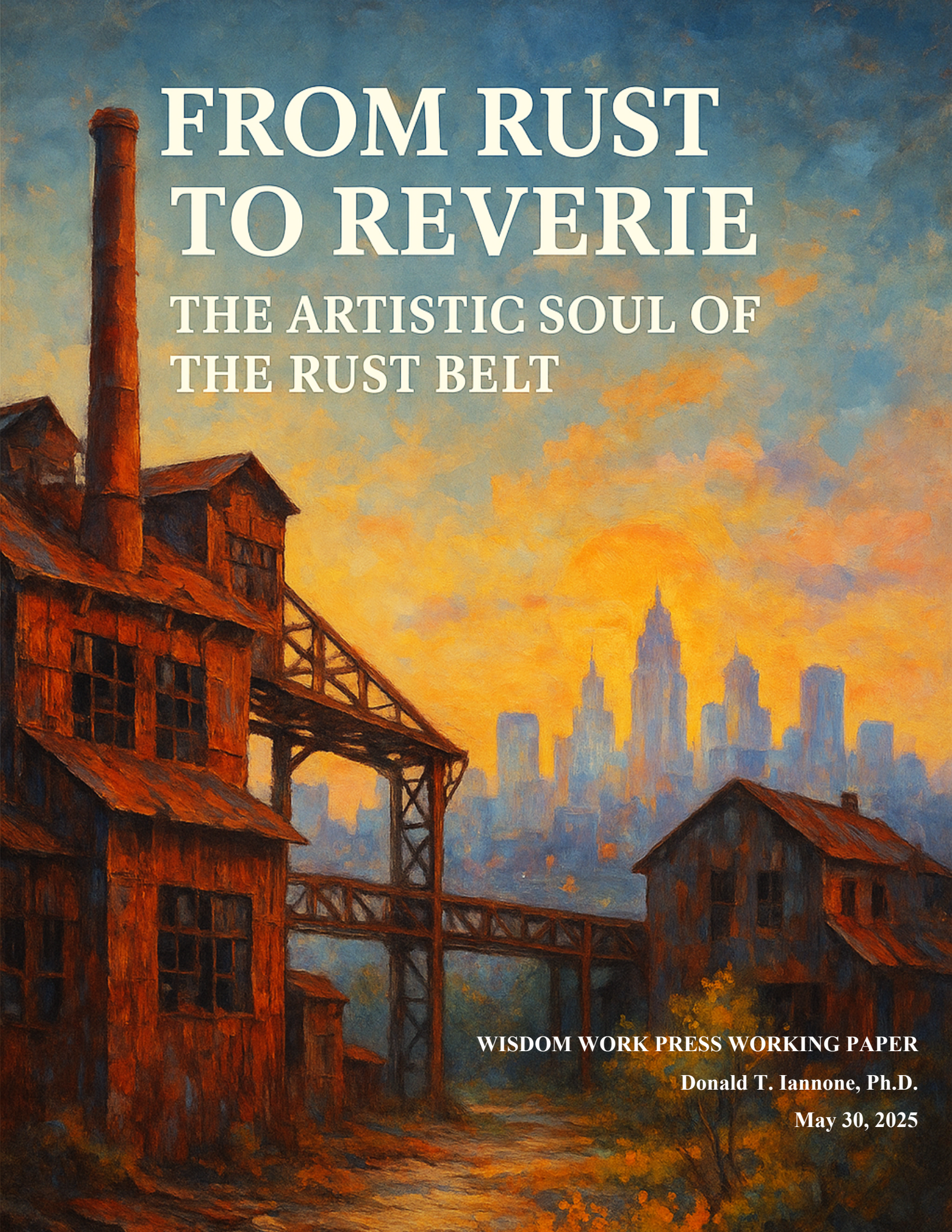

WISDOM WORK PRESS WORKING PAPER

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From Rust to Reverie: The Artistic Soul of the Rust Belt

