

Phil Hessler

Artist Statement

The distillation of language and of steel - and how language can paper over the mess left by these articulations- is often in the background of what I do. Turning my lens toward dereliction, I study changes in the status and position of old objects. I take photos, I make installations, and I draw in no particular order.

The kind of poetry that I look for is empty. Worker incident reports and company memoranda have a clean, hard logic to them. Beneath appreciable qualities here, one can recognize parallels with the sharp efficiency of a machine aesthetic that sputters out moral and material bankruptcy. With labor scrapes and metal scraps, Pinkertons wall up the sepulchre of Carnegie. All of this is licked clean in a revisionist fiction in which industrial logic met its end in a graceful arc; in which labor did not end in a disbanded, disenfranchised, and occasionally dismembered work force. The wasteland is christened post-industrial, the workers shuffled into an awkward role in an information economy with no sense of its own history and a questionable trajectory. With entropy and with poetry I stand with my back turned.

I work in Pittsburgh. Shoddily re-purposed industrial complexes and abandoned lots frame my art practice. In all of this there is a tinge of vitriolic nostalgia.

'Defamiliarization' (taken from the *ika* of Japanese writer Kenzaburo Oe and the *verfremdungseffekt* of Brecht) is preferable to the status quo. I cite Alan Sekula, Gordon Matta Clark, and Lewis Hine as other primary influences in work that aligns with critical realist ontology.

Like Walter Benjamin put it, as only he could, "Where we perceive a chain of events, [the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage ... A storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."