Hot Metal, Cold Reality: Photographers' Access to Steel Mills

Hot Metal, Cold Reality explores how photographers gained access to steel mills and how the type of access gained influenced their image making. It explains legal and ethical issues associated with gaining access to industrial sites, as well as how the right to publish or exhibit may be restricted even after access is granted. It incorporates extensive face-to-face interviews and uses archival documents and images to illuminate challenges facing photographers of steel and industrial facilities.

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This article is the product of six years of research for an exhibition and book project, Molten Light: The Intertwined History of Steel and Photography. The project contributes to an understanding of how the art of photography has progressed over more than 150 years and several continents can be brought together to illuminate the complex interrelationships of steel—and more broadly, industry—and humankind. It tells, in a unique, symbolic way, a story of the mid-19th century through the beginning of the 21st century.

The history of photography and the making of modern steel have been interwoven since both came into being in the mid-19th century. Photography, invented in the late 1830s, and modern steelmaking, invented in the mid-1850s, emerged near the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Steel made the modern world possible; photography made it understandable.

Thus the linkage of steel with photography is an ideal metaphor to examine the industrial, social, and cultural history of the past 150 years. By its nature, photography records the moment. Through photography we witness time frozen through the mental lenses of the image maker. It goes beyond aesthetic expression to also reveal objects and issues of current interest from a cultural and social perspective and what is on a society’s agenda from a political perspective.

Photographing the steel industry has always presented technical as well as aesthetic challenges, yet no challenge has been more daunting than that of access. Mere fascination with industrial architecture, the dramatic processes of moving from raw iron ore to finished steel, or the many tasks performed by steel workers does not entitle a photographer to make pictures of mills. To shoot, a photographer must first get in. Access must be arranged. Where mills are owned by a government, access may be available only through political or official connections. Sometimes the company or its advertising agency hires photographers. Some photographers pull strings to gain entry. Some talk their way in. And occasionally they sneak in. Without access, photographers can make pictures only from outside the perimeter of these architecturally impressive industrial sites, and even that vantage point may be contested and blocked.

Statement of the Problem

Margaret Bourke-White, the pioneering American industrial photographer and photojournalist, described her access to Otis Steel in Cleveland in 1928 (see Figure 1). This occurred before she became a world-renowned photographer—indeed, before she ever made an industrial photograph. In an unpublished draft autobiography, Bourke-White (1932) recalled how she gained entry to the mill, what she learned in the process, and how the pictures she made over five months proved critical to launching her career:

The thing I wanted to do most in the world was to take the first successful steel photographs. I managed to get introduced to the president of a Cleveland steel mill. He had admired my photographs of flower gardens, but he was skeptical about my
finding anything artistic in his mill. All I wanted was a chance to try. He gave me permission and fortunately for me went off to Europe..... The executives at the plant thought I would go down there one night and make a few photos. I went every night for a whole winter.

Bourke-White solved the problem of access to the first steel mill she wanted to photograph by a direct request to a company owner sympathetic to the needs of a challenging young photographer. The question, then, is how have other photographers solved this problem from the very beginning of photography to our post-9/11 world where companies and governments are more concerned about the security of industrial sites and secrecy.

Methods

Drawing primarily on extensive personal interviews and archival documents and images, plus biographies, correspondence, and memoirs, this article explores how photographers gained access to steel mills and how the type of access they gained influenced their photographs. It discusses legal issues associated with access to such industrial sites, plus how the right to publish or exhibit may be limited after access is given. It incorporates excerpts of interviews with photographers and one with a photographer's assistant in Asia, Europe, and North America.

Ethics and Law

Ethical and legal principles and their respective professional standards and statutes overlap but differ. For instance, a paparazzi may legally position themselves on a hill in a park to photograph celebrities’ sexual activities occurring behind a high fence in a nearby private yard, even though such behavior sometimes raises ethical questions. In contrast, it may be ethical to photograph leaking drums of hazardous chemicals outside a defunct steel mill—thus disclosing a major public health danger—but illegal to climb a wall onto private property to make the same photos. In situations like these, ethics codes are merely guidelines that are unenforceable in court.