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I. Prologue

Art and creativity have been lifelines in my journey—tools not only for expression, but for reinvention. At several turning points in my life, when old identities gave way or the world shifted beneath me, it was through writing, photography, poetry, and painting that I rediscovered purpose and presence. These practices allowed me to reimagine who I was and what the world could be. In many ways, the Rust Belt has undergone a similar transformation—scarred by loss, yet rich with the raw materials of rebirth. This paper explores how that region, like the creative process itself, offers fertile ground for vision, resilience, and making something new from what remains.
~Don Iannone

When a Factory's Life Ends
By Don Iannone (2008)

Foul gray smoke once rose
from tall redbrick stacks—
a bittersweet plume,
the old factory still breathing.

That cloud is gone now,
along with the hammer-clang chorus
that filled the long days
of men working from dark to dark.

The iron gates hang chained,
no longer parting for grim, unshaven faces,
breath sour with black coffee
and the last drags of morning cigarettes.

It's too easy to blame the strikes.
There were other truths:
cheaper hands in distant places,
customers wanting less steel,
less permanence.

So the laughter quieted.
The dark faces grew darker still,
not from soot,

but from the slow erosion of worth.

The mill is a monument now—
a cold shell in wind and rust,
a fossil in the city's marrow.
Gone too are the paychecks,
which once bought bread,
paid rent,
and soothed backs bent with fatigue.

Two thousand men once stood here,
cracking bad jokes,
dreaming of easier days.

Now those days have come—
and with them,
the end of the dreaming.

II. Introduction: A Landscape of Rust, a Field of Dreams

This paper was originally released for review in April 2023. It has been revised several times. This is the latest version of the paper.

I grew up in Martins Ferry, Ohio—a small town clinging to the banks of the Ohio River—just as its steel mills, coal mines, and metalworking plants were beginning to rust, flicker, and fade. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Ohio Valley still pulsed with industrial life. The valley roared with trains, glowed with molten steel, and buzzed with shift whistles and steel-toed boots on factory floors. But even then, as a boy, I sensed something slipping—a slow unraveling that neither the men at the mills nor the families in their shadows wanted to name.

My father was a millwright and mechanic at the Sylvania Electric plant in South Wheeling, just across the river. That factory, like so many others, closed abruptly—moving its operations to North Carolina in search of cheaper labor and laying off two hundred men in Wheeling, including my father. They were skilled men with deep roots and limited options. My grandfathers, too, were men of steel and rail—one worked in the mills, the other on the railroad. Their labor shaped the land and fed our families, even as the future slowly turned against them. I didn't yet know the word "deindustrialization," but I understood its meaning. It echoed in our dinner table conversations, in the growing silence of once-busy streets, and in the long pauses that filled the air where factory smoke had once hung.

That experience gave me more than memory—it gave me insight. I developed a deeply personal understanding of what the "Rust Belt" means, not just as a geographic label, but as a lived and layered reality. It is the story of loss, yes—but also of resilience, reinvention, and a haunting kind of beauty. The rust that spread across the Ohio Valley was not merely corrosion. It became metaphor. It became material. And for artists, it became muse.

Stories from an Hourglass: A Personal Memoir about My Life and Work is the story of my life—one shaped in profound ways by the people, places, and struggles of America's Rust Belt. These communities gave me my earliest understandings of work, dignity, and the quiet resilience that defines so many Rust Belt lives. Over the course of my career, I worked across 32 states, 10 countries, and 10 American Indian reservations. Whether in urban neighborhoods or rural towns, I dedicated myself to helping leaders and citizens navigate the long aftermath of deindustrialization, supporting them as they worked to reinvent themselves, their communities, and their futures. My path always came back to the same core mission: helping people and places rediscover purpose and value. In writing this memoir, I wanted to capture not only my professional journey, but the emotional and spiritual threads that run through it—the lessons, the disappointments, the quiet victories, and the lasting bonds. It's a deeply personal reflection on a life lived with intention, shaped by the landscapes of memory, work, and hope (Iannone, 2023).

