



Transformations

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Toward a Rust Belt Poetics: Ruins and Everyday Life in Visual Art from the Deindustrialised U.S. Midwest

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Abstract:

This article examines a variety of visual art emerging from and about the American Rust Belt. Through an analysis of photography collections and gallery installations, it is argued that artistic projects interpret the ruins of the Rust Belt in competing ways, and much of this contestation occurs through a discourse about everyday life. A distinction is developed between a poetics developed from *the ruins of space* and *the ruins in place*. Ultimately, what's at stake in these visual poetics of the Rust Belt is a claim on the region's future, claims that are often invested with hope.

Keywords: Rust Belt; everyday life; urban ruins

Because the following analysis explores everyday life and urban ruins, I want to begin with an anecdote about my everyday experience in Detroit, Michigan. In 2013, I visited the Museum of Contemporary Art-Detroit (MOCAD) to view the exhibit *The Past is Present* [1]. Coinciding with the 80th anniversary of Diego Rivera's famous mural *Detroit Industry* housed at the nearby Detroit Institute of the Arts (DIA), MOCAD commissioned 14 artists to create murals relevant to 21st-century Detroit, much in the way that Rivera's work was relevant to the city in the early 20th-century [2]. Many of the paintings, murals-in-miniature, invoked historical legacies like automobile manufacturing and Motown to position the city's history as constitutive of its present, and others built on the city's ruined reputation.

As an example of the latter, Carolina Caycedo's *SCRAPCITY* was particularly striking. At the centre of the painting, Caycedo reimagined the city's seal, misspelling the city's name as "Destroit" – a homophone of "destroyed" – to demonstrate how destruction had become constitutive of the city itself. Although the city had been nicknamed the "Arsenal of Democracy" for its role in World War II, Caycedo's work rechristened the city as the "Arsenal of Bankruptcy," which alludes to Detroit's 2013 bankruptcy. The date of the bankruptcy filing (July 18, 2013) and the total amount of the city's debt (\$18.5 billion) appear at the bottom of the painting on a mock celebratory ribbon [3]. Behind the city seal, Caycedo painted Detroit's skyline, and in the background a heap of rubble towers over the modernist skyscrapers. Below the horizon line that divides the painting, Caycedo painted a blurry reflection of both the city skyline and the towering rubble.

I kept returning to this painting as I walked through the gallery. I was drawn to it, in part, because of its disorienting effects. It depicted images I was familiar with – the skyline, the city seal, even the city's name – yet all with a difference. In the next room, a post-modern jazz ensemble rehearsed, sending atonal music through the open warehouse exhibition space. This dissonance contributed to the feeling of intrigued unease I had with Caycedo's piece. Perhaps, too, I was drawn to it because of the critical echoes the painting had with Walter Benjamin's analysis of the Klee painting *Angelus Novus*. Writing of

the painting, Benjamin says that “[w]here we perceive a chain of events, [the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (“Theses” 257). Caycedo’s mural-in-miniature captured this sentiment, and in doing so, it redefined Detroit through its ruins – one more pile at the angel’s feet.

The angel’s all-encompassing view is reminiscent of, though certainly distinct from, Michel de Certeau’s view in “Walking in the City” from his text *The Practice of Everyday Life*. There, de Certeau is atop the World Trade Center in Manhattan, and he ponders his bird’s-eye-view, a view with especial weight in post-9/11 Manhattan. Far from intimate, de Certeau’s view rendered Manhattan grid-like, readable, and comprehensible, while providing the viewer with a feeling of separateness and omniscience. However, this image of the city is nothing more than a fiction. De Certeau describes it as “a ‘theoretical’ (that is, visual) simulacrum ... a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and misunderstanding of practice” (93). In other words, the panoptic view of the city cannot apprehend the way residents, or practitioners of de Certeau’s “long poem of walking” (101), make daily use of the streets, sidewalks, and alleys. Similarly, Caycedo’s repositioning of Detroit as defined by its ruins cannot imagine everyday life amongst the debris. Instead, the city appears as a reciprocal metaphor of ruins, where Detroit is synonymous with ruins and ruins synonymous with Detroit. The tensions arising from this strategic, panoptic fiction and the tactical, experiential practices of the street persist. And it is with this tension in mind that I want to turn to the visual poetics of the United States Rust Belt.

In this article, I examine a variety of visual art emerging from and about the U.S. Rust Belt. Through an examination of photography collections and gallery installations, I argue that artistic projects interpret the ruins of the Rust Belt in competing ways, and much of this contestation occurs through a discourse about everyday life. Therefore, I focus on this discourse, drawing primarily from the work of de Certeau, to distinguish between *the ruins of space* and *the ruins in place*. While cognizant of the limitations and pitfalls of dualistic categorization, my goal is not to argue for a foreclosed, definitive distinction, but rather to offer a framework for looking at the poetic and aesthetic representations of urban ruins. This distinction builds on cultural geographers’ distinction between space and place and follows closely de Certeau’s contrast between strategies and tactics. Ultimately, what’s at stake in the visual poetics of the Rust Belt is a claim on the region’s future – and for that matter the nation’s future – claims that are often invested with hope.

Before turning to the archive of visual art that concerns us presently, I want to first spend time discussing key terms from de Certeau that will prove critical for what follows, terms including strategies, tactics, and poetics. These terms will help in understanding the different way urban and industrial ruins become aestheticised. Eventually, these concepts will also help to establish the ways these artistic projects imagine a future for and in Rust Belt places.

