

Ripple Effect: From Industry to Environment in the Kalamazoo River Basin

Sarah Lindley and Steve Nelson

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As part of a collaboration funded through the Great Lakes Colleges Association, Steve Nelson and Sarah Lindley entered into a joint investigation of the former Plainwell Paper Mill, a brownfield site on the Kalamazoo River in Southwest Michigan. The mill, incorporated as the Michigan Paper Company in 1886, changed ownership numerous times throughout the twentieth century, prior to closing its doors for good in 2000. It was one of several paper plants in the area that contributed to the PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) contamination of the river that led to its EPA designation as a Superfund site in 1990. The 80-mile stretch of impacted water, sediment and adjacent lands comprises one of the largest regional cleanup sites in the United States. Many of the responsible parties had already left the area in 1990 and within ten years of the Superfund designation, nearly all of the area mills had closed.

In 2006, the City of Plainwell acquired the then abandoned structure and surrounding land in place of back taxes owed by the previous owner. In taking possession of an active brownfield site occupying one-quarter of the downtown area, the community hoped to determine its own future. At present, some sections of the mill have been demolished and sold for scrap; three historic structures have been redeveloped and are currently occupied by City Hall, Plainwell Public Safety and a private development firm. The remaining historic structures sit at odds with the elements awaiting further resolution and development. The EPA continues its work on cleaning up the site.

In the summer of 2015, Sarah Lindley and Steve Nelson were invited by the City to stage site-specific interventions in two of the abandoned buildings as part of the City's visioning process for the site. The contents of the exhibition in the adjacent galleries include photographs, objects and residue from that collaboration.

Sarah Lindley

“Exposure Pathway”— the route, path or course a pollutant takes from a source of contamination to people, animals or environments

My work is generated in response to the pull of place, a desire to understand the landscape of my surroundings and what is concealed beneath the surface. Throughout the creation of referential and imagined landscapes, I perform the roles of researcher, geographer, architect, project supervisor and laborer. The process of investigating and interpreting the push-play power dynamics between industry, surrounding communities and environments raises many questions for me and reveals the interconnectivity of each point within the waterway system itself. The delicate structures in my work are not entirely fixed in time and do not dwell on only one environmental trauma. In tending them, I consider the acts of violence and intervention on the land they represent.

The large white construction, *Exposure Pathways*, started as a site-specific sculptural intervention in the former Plainwell Paper Mill. The 20' x 35' form was fabricated entirely from one ream of abandoned Plainwell Paper product found in the mill and ultimately references the layout of the Kalamazoo Watershed. I worked with assistants in an assembly-line style process over the course of three months, folding and gluing paper into modular tubes that were then tabbed and glued together in larger three-dimensional sections that comprise the overall form. Designed for a space in the mill it was originally lit solely by the limited sunlight that entered the building and moved across the form throughout the day. Similar to the architecture in which it was housed, the construction was also at odds with the elements. It responded to each downpour and humid day, shifting and transitioning over the course of the exhibition.

For the Kendall exhibition, *Exposure Pathways* takes on new references and identities. I have juxtaposed it with Superfund Areas 1-5, which focuses on the stretch of the river in Kalamazoo and Allegan Counties that has already been or is currently under remediation by the EPA, and *Exit Allegan 1976*, a sculpture of the last train out of the City of Allegan before the line was closed. The clay structures shift scale and were developed using clay bodies that have been saturated with stains and oxides. Referencing topographical maps, aerial and historical photographs, I followed the natural evolution of terrain. Linear elements were stretched, rolled, manipulated and layered for the river. The final loose and open construct exists in a brittle vitrified state that emulates force and fragility and reflects my questions about power and passivity.

Steve Nelson

After Operations

I peer into worlds long abandoned. I am curious why I would want to even be here; the air hangs heavy with moisture and the residual scent of chemicals that have saturated the floor I stand on. I pass from one chamber to another, wandering without a sense of direction. The labyrinth of these corridors of production gives me an uneasy feeling about my own destiny. But why do I also have a feeling of belonging? What draws me back to this place? I emerge into daylight, surrounded by alien forms that stare toward the distant horizon. What are you seeking?

I photograph to probe relationship of memory and loss. I question the illusion of purpose and function of the post-industrial environment in abandoned spaces I photograph. Void of recent human activities, they are postured in the past, between the familiar and unknown.

A time capsule: the Plainwell Paper Mill that is left in a state of decline due to natural forces and salvage operations. These photographs were taken in the former Plainwell Paper Mill over the course of a year. The images present the industrial architecture, interiors and surroundings from intimate perspectives. Salvage operations, disuse, and the accumulated impact of natural forces have resulted in the site's current state of abandonment and disorder.

The *Interloper* series reveals intimate perspectives through the intersections of abrupt operational abandonment and the intrusive forces of nature. Probing the recesses of the facilities interior, 15 years after operations ceased, these forgotten spaces evoke in me a quiet sense of entropy, where function and purpose are lost, leaving ambitions of industry in decline.

The *Angels and Guardians* roof top vents and stacks pose as vestiges to their past functions of mediating interior mill spaces with the heavens. Their weathered armored forms are ennobling and at the same time sinister, as they overlook the surrounding watershed that has been impacted by the mill's production. They are uneasy sentinels of the industry, and although their function is no longer needed they remain blindly committed to their purpose.

Through these photographs I seek to reveal questions of power, and the value of industry and production in furthering the human condition. What was the value of the production process of this industry with regard to balance of commerce and the resulting environmental impact? What will

the function of these spaces be in the future? Will they ever find a function, or will they continue to decline and ultimately face demolition? I hope that the questions raised through the photographs contribute the conversation about purpose and function and our perceptions of the past, present, and future conditions.

Biography

Sarah Lindley is sculptor and installation artist whose work addresses the power dynamics between American Industry and surrounding communities. Her work has been recognized by numerous grants and exhibitions, including biennales in France, Korea and Taiwan. She holds degrees from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, BFA 1996, and the University of Washington, MFA 2001. She has thrice been an Arts-Industry Resident in Kohler, Wisconsin and was one of two inaugural Faculty Fellows in the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership. She is currently a Professor of Art at Kalamazoo College, where she has taught sculpture and ceramics since 2001. She resides in Plainwell, MI, just one mile away from the former Plainwell Paper Mill.

Steve Nelson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Hope College where he has taught photography since 1989. He received a Bachelor of Fine Art Degree in Photography from Western Michigan University before Syracuse University where he earned a Master of Fine Arts in Art Media Studies. His photographs have been exhibited widely, including solo and group exhibitions in Chicago and Grand Rapids Michigan. His 2013 exhibition in the De Pree Art Center gallery at Hope College "The Gardens of Post-Industry" featured a suite of large format photographs of several of Michigan's abandoned industrial sites that are being reclaimed by natural forces.