Trespass and privacy statutes and professional ethics codes vary greatly among countries, a fact that is particularly relevant for this study involving photographers from many nations who have carried out their work in many more nations. Yet with significant variables are time and occupation. Because statues and codes may be amended or revised, photographers in 2013 may face different legal constraints and professional standards than they would have faced decades, even a century, earlier, in the same country. Also, should ethical and legal standards change depending on occupational status? Hot Metal, Cold Reality includes images by photojournalists, documentary photographers, art photographers, commercial photographers, and company photographers. Those image makers may belong to associations with different codes of ethics, or no code, or may belong to no professional organization.

In addition, many codes are silent on the issue of access to property, although some urge respect in general terms for privacy. For instance, the American Society of Media Photographers (2013) states that editors and photographers have a “right to the privacy and property rights of one’s subjects,” while the National Press Photographers Association Code (2012) says, “for total and unrestricted access to subjects, recommend alternative to shallow or rushed opportunities, seek a diversity of viewpoints, and work to show unpolished or unnoticed points of view.”

Most published research by media scholars relevant to access to property explores visual journalists’ access to consulting, property (Sherer, 1985, 1991). There are two major reasons: In the United States, the First Amendment’s guarantee of press freedom imposes constitutional obligations on governments, not on private businesses or individuals. Also, criminal and civil trespass laws are more likely to be enforced by property owners than trespass on private rather than public property.

Lawsuits have focused on the right—or lack of a right—of visual journalists to carry out news gathering on private property without owners’ consent. Not all such cases concern mere physical trespass and invasion of privacy; some involve instead, or additionally, journalists’ behavior once on private property, such as undercover reporting, hidden cameras, side-long observations to gain access (Markin, 1999).

For example, litigation over photojournalists’ access to the”的“Capitol Cities”ABC Inc. (1994) awarded damages for intentional infliction of emotional distress stemming from an ABC undercover report of a psychic hotline; hidden cameras on the premises surreptitiously filmed the plaintiffs. KOPV-TV Inc. v. Superior Court (1995) involved television journalists who conducted a door-to-door interview with three children, ages 5 to 11, who lived next door to a murder-suspect scene; no adult was present, and the children had not known about the deaths until a reporter told them, with the camera rolling. In Bouch v. CBS Inc. (1993), a federal judge allowed a civil suit to proceed in a telethon crew had accompanied a social worker into a domestic assault victim’s home; the plaintiff said she thought the journalists were law enforcement officers and had been led to believe themselves to obtain permission for the taping.

By following the law, lack of access may severely impair what photographers can do. In discussing limitations he agreed to in exchange for permission to work at a Pennsylvania mill, American Tom Baril (personal communication, November 10, 2009) said, “Under a more restricted code where he could go inside the facility. “So I got the few pictures I did get, you know, I’m happy with. There’s still access to the old part of the mill. But there’s a chain link fence around it. I guess you could shoot over it.”

When permission is denied, a photographer may opt to break trespass or breaching and entering laws at risk of arrest. That is what American photographer Mark Peck (personal communication, January 5, 2007) acknowledged doing after being refused access to a Jones and Laughlin (J&L) mill. In other words, he was unsatisfied with Baril’s alternative of shooting over a fence.

I had known from walking around that if you go past the mill, there’s a cyclone fence with barbed wire. There was a three-foot hole. I didn’t cut it, but there’s a hole in the bushes. . . . And if you went in and it was dark, you could get to a little shed that was like a trainman’s shed, where you could stage your gear. And from there, you could work within the plant and literally be unseen except for the occasional observer. . . . And from the other side of the river you’d never see, so I thought once I’m in, essentially, I’ve got it. . . . The next Sunday morning, I got up before light, like four a.m. Stopped, got coffee, filled the thermos, got donuts, got all my gear into that train shed, moved on, light, started to make pictures. Worked all day. Little portable stove, battery strobe. And just started to go to work. And I continued to do that . . . every Sunday for two years.

Photographers confronted with such options may need to make a subjective decision on how to balance the constraints of law against the imperatives of ethics. What circumstances justify committing a criminal act by entering private property without permission? Should it matter whether the violator photographs identifiable people or only physical objects? Does art justify illegal entry? Do copyright considerations or the need to express environmental contamination that threatens public health? Or reveal inhumane, exploitive, or perilous working conditions? Even if the answer to any two or more of these questions, would a civil or criminal court accept a necessity defense? (And Forget Them Their Trespasses,” 1990).