Strategies and tactics are best explored comparatively. Drawn from a lexicon of warfare, a strategy refers to “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power ... can be isolated” (36-7). Strategies, therefore, are deeply integrated into space. Indeed, like in warfare, a base is required, a space of one’s own, from which to launch attacks on some “other.” De Certeau develops this concept of strategies further, demonstrating that a strategy represents “a triumph of place over time”; “a mastery of places through sight”; and a practice of transforming “uncertainties of history into readable spaces” (36). De Certeau’s view of Manhattan provides one example of how this concept of strategy can be applied in the urban context. In that example, the messy, lived space of New York is rendered graph-like, predictable, and readable – a fiction if there ever was one. In this example, space triumphs over time. The diachronic experiences of manoeuvring through the city streets are erased in favour of the synchronic map. And, what’s more, the ability to render the chaos of Manhattan readable is made possible through sight, the visual rendering of the city as static. In a similar way, Caycedo’s *SCRAPCITY* renders Detroit as fixed in its relation to ruins, providing an example of how de Certeau’s strategies may be executed through aesthetic projects.

In contrast to strategies, de Certeau defines a tactic as “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus.... It operates in isolated actions ... [and] takes advantage of ‘opportunities’” (37). Unlike strategies, then, tactics operate without the benefit of a base or a specific space. Therefore, instead of being invested in space, tactics tend to be more related to temporality. That is, tactics make use of time to challenge the omnipotence of spatial relations. Thinking still of Manhattan, Occupy Wall Street may be a

clear, if more dramatic, example of de Certeau's tactics. Using the semiotics of space imposed through the powerful, Occupy attained political notoriety because it challenged – albeit mostly symbolically – the use of “Wall Street” in the relations of globalised capital.

One of the key differences between strategies and tactics according to de Certeau is how each concept engages with space. He argues that “strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose ... spaces ... whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (30). Here, strategies function as an omnipresent power over a generalised map. Tactics, on the other hand, operate at the level of the street, the everyday, or the local. In the lexicon of cultural geography, we might say that strategies impose *space* while tactics enact or enable *place*. The distinction between space and place provides one way to conceptualise how time fits into de Certeau's project. Space connotes globalised, timeless geography, and place privileges the intersection of time and spatial relations. Scholars like Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Doreen Massey have articulated this distinction in different yet related ways [4, 5, 6]. For Arturo Escobar, place is “the *experience* of a particular location with *some measure of groundedness ... sense of boundaries ... and connection to everyday life*” (original emphasis, 140). Conversely, space, according to Escobar, is understood “as the absolute, unlimited and universal” (143). And, while we will see how aesthetic representations of the Rust Belt occur both through space and place, it is place – as the site of tactical, experiential, and temporal relations – that engenders a transformative poetics of the everyday.

For cultural studies scholar Benjamin Highmore, a poetics of the everyday is in fact central to de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. If de Certeau's principle project is to provide a way to “articulate [everyday practices]” (de Certeau xi), then, Highmore argues, “a poetics, a *poiesis* – an inventive language that will register the inventiveness ... of everyday life” is necessary to that very project (*Everyday Life* 153-4). According to Highmore, such a poetics intends “at least to make a start at listening to the practices of everyday life” (*Everyday Life* 169). For Highmore, a poetics of everyday life is carefully attentive to the quotidian and necessarily creative; it is the discourse through which the everyday becomes intelligible and articulated. This is at one and the same time an incredibly humble and yet transformative project.

My use of de Certeau's work is best understood within Highmore's framework of everyday poetics. In my analysis, strategies and tactics operate as metaphors to better articulate how aesthetic projects emerging from the U.S. Rust Belt engage with questions of space and place in relation to power dynamics. In Highmore's analysis, he argues that de Certeau's project can be most productive when “[t]he urgency and instrumentality of politics (what must we do?) is exchanged for an analysis (what's going on?)... [T]o designate a practice as strategic is akin to claiming it as metaphorical rather than metonymical” (*Everyday Life* 158). In other words, de Certeau's project is not a prescription for resisting power. Rather, it is an analysis of how power and the everyday exist side-by-side. My ensuing analysis attempts to build on this understanding of strategies and tactics as useful metaphors or analytics to investigate how specific poetic and aesthetic practices (re)organise and (re)interpret urban ruins to a variety of ends.

My focus is on the American Rust Belt – a region that lies in actual and metaphorical ruin – so the crux of my analysis is at the intersection of this everyday poetics and the aesthetics of ruin. In his text *Cityscapes*, Highmore offers a provocative definition of urban ruins that similarly connects space and time, and his explanation proves helpful in our present analysis. He writes:

Ruins, monuments and urban architecture point to an environment where the past continually impinges on the present. Ruins signal the trauma of history as the past remains in the present as a reminder of violence and destruction. Ruins, because they are fragments of the past, physical debris cluttering up the present, make the actuality of urban culture vividly evident; here the past haunts the present.... In this sense all cities are haunted; they are ghostly accumulations of past lives. (4-5)

Highmore argues that urban ruins make visceral the temporal overlap of past, present, and future. In this sense, ruins enable de Certeau's everyday tactics, given that tactics also depend upon temporal play. However, whereas ruins contain this potential for temporal play, it is a potential that is not always realised and can, in fact, be suppressed through various practices.

