and images of women workers, as Kif and Stef Skills wanted to introduce themes of feminism and international exchange. In our first planning session, a the visiting artist, Danny Devine, went to Cohen's studio, and we went through different photos while Cohen shared her knowledge of the Furnaces' history (she worked on a Camera Obscura project in 2016). Looking at a number of photos of the Furnaces' prior landscape, almost a forest of metal and stone, and its current site, where deer and ducklings happily walk around a lush green set of fields, the artists observed how nature "comes back." Stephanie reflected on how even extreme changes to landscape can be slowly repaired by the march of nature. She connected this idea to larger indigenous movements to protect water and land (she had been part of protests at Standing Rock and camped in solidarity with the water protectors, integrating themes from her Standing Rock experience into a number of her previous pieces). Wes and Orion were more interested in the scale of the site, and the strength of the workers. Danny, a more old-school style writer, was interested in the history of the trains passing by the site—as trains are a crucial surface for graffiti practice. Stephanie suggested that we use the design of a series of train cars, and each artist would have his or her own "car," but that there could still be some shared concepts.

After our initial planning meeting, we went on a tour with one of the Rivers of Steel docents, Adam Taylor, who comes from multiple generations of steel workers, and walked us through the site explained the casting process, pointing out some elements of international exchange that were part of the labor history of the site. He noted that in the early nineteenth century, a number of Mexican workers actually helped construct the furnaces, living in dormitories in Homestead. He also spoke to the racial politics of labor, how higher-paying skilled jobs generally went to races and ethnicities seen as more powerful, and how women

also worked on the site but also experienced limits in terms of the range of jobs they could perform. The artists took videos and photos throughout the tour, explaining to the camera that they wished to “pay respect to the history.”



Figure 1

Caitlin Frances Bruce, *Mural in Progress, 1*, Aerosol paint on wall, 2017, Rankin, Pennsylvania. Copyright: Caitlin Frances Bruce.

The painting process took about two days. Pilster and the Rivers of Steel volunteers had already primed the wall and hacked away the significant growth covering it, preparing it for the artists to paint. The artists who painted the final mural at the Furnaces were Stef Skills (Chicago), Kif (León), Orion (León), Wes (León), Devine (Pittsburgh), DuVall (Pittsburgh), Pilster (Pittsburgh), and Charles (Pittsburgh).

Orion chose to paint a portrait of a steel worker, and Wes painted a landscape including the Furnaces and a deer looking out at the viewer, its antlers ending at the top of the wall. Wes placed two bricks about ten feet from the painting and told me to stand on the bricks: from that perspective the branches of a tree behind the wall completed the antlers. Kif and Stef did two freight train pieces with the theme of plants emerging from the cars, enlisting the idea of “nature coming back.” Stef did a piece with her name made up of the smokestacks of the Furnaces, but rusted and increasingly covered with vines. She also did a large character of a fictional Haudenosaunee woman, including a purple wampum belt. Pilster, Devine, and DuVall did burners (multicolored letter-based, graffiti-based pieces with a complementing character). Charles painted a comic-style replica of the Furnaces with his iconic “Don’t do bad stuff” and his “Chu” characters. To some extent, the artists integrated elements of both site and history into their works, offering a tentative image of hemispheric graffiti worlds.



Figure 2

Caitlin Frances Bruce, *Orion, Steel Worker*, Aerosol paint on wall, 2017, Rankin, Pennsylvania. Copyright: Caitlin Frances Bruce.



Figure 3

Caitlin Frances Bruce, *The Wall Cry by Wes*, Aerosol paint on wall, 2017, Rankin, Pennsylvania. Copyright: Caitlin Frances Bruce.



Figure 4

Caitlin Frances Bruce, *Mural in Progress 2*, Aerosol paint on wall, 2017, Rankin, Pennsylvania. Copyright: Caitlin Frances Bruce.

Conclusion: Memory, Evolution, and International Collaboration

In this brief experiment, the artists were able to point to resonant elements of public memory, historic evolutions, which were the products of international collaboration. Stef's international travels and longstanding solidarity with indigenous women activists meant that she brought a particular decolonial and ecological lens to her work, and her reading of the Furnaces' history. Kif's knowledge of international graffiti history, honed as the webmaster of her site, Lady's Graff meant that she had a deep appreciation for the history of letter-based graffiti at the site and its location near freight trains, iconic components of graffiti culture that Stef, too, represented.⁴ For Wes, the size and scale of the furnaces offered an interesting and intriguing contrast with the industry of his home city, that of leather and tanning. As such, he was drawn to represent the massive size of the furnaces but juxtapose them with an even larger figure of nature, a deer, and present both elements in a site-specific way by formally putting the piece in conversation with its surroundings. For Orion, the face of a worker was more important, a way to represent the power of laborers in international contexts and do a sort of homage to this figure. Jerome's "Don't do bad stuff" could be read as an extension of his anti-crime/awareness campaign, but also the "bad stuff" could be read as emissions and pollution that have been (somewhat) reduced, or, merely shifted to take different forms. In a patrimonial site with a flexible understanding of patrimony, the HCUAP mural offered one vector of potential evolution, with greater ecological and international tendencies. Such elements are not new but rather are part of the architecture of complicated public memory constructed through Pittsburgh's industry and the lives that made up its textured narratives. The networks and relationships activated through collaboration, influences that will continue

⁴ Kif and Stef Skills, "Lady's Graff," Lady's Graff (Blog), May 8, 2018, <http://ladysgraff.blogspot.com/>.

to be felt in distinct and ineffable ways, demonstrate that the fluidity and mobility of bodies and meaning around places of public memory can produce images that add another fold in the texture of physical spaces. The graffiti mural highlights ongoing tensions and possibilities between the physical and static and the ephemeral and mobile, demonstrating that the physical is not unchanging (the ruin becomes host to new aesthetic practices and ecological growth) and the ephemeral is not without duration (it enables lines of influence and understanding that inflect ongoing practices).



Figure 5

Caitlin Frances Bruce, *Stef piece*, Aerosol paint on wall, 2017, Rankin, Pennsylvania. Copyright: Caitlin Frances Bruce.



Figure 6

Caitlin Frances Bruce, *Kif piece*, Aerosol paint on wall, 2017, Rankin, Pennsylvania. Copyright: Caitlin Frances Bruce.

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