Discussion: Access to Steel Mills Through Photographers’ Experiences

Photographers may be corporate employees, management guests, or trespassers, but they must always be inventive. Their accounts of access reveal a great deal about them and the companies they photographed. Several photographers described their working methods once inside a mill. Some recall relationships with their minds and discussed safety and liability in such dramatic, challenging, and often perilous situations.

Photographers’ documentary and aesthetic aims, combined with the pressures of ethics and cooperation granted by a company, greatly influence the images they make. How freely a photographer can move around a mill or how a company-supplied mill restricts the image maker’s movements dramatically affects the content and form of the image.

Photography of steel mills began about the same time that modern steel making became possible through invention of the Bessemer converter (furnace) in 1855. Photographers have actively engaged this topic ever since. The pioneering German industrialist Alfred Krupp hired Hugo van der Ven (1854) as the company’s first full-time photographer. Krupp did not allow Van der Ven access to his employee positions.

Many, perhaps even most, photographs of steel mills have been made under such conditions. They were made to document the company’s work; aesthetic, artistic, cultural, and social aspects were secondary, if present at all. Molten Light is not primarily concerned with straight photographic documentation; rather, it focuses on photographers who married artistic vision with industrial content. With a few exceptions, those included in Molten Light were employed by steel or other industrial companies; instead, they were independent documentary photographers and artists.

The stunning nature of van der Ven’s early
photographs (Figure 2) and his decades-long relationship with Alfred Krupp are all the more interesting because, as an employee, he needed to interpret Krupp's business vision rather than his own artistic vision. Van Deren's task was to document Krupp's rapidly expanding company; he began to make periodic panoramas of the Kruppische Gußstahlfabrik in 1861. These panoramas started modestly and ended up monumental; the one from 1861 has three panels, which from 1867, with 11 panels, encompasses the broader view of the expanding plant (von Dewitz, 2005). The 1864 panorama was the most conceptually ambitious. It encapsulates the Krupp enterprise and serves as a metaphor for the emerging modern steel industry: labor, transportation, and war are all represented. From a historical perspective, this image serves as a reminder that as steel making became more efficient, it required fewer workers.

As technology evolved, photographic materials became increasingly light-sensitive and lenses became faster, making possible interior scenes of the workers who made steel and the processes used to make it. By the late 1890s, industrial photography was common practice. By the early 20th century, steel was being photographed in all regions of the industrialized world. When steel making began to contract in the West in the last third of the 20th century—and as it headed east to Asia and south to Latin America—photographers followed those cycles as well.

While approaches to photographing steel have expanded greatly since the mid-1800s and the processes of making steel evolved from a system that required ever-increasing numbers of workers to today's computerized mills that require only a few highly skilled workers, one thing has not changed: Photographs cannot be made without access. Photography "by its nature . . . requires direct observation," and photojournalists and other photographers "must be physically present" and cannot "construct their reports from second-hand sources" (Kim, 2012).

Once manufactured, steel becomes the raw material for everything from stainless steel egg slicers and surgical instruments to skyscrapers, bridges, automobiles, and ships. In the 1980s, Peruvian-born American Philipp Rittermann photographed shipbuilding on the Southern California coast. Rittermann told how he got access to the site where the late-infamous Exxon Valdez was under construction (Figure 3). Through his involvement with the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, Rittermann met a board member who was a lawyer for the National Steel and Shipbuilding Company. Rittermann (personal communication, April 23, 2009) recalled:

[The board member] had seen my images, he liked them. He said, "You know, you should come and photograph in the shipyard." And I said, "I’ve been trying to." And he said, "Well, let’s see if I can get you in there." And it took a long time, but he had some of my images up on the wall, and eventually I had a contract, in which I signed my life away, in case anything happened to me—sort of like your disclaimer . . . or disclosure. And I

had a year to do it. I had access, within twenty-four hours, to call, and I would be given a golf cart and a hard hat and two badges, and I could go anywhere I wanted in the whole shipyard yard.

Having had such freedom, he responded that the company’s lawyer was an art enthusiast who recognized that the type of photographs Rittermann would make differed vastly from those of company photographers; Rittermann distinguished between what he was doing and the more mundane reasons for industrial photographs. Because the company lawyer belonged to the museum board and loved art, Rittermann got in and was free to make whatever images he chose. He did not receive, however, the same freedom to exhibit or publish his work. All photographs were subject to company review, and he was told that some could not be used.