In the Rust Belt, ruins have been investigated as serving multiple functions. Steven High and David W. Lewis, for example, investigate the ruins of the American Rust Belt through photography and ethnography. Writing specifically about industrial ruins, they write that “[i]ndustrial ruins are memory places, for they make us pause, reflect, and remember. But remember what, and to what end?” (9). They recognise the inherent ambivalence in ruined landscapes, suggesting that, in part at least, the aesthetic representation of ruins can be multiply motivated. These competing motivations, in turn, can lead to different tropes, images, and, ultimately, meanings emerging from the ruined space. High goes on to answer his own question, suggesting that these specific ruins serve as a site of memory that unites displaced labourers. Indeed, *Corporate Wasteland* is a testament to precisely how these industrial structures contribute to a sense of camaraderie among displaced workers. More broadly, when deindustrialisation devastates entire cities, not only the factories but also the civic buildings, retail centres, schools, train stations, and hospitals are all at risk of ending up as ruins. These ruins contain the traces and memories of everyday life, and a poetics of the everyday would re-present these traces in order to make them legible and known.

The image of the Rust Belt as a region in ruins is fairly common in North America [7]. Cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, and, perhaps most notably, Detroit all have national and, at least in Detroit’s case, international recognition as modernist cities that have been decimated by deindustrialization. Images of abandoned factories, empty blocks, and vacant downtown cores populate the present discourses about these urban spaces. The interest in these ruined, urban spaces has created a boom in the culture industry, particularly in amateur photography. The term “ruin porn” has been coined to describe the proliferation of photographs that depict defunct factories, eroded office buildings, and abandoned homes. Often, the genre focuses on deindustrialised regions like the American Rust Belt. “Ruin porn” is often used derisively, but some ruin porn photographers have sought to reclaim the term. I argue that the ruin porn archive in general lacks a critical lens and instead decontextualises Rust Belt ruins, inhibiting any political potential the images may contain.

With the prevalence of social media platforms for sharing photographs, it is fairly easy to locate a number of different amateur archives of Rust Belt and ruin porn photography. On the popular site Flickr, for example, there are over 2,000 photographs included under the tag “ruinporn” at the time of writing. On Instagram, the count at the time of writing was 17,000 for photographs that included the “#ruinporn” hashtag. The trend was so notable, in fact, that the online magazine *Thrillist* published an article titled “#Ruinporn: The Latest Instagram Travel Trend.” Published in April 2014, the brief article cites 7,000 #ruinporn photographs on Instagram, and most of the photographs the article discusses come from cities in the Rust Belt, most prominently Detroit (Villagomez).

However, even a cursory glance around these platforms will quickly demonstrate that the term “ruin porn” isn’t unique to the Rust Belt: photographs from Cleveland to Glasgow to Pretoria to Mexico City are all tagged “#ruinporn.” Searching for a more specific term reveals equally large online archives. Though different in tone than “ruin porn,” “Rust Belt photography” is likewise a prominent category on these social media platforms, and it is typically specific to the Great Lakes region of the U.S. Midwest. For example, the Flickr group “Rust Belt (Industrial Midwest USA)” has over 600 members and more than 13,500 photographs, and the Instagram hashtag “#rustbelt” yields more than 17,000 images. These figures demonstrate an increasing interest in the photography of Rust Belt ruins.

In the Flickr group, the vast majority of the photographs depict architectural or structural ruins like buildings, farms, railroads, or highways. Take, for example, the photograph collection of the Flickr Rust Belt group’s top contributor, whose username is David Grim. The user’s photo collection is almost entirely of homes and factories in various states of disrepair. Primarily, the collection is focused on the Pittsburgh area. Though the odd image of people or contemporary life is present, the user’s archive consists mainly of images much like “Feelin’ Woozy,” a photograph David Grim shared in June 2015. The image, which at the time of writing received more than 72 “faves” (Flickr’s answer to Facebook’s “likes”), is of an abandoned home. By every measure, the home is most certainly in ruins: the front windows have all been broken, and the front door has been boarded over; the foundation has clearly shifted, and the beams supporting the front porch roof are askew; the vegetation surrounding the home is overgrown, and ivy has begun to cover the roof. The image’s title is something of a pun. The house is “woozy” in the sense that it is ill, but it also connotes an inability to stand upright, akin to drunkenness.

The use of the colloquial “feelin’ woozy” is almost playful or light-hearted, creating a sharp juxtaposition with the otherwise grim reality of the abandoned home.

Though executed with some degree of sophistication, the Rust Belt Flickr group photo stream exemplifies, unabashedly it seems, the intersection of Rust Belt and ruin porn photography. Exemplified by “Feelin’ Woozy,” the stream of collapsing buildings and rusted factories creates a narrative about the region, one that depends upon a seeming emptiness, collapse, and devastation. What’s more, this narrative is woven from the fabric of spatial relations. In his article “Detroitism,” John Patrick Leary writes that ruin porn “aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, *dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them*, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation ... of the city” (my emphasis). In effect, ruin porn, a category under which much Rust Belt photography falls, isolates spaces from their temporality and relationality; they become, in de Certeau’s lexicon, a strategic practice. The consequence of *strategically* defining the region in terms of rusted space is that it ignores the legacy of social relations – including class struggles, racial tensions, and resistance – and it precludes the imaginative potential to think otherwise about these spaces. Ruin porn, like Leary argues, cannot think the origins of poverty nor think resistance to the systemic issues of the region. Instead, ruin porn creates only an aesthetic object of desire without past or future [8].

If ruin porn is largely understood as an archive of amateur photography, how might a more professional collection contribute to or challenge its overarching, *strategic* practice? Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s *Ruins of Detroit* is a professional photography collection focused on the modernist ruins of Detroit. Despite its more sophisticated presentation and its sometimes stunningly beautiful photographs, the collection as a whole offers a stereotypical view of Detroit as a space of utter ruin. Not totally dissimilar from the Flickr photo stream, this published collection barrages the viewer with image after image of ruined homes, factories, and modernist architecture. Throughout the collection, the abundance of ruin becomes apparent, even obscene [9].