The term “Rust Belt” rose to national use in the 1980s, evoking the decline of America’s industrial core—cities like Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Youngstown (Sugrue, 1996). But the label extends to small towns like Martins Ferry, Steubenville, and Bellaire—places too often overlooked by the cultural spotlight, yet rich with human stories and artistic potential. These are places where the past is visible in every boarded window, where history is a scent in the brick, and where creative spirits still stir among the ruins.

This paper—*From Rust to Reverie*—is a deep reflection and a guide. It explores the profound artistic appeal of the Rust Belt through photography, poetry, film, painting, sculpture, public art, and beyond. Drawing from both scholarly research and lived experience, it offers creators of all kinds an invitation: to see the Rust Belt not as a relic to mourn, but as a living archive of stories, textures, and truths. As cultural historian Julia Bryan-Wilson (2009) suggests, “Art in zones of industrial collapse reveals a potent entanglement of memory, labor, and survival.” This is not simply an elegy for what has been lost—it is a call to find new meaning in what remains.

What follows is a journey through the artistic soul of the Rust Belt—a region long defined by the clang of industry, now reshaped by the quieter rhythms of reinvention. Here, in the skeletal remains of factories and the silent corridors of abandoned warehouses, artists reclaim forgotten spaces and infuse them with meaning. In its ruins, we find reverie—not nostalgia, but a meditative recognition of resilience, where decay becomes a canvas for memory and imagination. In its silence, we hear the pulse of creation, steady and defiant, rising from soot and steel with the urgency of a people determined not to be erased. This is not just a story of loss, but one of enduring spirit, where creativity blooms amid rust and rubble, revealing a region that still speaks—in tones both fierce and tender—of beauty, truth, and becoming.

III. A Landscape of Loss: Industrial Decline as Emotional Terrain

The collapse of industry in the Rust Belt was not simply an economic shift—it was a cultural trauma etched into the buildings, bodies, and memories of those who lived through it. Empty factories became monuments to lives interrupted. Their rusting skeletons stand as quiet witnesses to an era of American productivity that, for better or worse, shaped the national psyche. For the artist, such a landscape is rich with emotional complexity. It offers not only the visual drama of ruin but also the invisible weight of grief, dislocation, and longing.

Industrial loss has long been recognized as a form of collective mourning. In their groundbreaking ethnographic study, *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media* (Krauss, 2000), Ellis Krauss and others noted that post-industrial communities often experience a kind of "civic bereavement," where the shutdown of a major plant or factory functions as a death in the social fabric. In towns like Martins Ferry and Youngstown, Ohio, and Braddock, Pennsylvania that death was felt on every street corner. Yet, for artists and writers, such sites of grief often become places of quiet revelation.

The visual language of industrial decay—peeling paint, broken windows, rust-covered gears—offers a palette of metaphor and texture that is uniquely powerful. Photographers such as Camilo José Vergara have documented these landscapes for decades, capturing what he calls the "architecture of decay" in cities like Detroit, Camden, and Gary (Vergara, 1999). His work, often aligned with the practice of "ruin photography," seeks not to romanticize decline, but to humanize it—to allow viewers to consider the people behind the rust and rubble.

Ruin photography, sometimes criticized for its potential voyeurism, when approached ethically, becomes a form of visual elegy. As art historian Tim Edensor (2005) argues in *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics and Materiality*, post-industrial spaces offer a "complex sensuality" that appeals to the imagination. These sites are full of tension—between history and forgetting, between destruction and persistence, between beauty and collapse. For artists, they offer a means of exploring the subtle textures of human vulnerability.

Poetry and narrative literature have long responded to these emotional terrains. The poems of James Wright—especially his iconic "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio"—are steeped in the aching, steel-tinted atmosphere of the postwar Rust Belt. In that poem, Wright captures not only the economic emptiness of a mill town but also its psychic disquiet: "All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home." His lines express the masculine silence of a generation stripped of purpose when the furnaces cooled and the jobs evaporated.