Controlling the company’s public image and reducing potential liability for safety or environmental damage are strong reasons for companies to be concerned about whom they allow to photograph and under what circumstances those pictures are used.

Sometimes one photographer has been permitted to make and publish photographs, but a subsequent person's request for access encounters problems. For example, research for Motion Light took the lead author to China to interview photographers Zhou Hai and Chen Jia gang and to interview Noah Weinzweig, Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky's assistant while working in China. Weinzweig works as a translator for English-speaking visitors and also arranges for visitors to access places in China. Through him, Burtynsky was allowed to photograph at Bao Steel, a site the lead author wanted to visit. At first Weinzweig (personal communication, October 1, 2008) thought that arranging access would not be difficult; however, it turned out to be impossible:

I called Bao to try to get permission for your tour. And I had made friends with some of the people at Bao back then, when Ed was shooting. And they told me, they said, "Well, you know what? Actually, we never told you this, but there was a bit of a backlash because we let you into the factory." And some of Ed’s shots ended up in a publication—a Chinese publication. And the text . . . badmouthed Bao Steel’s environmental policies . . . . So their bosses at the higher level of Bao Steel got wind of this and scolded the people that had assisted us, the lower management or middle management. So they were a bit—they were, like, you know, "It’s unlikely we’re gonna let you in again."

Gaining access is difficult enough in a photographer's own country. It can be much harder in a nation that is much less open than the United States or Western Europe. This difficulty can be magnified if the company is state-owned, as Bao Steel is. Weinzweig detailed how he and Burtynsky obtained entry into Bao Steel (Figure 4). It is a story that involves ingenuity and extensive cooperation from the Canadian government. It is a story that illustrates how the work of an important artist can be used as a tool of diplomacy. And it is a story that illustrates
permission granted from a desire to be diplomatic can also be used as a shield for shifting responsibility if something goes wrong. Weinsweig (personal communication, October 1, 2008) said,

Bao is owned by the government; so we had to go through Foreign Affairs in Shanghai. [Early on, I realized that I needed political weight behind this project. Otherwise, I wasn’t going to get into state-owned enterprises and big factories. So I went to the Canadian embassy here. And this was the best thing . . . I did for our project. I said, “Listen.” I brought in a couple of Ed’s books . . . and I said, “My name’s Noah. I’m working for this very famous artist in Canada. This is his work. We’re having a lot of difficulty getting into these places. . . . Is there anything you could do?”]

There’s this guy . . . the head of cultural affairs at the time. He was magnificent. Right away . . . he got it. And he said, “This is what we’re going to do. We’re going to write you a letter. We’re going to introduce Ed. We’re going to send it to the foreign ministry. We’re going to let them know about it. And you can take this letter and go anywhere you want with it. . . . Within an hour, I just had everything I wanted and more. And that letter . . . from the Canadian government was exactly what I was lacking . . . In China, you know, everyone liked me, they liked the idea; they liked Ed’s work. . . . But it’s a responsibility issue. Ultimately, if we go in there and shoot photographs and something goes wrong—whether during the photography or afterward, politically—who’s going to take responsibility? With a letter from the government of Canada, it’s the ultimate scapegoat for everyone, because they can just point the blame and say, “You know what? The government of Canada said this guy is a great artist and . . . a national treasure of Canada.” So they can just point the blame somewhere else. . . . Once I learned about abdication of responsibility, I figured out how to work the landscape.

American Terry Evans—like Bourke-White

decades earlier—got access to a mill from the top. For some projects the partners with Gerald Adelmann, president and CEO of Openlands, an organization dedicated to protection of “natural and open spaces.” Adelmann was a close friend of the CEO of ArcelorMittal Steel, liked Evans’s photographs—primarily landscapes at the time—and arranged access. Evans (personal communication, June 17, 2008) described her introduction to the inside of a mill and the minder who accompanied her on all shoots:

[CEO Lou Schorsch] arranged for me to have a tour. And as soon as I was in there I thought, well, this is totally foreign to anything I’ve done so far, but I have to come back. And eventually . . . he gave me permission and . . . I had to have someone with me every second when I was in there . . . because it’s so dangerous . . . The guy—who was wonderful—who was my partner over there and who took me around every time has a higher count than I do of the number of times that I went over there. But it was like thirty-five or forty-five times that I visited there.