If the entire collection presents an ironic abundance out of emptiness, this motif is repeated at times within individual photographs or montages. Take, for example, the photograph of the Cass Technical High School. Opened in 1907 as Detroit’s first technical high school, Cass Tech eventually grew into a magnet school for technology and science. The school building was completed in 1922, and later an addition was completed in 1985. In 2005, the school building was abandoned for a newly completed building just north of the original site. The 1922 and 1985 structures were abandoned quickly; in 2007 these buildings were badly damaged by a fire; and by 2011, the buildings were demolished (Austin). Marchand and Meffre photographed the 1922 and 1985 structures after they had been abandoned but prior to the fire.

The particular photograph I’m interested in depicts the courtyard faade of the building, with 12 evenly spaced windows: 3 rows and 4 columns [10]. As reliably as a rubber stamp, each window reproduces the rubble and abandonment of the last one. There are toppled desks, old computers, dilapidated dry wall, and general debris. As something of a synecdoche for the entire collection, this image reproduces over and over precisely what any viewer has come to expect from an image of Detroit: timeless ruins. We can read this overproduction of ruins as a spectacle, in Debord’s sense, or as a phantasmagoria, in Benjamin’s sense [11, 12]. In either theoretical frame, *Ruins of Detroit* floods the senses with the aesthetics of ruins, but in doing so anesthetises the viewer to the broader social concerns that created the ruins in the first place.

This anesthetisation is part of what I characterise as *the ruins of space*. Following the distinction discussed earlier between space and place, this category of Rust Belt photography emphasises space over time much like de Certeau’s strategies. The images in both the online, amateur galleries and Marchand and Meffre’s published collection emphasise architectural ruins and ignore the everyday experiences of life amongst the ruins. Walter Benjamin argued that architecture was “appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception” (“The Work of Art” 240). If we can understand use as a corollary for a temporal experience of architecture and perception as a spatial experience of architecture, we may see more clearly how these collections of Rust Belt photography privilege only perception, or space, and disregard the experiential, temporal components of these buildings. Everyday life, then, becomes similarly objectified and rendered invisible at best.

That is not to say that the chaos of everyday life does not irrupt into these collections. In *Ruins of Detroit*, everyday life emerges in small, seemingly accidental moments of the photograph. In the photograph of Cass Tech, for example, the seemingly stamp-like repetition is interrupted upon closer examination. At the intersection of the third row and the third column, the window opens to a scene quite different than the others. Instead of overturned chairs and toppled bookcases, the window reveals a more organised space. A bright yellow chair is in the centre of the room, and a loveseat is against the wall, facing outward. The orderliness of the room operates like Roland Barthes punctum and belies the image of chaotic disrepair [13]. It suggests life – an indication of squatters or at least the shadows of those who had previously walked the halls.

As another example, *Ruins of Detroit* includes a brief historical narrative, written by the preeminent Detroit historian Thomas Sugrue. The historical account provides background to the photographs being viewed as well as a contextual account for the social and economic relations that led to the ruination detailed in the photographs. This narrative resituates the spatial, strategic project of the photography collection back into the temporal, historical context. Though it provides a thoughtful contextualization, this context alone cannot alter the overwhelming focus of the collection on abstract ruins. Therefore, despite small moments that open up possibilities to think otherwise, the collection as a whole remains focused on static, ruined space.

Contrasting with ruins of space, an alternative aspect of Rust Belt aesthetics might be classified as *ruins in place*. Instead of focusing exclusively on space, projects that explore ruins in place focus on the temporal-spatial relations between urban ruins and the related effects of everyday life. In other words, aesthetic projects have the potential to make legible the lived experiences of urban ruins instead of anesthetising them. These intersections between space, place, time, and everyday life are evident in Gregory Halpern's photography collection *A*.

Halpern's *A* is a photography collection that is more expansive than *Ruins of Detroit*, both in terms of themes and locations [14]. Whereas *Ruins* focused exclusively on Detroit, *A* tours the entire Rust Belt region. An editor for the collection remarked that the photographs came from "Buffalo, Rochester, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Memphis, Detroit, and other small cities in between" (Fulford). In addition, if *Ruins* focused almost exclusively on structural ruins – and, even more specifically, modernist, urban ruins – *A* examines the concept of ruins with a much broader lens. While there are certainly photographs of dilapidated buildings, much more attention is paid to the social realities that surround the ruins. Portraits of both human and non-human animals fill the collection alongside images of ruined landscapes, functioning modernist architecture, homes, and graffiti. Halpern's photographs capture a wide swath of everyday life in the American Rust Belt.

Take, for example, a photograph of Halpern's that at one level appears to function like some of the most obvious examples of ruin porn. Appearing toward the end of the collection, the photograph captures a Victorian-era home. Like many of the images in *Ruins of Detroit*, this home suffers from peeling paint, an overgrown yard, and a cracked foundation. Holiday lights hang from the columns and porch in various stages of assembly, or disassembly. The porch roof appears to be compromised, but makeshift beams have been erected to help prevent any future damage. The camera is focused specifically on this corner of the house, centring the two-by-fours that support the porch roof. These makeshift supports force the viewer to accept a human action on the scene of ruin even as it calls attention to the inter-related *processes* of destruction and construction. Given this, we may say that the beams operate much like de Certeau's *tactics*. Imagining a user of this site, the image suggests that, although beyond the user's ability "to produce, tabulate, and impose" a new space, these beams at the very least suggest that the user *is* able to "use, manipulate and divert" within the place of ruin (30). In other words, the beams interject a temporality into the image, and that temporality, to my mind, is imbued with a critical hope.