Similarly, Philip Levine's body of work provides an uncompromising look at life in industrial Detroit, elevating the experiences of factory workers to the realm of the sacred. In poems like "What Work Is," Levine gives voice to the working class without pity or sentimentalism, instead presenting them as figures of stoic endurance. His poetry, grounded in physical labor and personal memory, helps

artists understand that the emotional terrain of industrial decline is not abstract—it is carried in muscle and bone.

Painters, textile artists, and installation creators have also turned to the Rust Belt for inspiration. The use of industrial detritus—metal, rubber, shattered glass—becomes a symbolic act of reclamation. The late artist Charles Simonds, known for his "Dwellings" built into abandoned urban structures, saw these deteriorating spaces not as voids, but as "sites of potential rebirth" (Cullen, 2003). The creative act, in this context, becomes one of spiritual archeology: unearthing not just the remnants of a factory, but the stories buried within it.

Even documentary filmmakers have used industrial decline as a mirror for the human condition. Films such as *American Factory* (2019), produced by the Obamas' Higher Ground Productions, chronicle the tensions and contradictions of globalization through the intimate lens of a shuttered GM plant in Dayton, Ohio, reopened by a Chinese auto-glass company. The documentary captures the emotional vertigo of a workforce caught between past and present, tradition and transformation. It shows that the end of industry is not the end of life—but it does mark a profound shift in how life is imagined and narrated.

In "Art That's Rooted in the Rust Belt," Vera Scekic explores the flourishing creative communities in mid-sized industrial cities like Racine, Wisconsin. She highlights how artists in these areas often choose to live and work there not only for affordability but also for the strong sense of community and authenticity that such environments foster. Despite being overlooked by the mainstream art world, these artists create ambitious and innovative work, driven by collaboration and a commitment to their local culture (Scekic 2020).

As we consider the Rust Belt through an artistic lens, we must remember that these landscapes of loss are not static. They breathe with memory. They pulse with unspoken grief and unfinished stories. For the artist, they offer not only subjects to render, but truths to witness. The challenge—and opportunity—is to engage these spaces with respect, sensitivity, and an openness to the forms of beauty they still contain.

To work in the terrain of post-industrial America is to enter into a dialogue with absence. It is to paint with shadows and write with echoes. But in that dialogue, something extraordinary happens: loss gives way to meaning. And in meaning, artists find their purpose.

IV. Historical Memory and Nostalgia: Rust Belt as Time Capsule

To walk through an old mill town in the Rust Belt is to enter a time capsule—one filled with industrial ruins, mid-century signage, ghosted advertisements on brick walls, and stories embedded in steel and soot. The past is not buried in these places; it lingers in plain sight. For artists, such communities offer not only visual cues but profound psychological material—a layered archive of memory, struggle, and identity. The Rust Belt invites a kind of creative archaeology, where history is unearthed, reimagined, and remixed through image, word, sound, and texture.

The relationship between memory and place has long been a concern of cultural historians and artists alike. Pierre Nora's (1989) theory of *lieux de mémoire*—"sites of memory"—posits that certain locations become vessels of collective remembrance, particularly in the face of loss or transformation. The Rust Belt is replete with such sites: abandoned factories, shuttered schools, empty churches, and defunct union halls. Each functions as a mnemonic device, triggering personal recollections and communal narratives that resist erasure.

In Rust Belt art, historical memory often manifests in the preservation—or reinterpretation—of material culture. Painters and sculptors repurpose industrial scraps into contemporary statements. Photographers document the slow disintegration of buildings as a metaphor for the erosion of economic security and social cohesion. Poets invoke family legacies that stretch back to immigrant ancestors who laid track, rolled steel, or descended into coal mines. These acts of creation are simultaneously acts of remembrance.

Nostalgia, often dismissed as sentimentality, carries more weight in post-industrial contexts. As theorist Svetlana Boym (2001) explains in *The Future of Nostalgia*, there is a distinction between "restorative nostalgia," which seeks to recreate a lost past, and "reflective nostalgia," which lingers in longing and explores the fractures of memory. Artists working in the Rust Belt often embody the latter—aware that the past cannot be reclaimed, but that it must be honored, interrogated, and transformed.