Evan’s comments illustrate an extremely high degree of cooperation from the company, as well as her respect for the company people with whom she worked. She commented further about cooperation and on-site safety, saying of the mill’s head of environment and safety:

If I was, for example, photographing in the blast furnace, then he would coordinate that with the blast furnace foreman. And then that person would escort us around because he would know more about his immediate conditions than Harold would. And so there was always the absolute understanding from the first day that if they said move, I had to move. Never mind if I was in the middle of an exposure. Sometimes I couldn’t go where I wanted to because it was simply too dangerous. And I had total trust and respect in their judgment, of course, about where I could go because . . . it’s too risky not to. . . . But sometimes, a couple times, something slightly unexpected would happen, and they would say, “Okay, you need to move back here right now.” And so I did. And the first time that happened, I think it was
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American Terry Evans—like Bourke-White decades earlier—got access to a mill from the top. For some projects she partnered with Gerald Adelmann, president and CEO of Openlands, an organization dedicated to protection of “natural and open spaces.” Adelmann was a close friend of the CEO of Accelor/Mittal Steel, liked Evans’ photographs—primarily landscapes at the time—and arranged access. Evans’ (personal communication, June 17, 2008) described her introduction to the inside of a mill and the minder who accompanied her on all shoots:

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by a basic oxygen furnace... So I moved, but I didn't move my camera gear. And I came back and everything was totally coated with steel dust [including] my four-by-five camera. My case was open, all the stuff I had in it. So I learned.

Although company people generally ran interference for Evans, she described a situation at an ArcelorMittal mill, where things did not go as expected. That was the only mill where the minder interfered with her artistic judgment:

And I didn't get any pictures that I ever ended up using there... They practically set up my tripod for me, you know. They'd say, "You can go here but not here. But, you know, how about right here?" And that wasn't interesting at all.

Evans's comments demonstrate the often-symbiotic relationship between photographer and minder. To her, her minder was mostly an asset. He facilitated her work, making it possible to photograph safely in a potentially dangerous setting. Some images, including Slag Processing, Indiana Harbor from 2006 (Figure 5), reveal the extremely dramatic image a photographer can create by getting close enough to the intense heat, light, and molten metal. Blistering heat and how it affects the way a photographer works has been a concern for decades. Bourke-White (1933) described her working method in the 1920s in the Otis Steel mill. In a typed version of an autobiography in her archive, she talked about the heat, sparks, and concern with having to work quickly lest the film melt. She wrote the following in a section titled "My Camera and I Are Scorched!":

In the midst of flying sparks and intense heat I worked away. Sometimes the heat was so great it raised blisters on the varnish on my camera. Sometimes I had to have men arranged bucket-brigade fashion so I could hand back my films out of the heat before they would melt. Sometimes I would spend hours in a traveling crane slung up near the roof, traveling back and forth photographing the fiery crater far below. Always the men below would watch the traveling crane anxiously—they were afraid I would faint from the heat and fumes which rose to the ceiling.

Evans found the company's insistence on a minder mostly an advantage, even a collaborative experience, while other photographers found minders an impediment. For Viktor Kolář (personal communication, May 20, 2008) of the Czech Republic, a minder made it extremely difficult to photograph in a dramatically beautiful but physically dangerous mill:

They were always sending a guy with you. And you know, to cope with this guy who was always talking, always telling you what is attractive... These were the things I usually didn't want to photograph... I couldn't tell him, "Listen, you shut up because I need to concentrate myself."... You learn, little by little, how to cut yourself off from your mind... This is what people do. Photographing business is entirely private business. You have to be focused... you have to be alone.