This theme of hope is emphasised in the image that is on the facing page of the dilapidated Victorian home. A yellow-sided home is in the image's background, partially hidden by the photograph's central focus on a sparse-yet-blooming magnolia tree. Amidst the brown, scraggly brush of the foreground, the white and pink flowers are especially vibrant. The flowering tree works on a number of levels. First, it again introduces temporality into the photographs. The viewer is given a glimpse into spring, and the emphasis on this seasonal change implies shifting time. The introduction of time cognitively alters the question of ruins. No longer is it about the object, but instead the process. What's more, spring is a clear

indicator of hope – amidst the deep freeze of winter, spring offers a future that is alternative, different, made anew from the ruins of winter's frost. Like a mirror, this image reflects back onto the Victorian home, offering a similarly hopeful view of the future.

Halpern's expression of hope is not naive. In an interview about the collection, Halpern says that he "wanted to punctuate [the] inevitability [of death] with images that are ... very hopeful.... Hope is the envisioning of that which is not present. At times I think the creation of a photograph can function that way" (Fulford). Perhaps ironically, Halpern tasks photography with capturing that which is not present; the photograph must be able to envision that which is beyond the object represented. Put differently and more specifically for our context, Rust Belt photography can be most successful when it enables the viewer to see *through* the represented ruins to an alternative, imaginative future. In a similar way, this is what Highmore argues is at the heart of de Certeau's poetics. Like photography that captures what is not yet there, a poetics of the everyday works to represent a discourse that does not yet exist, a discourse that is non-representable. The image of the blooming magnolia works toward just such a discourse – a discourse of hope within the everyday.

Many of Halpern's portraits also enable a critical vision of hope. In one pair of photographs, Halpern's subject is a young boy. The boy is swimming in a pond or a slow-moving river. In the background, there is a single smokestack and a concrete building – perhaps the ruins of an oil refinery or steel mill. On the banks abutting the factory is lush greenery, and a branch hangs above the child, just barely visible in the top left corner of the photograph. The two images face each other and appear to have been taken in quick succession. In the first, the boy stands behind a rock that juts out of the water just a little. He is still and stern with his hands on his hips in something of a classic Superman pose. The boy's reflection is clearly visible in the water, and even the smokestack is reflected behind him. In the next image, it appears as if someone standing off camera has splashed the boy. Water droplets soar through the air, and the water surface ripples with activity. The boy's posture eases, and his shoulders hunch over; he grins widely, revealing a missing front tooth. Both his and the smokestack's reflections are obscured in the rippling water.

This pair of photographs clearly demonstrates a temporal shift, and the images ask viewers to imagine the spaces of deindustrialization as both peopled and in process. In stark contrast to the photographs in *Ruins of Detroit*, Halpern's work not only admits to the presence of people, but, like in this pair of photographs, it focuses on their in-the-moment experiences of the place. These two photographs specifically emphasise the way in which experience opens up dynamic relationships with place. The boy is not only present in space, but he is experiencing and changing his place.

Furthermore, these photographs ask us to imagine a future that is different than the present. Like the disrupted reflections in the pond, the viewer must consider an alternative image, even if blurry, of the future. The joy of the young child disrupts the common Rust Belt narrative of repetition, decay, and lamentation. In his work, Steven High identifies the common yet reductive understanding of the region as a "dominant narrative" of "victimization and loss," a narrative produced over and over again in *Ruins of Detroit* (*Corporate Wasteland* 12). Halpern's work forces a reconsideration of this central narrative, one that is not idealised yet not wholly defeatist either.

In comparing these various photography archives, I have tried to distinguish, however hesitantly, between projects that detail structural and architectural ruins and projects that intentionally intersect images of ruined space with lived experience. One way to conceptualise this difference is through de Certeau's everyday poetics and the metaphorical lens of strategies and tactics, where the former focuses almost exclusively on the preservation of power through spatial relationships and the latter works within that power to intersect space and time and thus imagine things otherwise.

In order to further explore how everyday poetics are relevant to the Rust Belt, I'd like to return to the Museum of Contemporary Art-Detroit where our discussion began. In addition to *The Past is Present* exhibit, I also visited the installation piece *Mobile Homestead*. *Mobile Homestead* was created by the late artist Mike Kelley as a replica of his childhood home in Westland, a working-class suburb of Detroit [15]. Being the same size as a small suburban home, the installation sits on the exterior grounds of MOCAD. The exterior of the installation looks like any suburban, ranch-style home from 1960s America. It is white-sided with a small front porch and a one-car garage to one side. In the front, there is an enviable lawn. Behind the home is an abandoned building, which was painted a bright sky-blue to serve as a

backdrop to the installation. While currently stationary on its manicured lot in Midtown Detroit, the main structure of the home is in fact mobile, as the name suggests. Prior to its installation, the home went on an almost ritualistic path, beginning in front of Kelley's childhood home in Westland and returning to the city, a path that dramatised in reverse the white flight of the mid-twentieth century and, simultaneously, mimicked the return of many young, white suburbanites to cities like Detroit.