This reflective nostalgia is visible in the literary voices emerging from the region. Scott Russell Sanders, in works like *Writing from the Center* (1995), argues that "the ground under our feet holds memory." His essays blend memoir, history, and environmental awareness, modeling a style that has become increasingly influential in Rust Belt creative nonfiction. Similarly, the publications emerging from Belt Publishing in Cleveland—including *The Detroit Neighborhood Guidebook* and *Voices from the Rust Belt*—are part oral history, part personal essay, and part cultural anthropology. These books serve as portals into the memory worlds of Rust Belt communities, preserving voices often left out of national conversations.

Visual artists too have embraced memory as medium. Photographer and installation artist LaToya Ruby Frazier's acclaimed series *The Notion of Family* (2014) documents three generations of

women in Braddock, Pennsylvania—a town hollowed out by the decline of the steel industry. Her work merges autobiography and social critique, showing that memory is not only what we carry forward, but also what we use to reckon with the systems that shaped us. In her words, art becomes a form of "witnessing history from the inside out" (Frazier, 2014).

Public art projects across the Rust Belt have harnessed memory as a communal force. In Youngstown, Ohio, the *Voices of the Valley* oral history project and accompanying murals map personal stories onto public walls. In Pittsburgh, the *Carrie Furnaces*—a former blast furnace site turned National Historic Landmark—now hosts large-scale art installations and memory-driven tours, turning a former engine of industry into a crucible for creative heritage work.

The interplay of memory and nostalgia extends even to sound. Musicians and sound artists have begun capturing the ambient resonance of old industrial sites—clanging pipes, creaking beams, dripping water—and remixing them into haunting sonic landscapes. These aural time capsules evoke a felt sense of history that transcends language, drawing the listener into the forgotten rhythms of labor and loss.

For creators drawn to the Rust Belt, historical memory offers both a compass and a canvas. To engage with the past is not to live in it, but to give it voice—to acknowledge its ache and dignity, its brutality and brilliance. Memory, in this context, becomes not a prison of yearning, but a palette of layered meanings.

From Rust Belt to Artist Belt is an executive summary produced in December 2008 by the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture (CPAC) in Cleveland, Ohio. It presents a compelling argument that Rust Belt cities—often struggling with deindustrialization, population loss, poverty, and vacant properties—can be revitalized by integrating artists and cultural workers into community development strategies.

The report explains that while these cities face significant challenges, they also possess unique assets: low costs of living, abundant industrial spaces, strong arts sectors, and a tradition of community development organizations. These conditions make them ideal environments for artists seeking affordable, impactful places to live and work.

The report was led by Thomas B. Schorgl, CPAC's president and CEO, with significant contributions from staff including Seth Beattie, Kristin Tarajack, and Valerie Schumacher, and editing by Carolyn Jack. It was shaped by input from a wide range of advisors, artists, policymakers, and national speakers, including individuals from Cleveland, Detroit, Toledo, Chicago, and Milwaukee, among others.

The report was written to:

- Demonstrate how artists can be catalysts for neighborhood and economic revitalization in Rust Belt cities.
- Provide best practices and policy recommendations for integrating artists into redevelopment efforts.
- Serve as a guide for community leaders, urban planners, arts advocates, and civic developers to align creative energy with economic transformation.

The report promotes Artist-Based Community Development (ABCD) and suggests that, while artists alone can't solve systemic urban issues, they are vital partners in rebuilding and reimagining these historically rich but economically distressed communities

As artists engage these remembered landscapes, they participate in something vital: the reconstruction of cultural memory in a region too often reduced to statistics. They reframe nostalgia as a dynamic creative force—less a retreat into the past, and more an excavation of its lingering truth.