American Michael Schultz has worked for many years on a large-scale study of steel mills and foundries (Figure 6). His work has taken him all over the United States, throughout Europe, and to China. Unlike most other photographers interviewed, he had to solve access problems on a rolling, continuing basis. He needed to figure out how permission to work in one mill or foundry could facilitate getting into the next one. Asked what it takes to gain entry to industrial sites, Schultz (personal communication, March 12, 2011) talked about trust and respect for a company's proprietary secrets:

I think that what it takes is the companies must have some sense of trust. If I had one word, it'd be trust. They've gotta know that you're coming in not to take away from them—and by that I mean secrets, proprietary secrets of how the castings are made. And they've gotta have a sense that you're going to honor your word, that you're not gonna publish your work without their permission. If you can gain that trust, you can gain access. Now, for me, the fact that they knew that I was doing a book and I would explain why I wanted to do the project—and I think that
they knew as I knew that nobody had done anything like this before. Yeah, foundries have been photographed, steel mills have been photographed, but specifically large foundries have never been systematically covered the way that I was going to do it, especially in color and especially with a digital process.

Schultz became a specialist with a deep understanding of the processes used in steelmaking and foundry work. His knowledge of the industry, combined with talent as an artist, opened doors to what he described as a “hidden industry” (Schultz, personal communication, March 12, 2011). It was a pattern of one person leading to another, and of friends, colleagues, and even competitors embracing his artistic vision:

[You get] to know one person who knows another person, because the foundry industry’s very tight. CEOs and presidents and foundry managers know all the other foundries in the area or in their particular sector of castings; they know them—

German Uwe Niggemeier (personal communication, May 25, 2008) has devoted himself to the photography of steel and has worked in many countries (Figure 7). His website presents his photographs of steel mills in an almost encyclopedic fashion. He described the process of gaining access:

It’s trial and error. You write a letter and then you call later, and you always are lucky to get the right person. If you get the wrong one, that’s the end of it. The larger the mill is, the larger the company, the more difficult it is because more people are involved in the decision. And with a small company, you often have got a boss or a kind of family-run business, and they say, “Okay, come in. I like the idea.”

Niggemeier and Schultz once made an industrial photographic odyssey together. While Niggemeier managed to get into mills across the world, he found United States Steel (U.S. Steel) inhospitable. Local police met him when he arrived at its Clairton, Pennsylvania, plant. Their intention through intimidation was to prevent him from making photographs.

They have a horrible attitude to everything that was pictures from outside. We were really hunted by them. Well, they had no right, but we were in Clairton. There was a nice row of old houses, all closed down. Must’ve been four, six bars. Everything’s closed down. And in the back, the mill is still running. And they came out first with their security guard. And we told them, “You have no right to hassle us. We are on public ground here.” And they said, “Okay, show us your ID”... And then a police car showed up. Showed ID. Another police car showed up. In the end, we were sitting there in the middle with the three police cars around us. And then we traveled on to Braddock, where the other active mill is, and they were already waiting for us there. We went to the back side on a public road. Took a picture from the back side into the mill, and immediately they were there. They came high speed down the road and told us, “You’ve been warned before.” We told them, “You don’t have to warn us. We are on public ground.” And they said, “Well, just wait a minute.” And five police cars came from two different counties.

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Steel companies, like most businesses, make decisions they believe are in their best interests. While U.S. Steel took a hard line by excluding Niggemeier, Perrott had to determine how to solve his access problem when J&L refused a request to photograph in its Eliza Works plant in Pittsburgh in the early 1980s.

Perrott, who discovered that J&L planned to close Eliza, felt strongly that the plant should be documented before being dismantled. It was a time of great contraction in the American steel industry, when mills were closing across the country and throughout Europe. The golden age of steel had ended in the West, and Perrott wanted to preserve the sad remnants of the industry through a poetic documentary study. His 1981 Eliza, Fallen Furnaces poetically symbolizes the end of Big Steel in the United States and Western Europe (Figure 8). Previously he had photographed in several J&L plants and so wrote to company president Tom Graham, although he assumed his request would be denied. He recalled that letter:

“Dear Mr. Graham, I think this is a moment in history that can’t be missed... I’m asking permission to go in and make photographs at my expense. And I’d be happy to sign any waivers of liability that might appease your law department.”

As this article noted earlier, Perrott chose to trespass rather than give up on the project.

U.S. owners primarily controlled access, whether

Figure 7. Uwe Niggemeier, German, 2007. Charging the AUD-violad, Latrobe Specialty Steel, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, 15 x 11 inches (48.1 x 27.9 cm). Analog film, digital ink jet print, photograph © Uwe Niggemeier, 2007, courtesy of the photographer. Original image in color.