My immediate impression of the installation was its stark, ironic contrast with its surroundings. The home is so perfectly suburban that it draws considerable attention to itself in the dramatically different space of Midtown Detroit. *Mobile Homestead* faces Woodward Avenue, one of the city's main thoroughfares, so the installation is very much a part of the urban landscape even as it is foreign to it. In other words, *Mobile Homestead* articulates the inherent yet often unspoken tension between the everyday life of the deindustrialised city and the everyday life of the suburban bedroom communities at its fringes. Kelley uses this tension to interrogate urban ruins from a radically different perspective.

Kelley's work draws attention to urban ruins through the representation of its opposite, the well-kept suburban home. In a city with a stereotypical reputation for urban ruins – depicted emphatically in *Ruins of Detroit* – the site of a newly constructed, white-sided home is a marked departure from standard representations of the city. Even the well-maintained lawn invokes a comparison to its largely concrete and asphalt surroundings. In a certain sense, then, *Mobile Homestead* draws attention not to the structural ruins that are the focus of much ruin porn. The installation explores a different type of ruins – the ruins of the social – made evident in the tensions between private space and public space.

Mobile Homestead explores this tension not only through the visual cues of the suburban home, the fenced yard, and its surrounding urban setting. The interior of the house plays a vital role in how the separate spheres of the public and private are understood and problematised. Not knowing much about the exhibit when I visited, I was surprised that the home's interior wasn't decorated to mimic the style of the 1960s and 1970s suburban home. Instead, the space had multiple functions, including a community library and community space that could be reserved for activities "relevant to the cultural interests of the local communities." Perhaps most fascinating, however, are the underground studios that are not accessible to the public. According to the installation's pamphlet, the basement space is "reserved for covert, personal use." In his plans for the installation, Kelley described this space as "antisocial" and critical to the entire piece (Kelley *Mobile Homestead*). In this way, Kelley emphasised the installation's layered irony: situated along one of Detroit's busiest public roadways, a private, suburban home houses a community-oriented centre yet has at its foundation a private, even anti-social, space that remains hidden to the majority of the community.

Given these contradictions, Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* demands an alternative approach to thinking about time and space. The installation calls attention to temporality because of its layered responses to suburbanization, white flight, and the present trend of urban pioneers. Even beyond its content, however, the installation's form similarly engages with the intersection of time and space. If *Ruins of Detroit* could be experienced solely in spatial terms, *Mobile Homestead* requires that the viewer move through space, experience the installation, walk through doorways and hallways, and regard the home from the nearby street. At each of these moments, time and space necessarily intersect, calling attention to an experience of ruins – in other words, a poetics of ruins in place.

In some ways, the distinction I'm drawing between *Mobile Homestead* and *Ruins of Detroit* may seem more related to the formal differences between installation art and photography than to a difference in the political projects of each. Is it reasonable, for example, to expect photography to engage temporally with its subject? To reveal to the viewer not a static object, but an image that is in process? While certainly the formal elements matter, it is not the case that only installation pieces are capable of doing this work. For example, Halpern's *A* expertly employs photography to develop a poetics of ruins in place. The distinction between ruins of space and ruins in place hinges not so much on formal qualities than on the way the artist gives voice to those most impacted by the representation. Halpern, for example, photographs a number of people in the Rust Belt, giving a sense of a peopled yet ruined landscape. Likewise, Kelley's installation presents the viewer with a layered, temporal work of art that demands interpersonal engagement. *Ruins of Detroit*, on the other hand, presents a common stereotype of Detroit, so it does not require critical engagement. As Walter Benjamin argued regarding another form of exploitative photography, *Ruins* "succeed[s] in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish,

technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment" (*Understanding* 95). The metaphoric distinction between strategies and tactics, or between ruins of space and ruins in place, is not limited by artistic medium. Rather, these distinctions lie in the possibility of giving voice to the everyday.

Like Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, Dennis Maher's installation also gives voice to the experiences of everyday life in the Rust Belt. Installed at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY in 2013, Maher's *House of Collective Repair* collates eight model homes [16]. Each "home" was constructed by a specific tradesperson using only the material of his or her trade. For example, the plumber constructed her home from pipes, the painter used paintbrushes and stir-sticks, and so forth. Commissioned by Maher, he collected the model homes and situated them in relation to one another, constructing an imaginatively recreated model city.

Maher's *House of Collective Repair* was disorienting when I first encountered it. Although the individual materials were easily recognised – pipes, boards, wires – the constructed objects were less familiar. A short video was mounted to the wall, and it offered a narrative about the installation's construction. The entire piece nearly filled the exhibition space, so as I moved through the space, it was necessary to be cautious and very attuned to my movements in order to not disrupt any of the piece's components. Each model home, though distinct, contributed to the larger project, blending into the structures of Maher's "model city." At various moments throughout the exhibit, audio recordings played the voices of the craftspeople explaining their individual contribution. The installation engaged every sense, and it was completed only when people moved through the space – or, perhaps more precisely, the exhibit was never actually complete, but was constantly in process.

I categorise Maher's work similarly to Halpern's *A* or Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, within what I've been calling ruins in place. *Collective Repair* uses largely discarded, ruined materials to recreate an alternative vision. It is a model city built from the ruins of the past. In some ways, it provides the mirror image of Caycedo's *SCRAPCITY*, the painting with which our discussion began. In Caycedo's piece, the mountain of debris looms behind and above the city as an oppressive, ominous vision. Here, Maher repurposes the ruins of the Rust Belt to reimagine and rebuild a new vision of the city. Elsewhere, I have written about Maher's project as a critique of urban renewal currently at work across the Rust Belt (Manning). For our present purposes, it is important to see that his alternative vision is premised upon a collective approach to place-making.