V. Ruins and Resurrection: Themes of Rebirth and Reclamation

In the Rust Belt, ruin is not the end of the story—it is the beginning of a new chapter. Where others see desolation, artists often see potential. The rusted factory, the collapsing church, the gutted warehouse—these are not just remnants of a failed economy; they are canvases of becoming, spaces in which rebirth takes root. In this section of the Rust Belt's artistic journey, we encounter the redemptive themes of reclamation, resilience, and transformation.

Art, by its nature, is alchemical. It transforms absence into presence, loss into meaning, and death into a new form of life. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rise of creative placemaking across the Rust Belt. In cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh, artists and communities have repurposed decaying infrastructure into living, breathing cultural spaces. These acts of reclamation not only preserve material heritage but also instigate emotional and civic renewal.

One of the most striking examples is Detroit's Heidelberg Project, founded in 1986 by artist Tyree Guyton. On Heidelberg Street, Guyton transformed a blighted urban block into an open-air art environment using salvaged objects, paint, and community stories. The project has become an international symbol of resilience, demonstrating how art can activate abandoned space and catalyze collective healing (Thompson, 2012). Guyton's work challenges conventional definitions of both ruin and art, offering instead a hybrid of sculpture, storytelling, and neighborhood activism.

A similar impulse drives Cleveland's *Rooms to Let* project, in which local artists transform condemned homes in the city's Slavic Village neighborhood into immersive art installations before demolition. These ephemeral interventions confront the aesthetics of decline with acts of creative defiance—temporary, yes, but powerful in their statement that no space is beyond redemption. As art critic Rebecca Solnit (2001) observes, "ruins are not empty; they are reservoirs of imagination." In the Rust Belt, the imagination runs deep.

Resurrection in these contexts is not merely aesthetic—it is often social. Artists working in post-industrial spaces frequently collaborate with communities to create public murals, sculptures, gardens, and interactive exhibits. These projects serve as participatory rituals of renewal, where former sites of labor become new commons for expression and belonging. In Pittsburgh, the *Rivers of Steel Heritage Area* has transformed the Carrie Furnaces—a relic of the Homestead Works—into a multidisciplinary venue for metal sculpture workshops, theater performances, and memory tours (Zipp, 2012). Here, fire and steel, once the domain of industry, are reborn through art.

Sculpture and installation art have also emerged as dominant modes of reclamation. Artists like Chakaia Booker use industrial materials—tires, metal, salvaged wood—to comment on environmental degradation and urban survival. Her large-scale, site-specific installations recall the textures of factory work while simultaneously asserting a new visual language of strength and adaptation. Likewise, sculptor John Sabraw uses toxic runoff and iron oxide extracted from Ohio's

polluted rivers to create luminous, sustainable pigments for paintings—literally turning pollution into beauty and message (Sabraw, 2018).

The theme of resurrection is also deeply embedded in Rust Belt poetry and prose. Writers like Dave Lucas, former poet laureate of Ohio, often frame the post-industrial world in metaphysical terms. In poems such as "November," he writes of Cleveland's blight as a kind of sacred ground: "We praise the quiet lots, / the fields that bloom / with rust and winter." Lucas's work evokes the paradox of a beauty born from abandonment—a recurrent thread in Rust Belt expression.

Beyond individual artists, entire creative ecosystems have begun to emerge around the idea of cultural regeneration. Organizations such as The Alloy School in Pittsburgh, SPACES, Brownhoist Gallery, Cleveland Photo Fest in Cleveland, and Signal-Return in Detroit offer residencies, workshops, and exhibitions that foreground community-driven art. Their mission is not to fix what has broken, but to imagine what might emerge from the cracks.

What unites these diverse forms of artistic resurrection is a common ethic: to refuse despair. The ruins of the Rust Belt, rather than being mourned as endings, are reimagined as fertile ground for experimentation and renewal. As cultural theorist bell hooks (1995) reminds us, "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible." In the post-industrial Midwest, possibility lives in the soot and silence, awaiting the artist's hand.