Figure 8. Mark Perrott, American, 1981, Eliza, Fallen Furnaces 6 x 8 1/4 inches (17.4 x 20.8 cm), Selenium-toned gelatin silver print, photograph © Mark Perrott, 1981, courtesy of the photographer.
their mill or foundry was small and family-owned or part of a huge multinational conglomerate. In some instances it was different in Europe where powerful trade unions could insist on access for those people they wanted inside. Bernard Bay of Belgium made his photographs at the request of a union and received a great deal of freedom to make the pictures he wanted. His haunting portrait of a steel worker wearing goggles and protective clothing was made in 1983 (Figure 9). Bay (personal communication, June 30, 2010) described his freedom inside the mill and the collaborative process of working with the union, not with the company.

When I go out of the school, some people there had already seen my pictures, so they asked me to do pictures in this factory. But they let me do what I would like to do. They don't tell me you have to take pictures of the machines, pictures of the man who works with the machine, like this, like this. No, I was free. And then we made a choice together, inside my picture. ... And we discussed. And if I say, "This is better; I prefer this one," it was okay like this.

The industry dramatically changed as mills across the United States and Europe closed. Hundreds of thousands of workers lost jobs, communities were devastated. Photographers who had been attracted to the drama and power of the industry as industrialization created the modern world began looking at issues of deindustrialization, industrial pollution, and the dismantling of mills in the West and their rebuilding in countries such as India and Brazil. For example, when Ferris photographed the closed J&L Eliza Works as it was shutting down, J&L still owned the facility.

Steel mills, however, do not just disappear. Sometimes their remnants remain as decaying industrial ruins for decades, as happened to the Bethlehem Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Many photographers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries felt drawn to closed and abandoned industrial sites. American Theo Anderson was attracted to the once-mighty remains of Bethlehem Steel. However, he learned that there was no longer a company to deal with. Bethlehem Steel, founded in 1857, had gone bankrupt in 2001, and its assets were sold in 2003. For Anderson, the quest for access started with the need to learn who controlled the permission process. In an interview about Where's Jack? The Ghost of Bethlehem Steel—his large, color, poetic series exploring the haunting shards of the mill—Anderson (personal communication, March 10, 2008) described what he found and his frustrations (Figure 10). Eventually he gained access through a chance meeting with a maintenance worker still employed there.

Conclusion

Ever since van der Warden made his panoramas of the Krupp works at the dawn of the Industrial Age, photographers have been fascinated by the documentary and artistic possibilities of steel mills. Although coming from many countries and working across more than 150 years, their stories about gaining access are remarkably similar in many ways. They relate—and perhaps
embellish—how they managed to get inside to create powerful and moving photographs. In the process, they reveal a deep love and fascination with steel as a material, steelmaking as a process, and steelworkers as multidimensional people who helped build the modern world. They describe not just how they got in but also how the particular type of access influenced the images they could make and the technical problems they confronted. Photographing in steel mills and other industrial sites was not merely a job. Rather, it was a labor of love and artistry driven by a passion to reveal what steel meant to them and to the broader society.

In pursuing that passion, photographers learned that the ability to make steel photographs leaves them almost always dependent on the cooperation of the company or government that controls the industrial site. They learned that entry does not guarantee freedom to make pictures of whatever they want, wherever they desire within the industrial landscape.

Thus it is clear that, for steel photographers, the challenge has always been “how do I get in, and how can I find the pictures I want to create?” As this article shows, owners were often less than enthusiastic about granting access, and even if they granted access they frequently wanted to control the use of the pictures. That challenge becomes more difficult in the aftermath of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, which made corporations and governments more cautious in allowing access to industrial workplaces and often more suspicious of the motives of those seeking access. Further adding to that challenge is a growing concern among policy—privacy of individuals and, on a business level, of proprietary information—around the globe in an age when technology makes intrusion increasingly easy.

Notes
1 More than 30 professionals were interviewed from 12 countries for this project. Photographers from these countries mentioned access issues: Belgium, Canada, China, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Sometimes the access issue related to working in a country other than their own; for example, a Swedish photographer talked about access to mills in India, and a Canadian photographer discussed working in China.

2 See the Openlands website at http://www.openlands.org:443 for a discussion of their work.

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