In order to get a sense of Maher's goals for the project, it is worth quoting him at length. In the pamphlet for the installation, he writes that,

The house models ... establish themselves as unique monuments within the armature of a miniature city. Within this city, I imagine skilled laborers are the primary occupants. They are the handlers around which the unformed material of the city moves. I imagine that they travel along cracks in the city's walls, congregate at one another's houses, and form unique bonds – bonds that are solidified by the awareness of how to make something work. As they impart form to loose piles of matter, they link aspiring visions to constructed realities. They rehabilitate the city by connecting their hands to the minds of those who perceive it from afar. This connection produces a new image of the city, one in which standard tools and materials are communicators of its lost knowledge and indicators of its future prospects. (12)

Maher focuses here on collective labour to construct "a new image of the city." This collective labour operates through a form of de Certeau's tactics, using "standard tools and materials" to produce this radical new vision out of the ruins of the past. Here, too, Maher's project connects the temporal split between the past ruins and our future hope. Instead of seeing these as opposed, as *Ruins of Detroit* might, Maher develops them as integrally connected, where our "future prospects" depend upon an exploration of our "lost knowledge," and our "lost knowledge" must serve our "future prospects."

Maher's project develops this futurity through a poetics of the everyday built from the ruins of the everyday. Specifically, *Collective Repair* gives voice to a number of different tradespeople and artisans. Because it was created collectively, the project is necessarily polyphonic. It listens to and gives voice to disparate visions of the everyday, and it is precisely this multiplicity that makes Maher's work so inventive and suggestive of an alternative political form, however vaguely imagined. Through his work, Maher – and the other artists we might categorise alongside him as producing a poetics of ruins in place

– allows the everyday to emerge in all its ambiguity and contradictions. And, as Highmore argues, “only after the everyday is allowed to emerge would something like a politics of the everyday become possible” (*Everyday Life* 172).

Concluding his essay on the project, Maher poses a series of questions. He asks, “could the collective house change how we think about and inhabit the city? And could it become the nexus of a city-centered art?” (12). Maher’s questions ask the viewer to rethink our relationship to the urban ruins that surround us in places like Buffalo or Detroit. Instead of seeing mere trash or even a disconnected aesthetic, Maher asks us to imagine the potential for alternatives. Like Maher’s project demonstrates, any hope for Rust Belt communities’ revitalization must be constructed collectively, like *House of Collective Repair*. In *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey argues that “[a]s we collectively produce our cities so we collectively produce ourselves. Projects concerning what we want our cities to be are, therefore, projects concerning human possibilities, who we want, or perhaps even more pertinently, who we do not want to become. Every single one of us has something to think, say and do about that” (159). In other words, Harvey argues that through our collective imaginaries, our cities can be fundamentally reformed to better foster “human possibility.” Maher’s project is precisely such an imaginative attempt to collectively reshape the urban space of the American Rust Belt. Out of the often-reified ruins of the Rust Belt, Maher and his colleagues made legible the everyday. Because of this, the project was able to pose questions about how everyday life could itself be reimagined precisely because the city was likewise reimagined.

In conclusion, I’d like to return once more to the site that began our discussion – the Museum of Contemporary Art-Detroit. Upon leaving, I was overwhelmed by both the effectiveness and the limitations of various aesthetic representations of the American Rust Belt. In the warm Michigan sun, I stood outside and pondered *Mobile Homestead* once more before leaving the city, gazing through the fence and parking lot and yard up to the faade of the white home. I then turned south, looking down Woodward, to see Detroit’s skyline. The sky was clear and blue. When I stepped off the curb to get a photograph of the distant skyline, I noticed that standing just in front of the *Mobile Homestead* installation, at the corner of Canfield and Woodward, was a group of people also staring south, though they were waiting silently for the bus, not admiring the view. If they noticed the ironic home behind them, they didn’t give any indication that it had changed their everyday practice of waiting for a bus that, given Detroit’s continued financial woes, was sporadically scheduled at best (Cwiek). This intimate view of the relationship between ruin aesthetics and the poetics of everyday life provided a stark juxtaposition without a clear resolution.

The poetics of the everyday in the American Rust Belt use the real and imagined ruins of urban space and time to recreate an image of place. In many cases, this imagined place is nothing more than a ruined landscape void of the everyday experiences and rituals of the people who live there: it is *the ruins of space*. In other projects, the tactics of everyday life are made legible, and place is reimagined through the lexicon of the everyday. This poetics is attentive to the everyday and attempts to represent the uses of ruins, both structural and social: this is a poetics of *the ruins in place*. While the former maintains the status quo, the latter imagines, like Highmore suggests, a politics that emerges from the everyday. This is not a politics “about having certain ends in mind, but about generating beginnings” (Highmore 173). That’s why projects like *House of Collective Repair*, *Mobile Homestead*, or *A* – while imbued with a political potential – do not attempt to answer, but instead ask: what would an everyday politics look like in our place of urban ruins?

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Endnotes

1. More information on the exhibit, including images of the paintings, is available at MOCAD's website. A video about the exhibit features many of the paintings, and Carolina Caycedo's piece *SCRAPCITY*, the focus of my analysis, appears at the 3-minute mark of the video. See www.mocadetroit.org/past-exhibitions.html.
2. Diego Rivera's mural, commissioned by Edsel Ford, was the result of Rivera's study of the River Rouge Ford plant, the largest automobile factory in the world. According to Jeffrey Belnap, Rivera's "'Detroit Industry,' a twenty-seven-panel mural cycle in the museum's courtyard ... explores the manufacturing process that transforms raw materials into automobiles and the place of the workers in the process" (91). The mural blurs distinctions between modern, industrial America and pre-Columbian America, drawing on motifs of indigenous cultures as well as the cultures of factory labour.
3. In 2013, Detroit became the largest municipality to file for Chapter IX bankruptcy. The filing came after the state's appointed Emergency Financial Manager (EFM), Kevyn Orr, took charge of the city. In Michigan law, an EFM is an unelected, governor-appointed official that yields unilateral power to make financial decisions for financially struggling municipalities. The bankruptcy, the EFM argued, allowed Detroit to liquidate assets and relinquish responsibility for pension benefits, thus saving the city billions of dollars. As one side effect of the bankruptcy that is perhaps of particular interest here, the EFM suggested that the works of art held by the Detroit Institute of the Arts yet owned by the municipality be auctioned to the highest bidder. Works by Matisse, Rivera, Picasso and others were included in the appraisal by Christie's Auction House. Ultimately, public outcry and resistance halted the sale of these pieces of art (Kennedy). Though beyond the scope of the present analysis, this incident offers particular insight into the relationship between politics and art, specifically how the public imagines itself in relation to artworks that are not necessarily about the community though arguably a part of the community.
4. In Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, he focuses on space as a social product and argues that the shift in capitalism's productive force – from things to space – is "conflict-laden" and makes it "possible to preserve the Marxist thesis of the fundamental role of the forces of production while at the same time liberating this thesis from the ideology of productivity and ... growth" (410). Through capitalism, space is produced socially; this production of space, paradoxically, creates the social that enables the production of space. Seen in this way, space is a product of temporal, social relations and cannot be separated from it.
5. David Harvey builds on Lefebvre's concept of space (see note above). In "Space as a Keyword," Harvey configures space in a tripartite system: absolute, relative, and relational. This system is configured in relation to Marx's value-form: respectively, use-value, exchange-value, and value. In addition to being a useful correlation to Marx's work, this comparison highlights that space operates as a social product mediated by the commodification of space-time. By focusing on space as a social product, Harvey emphasises the importance of both abstract considerations of space and the temporality or lived realities of space.
6. Doreen Massey's *Space, Place and Gender* offers yet another way to think about the difference between space and place. Building on the work of Lefebvre and Harvey, Massey argues that space "represents Being, and to it are attached a range of epithets and connotations: local, specific, concrete, descriptive" (9). This is in contrast to place, which is understood as global and general.
7. The American Rust Belt is a regional identity that incorporates much of the Great Lakes region of the country. The term originated in the 1970s. Originally, the region was identified by a variety of terms, including the Rust Bowl. This name was meant to contrast with the Dust Bowl of the earlier 20th century. However, it later morphed into Rust Belt to better contrast with its perceived regional rival the Sun Belt (High 29-33).

8. Of course, there are thinkers who offer alternative analyses of the political efficacy of ruin porn. On the popular website Rustwire, Richey Piiparinen wrote a feature titled “Things are Broke. Can Ruin Porn Help?” In it, he discusses various representations of ruin porn and argues that “Rust Belt photography” – a phrase used to avoid the baggage of the word “porn” – “has the ability to be the tip of a powerful perceptual movement that allows America to change the way it has confronted its structural failures in the past.” For Piiparinen, ruin photography can offer a critical lens to think about broader, systemic issues. While I might agree that much of the work labeled “ruin porn” *may hope* to spark such a conversation, it is too narrowly focused on space without reference to experience or temporality, and, because of this, it fails to effectively offer a critical lens with which to understand the systemic issues of the American Rust Belt.
9. Here, I am drawing on Baudrillard’s concept of the obscene as developed in “The Ecstasy of Communication.” Baudrillard argues that “[i]t is no longer then the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication” (131). In our present discussion, images of ruined buildings in the American Rust Belt are obscene precisely because they are the most visible representations of the region.
10. The image is available online at <http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/41>.
11. Guy Debord defines the spectacle as “the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production ... the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system” (7). In other words, the spectacle reaffirms the existing system of exploitative capitalism and the ideologies that support it. Far from critiquing the inherently wasteful spectacle of late capitalism, *Ruins of Detroit* becomes an excess of ruins, of trash, of emptiness. Where consumption (seems to have) ceased, these photographs have been inserted to reassert, albeit differently, the process of commodity production and consumption.
12. Drawing on Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss argues that the “social function [of phantasmagorias] is in each case compensatory.... It has the effect of anaesthetising the organism not through numbing, but through flooding the senses.” In *Ruins of Detroit* the senses are flooded with images of urban detritus, leading to a numbing of the senses and a related inability to perceive the broader social concerns.
13. Roland Barthes describes the punctum as that part of a photograph that offers a “sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice ... [it] is that accident which pricks me” (27). The punctum, according to Barthes, is a result of a relation between the photograph and the viewer; he writes that it “is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there” (55). Therefore, on yet another level, this relational element itself interpolates the photograph into a temporal realm.
14. A video of the complete collection is available online at <https://vimeo.com/39798051>, and a number of the images can be viewed on Gregory Halpern’s website at www.gregoryhalpern.com/a.html
15. Images of the installation are available online at www.mocadetroit.org/Mobile-Homestead.html
16. For more information on the installation, including images of Maher’s work, please visit the Albright-Knox Art Gallery website at www.albrightknox.org/exhibitions/exhibition:01-25-2013-dennis-maher-house-of-collective-repair/.

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