Through creative reclamation, the Rust Belt becomes more than a metaphor for decline. It becomes a metaphor for transformation. It is a region not frozen in time, but forged anew—again and again—by those who dare to dream in rust and resurrect through art.

VI. The Material and the Metaphor: Working with Rust Belt Materials

In the Rust Belt, material and metaphor are one. Steel beams and slag heaps, rust flakes and cracked porcelain—these are not just the detritus of a fallen age, but its language, its pigment, its poetic residue. Artists who work in post-industrial landscapes often find themselves not importing materials but extracting them from the land itself—harvesting meaning from what others leave behind. The materials of decline become the medium of rebirth, and their transformation is not only physical, but philosophical.

The act of reclaiming materials from industrial sites is itself an artistic gesture—part resistance, part reverence. Found-object art, assemblage, and sculpture rooted in salvage are longstanding traditions in Rust Belt creative expression. The practice echoes the ethos of Arte Povera, a post-World War II Italian movement that emphasized "poor" materials—wood, stone, iron, cloth—as a critique of consumerism and a return to elemental forms. The Rust Belt, by its very nature, invites a similar aesthetic sensibility, where rust becomes patina, decay becomes texture, and the ruined becomes sublime.

Artists like John Bisbee, known for creating large-scale sculptures entirely from forged and bent iron nails, echo this sensibility. His dictum—"only nails, always different"—offers a metaphor for the post-industrial artist's work: to take uniform, discarded objects and render from them infinite variety and form (Burnham, 2010). In the Rust Belt, discarded industrial materials become talismans of cultural memory, shaped by the hands of those who see not junk, but latent meaning.

The resurgence of interest in materiality aligns with what scholar Glenn Adamson (2013) describes as the "material turn" in contemporary art and craft—a movement away from abstraction and conceptualism, and toward the tactile, the grounded, the made. In Rust Belt communities, this material consciousness is not merely academic—it's born of necessity. Artists often repurpose what is locally available: steel shavings, broken bricks, glass from demolished buildings, copper wire stripped from obsolete circuitry. The process echoes the working-class ingenuity that once powered these regions—only now, the furnace is metaphor.

Textile artists have likewise responded to the textures of decline. In places like Youngstown and Erie, quilters and fabric artists incorporate industrial imagery—gears, smokestacks, railroad lines—into their designs, often stitching with threads dyed from rust or natural oxidization processes. Fiber artist Dorothy Caldwell's work with "memory cloths," which use marks, burns, and rust prints as visual language, resonates deeply with the Rust Belt ethos. Her textiles become time-embedded surfaces, what she calls "maps of experience" (Caldwell, 2010). These works blur the line between artifact and artwork, suggesting that memory can be worn into the very fabric of things.

Even in painting, Rust Belt materials serve as more than metaphor—they provide physical substance. Some artists grind rust into pigment, creating iron-rich paints that oxidize on canvas.

Others layer coal dust into encaustic work, using beeswax as a sealing agent for industrial residue. In each case, the physicality of the material carries the emotional and historical freight of the region. The art becomes not just about the Rust Belt—it becomes of it.

The metaphoric power of these materials also opens broader interpretive possibilities. Rust, for example, speaks of both time and transformation—it is decay in progress, a slow oxidation of the past. Broken glass reflects and distorts, capturing the fractured perspectives of a region whose identity is often contested. Scrap metal, with its sharp edges and potential for reuse, suggests danger and possibility in equal measure. Each substance carries with it a symbolic charge that invites deeper engagement from both artist and viewer.

The Rust Belt Photo Collective is organizing a group photography exhibition titled "Indirect Reality," which will run from June 7 to July 7, 2025, at the Beachwood Community Center Art Gallery in Beachwood, Ohio. This exhibition features work from various photographers, unified under three thematic categories: *Pictures Inside of Pictures*, which presents layered moments within a single frame; *Observations of Meaningful Shadows*, where dreamlike and symbolic shadow imagery evokes emotion and depth; and *Urban Stories*, which explore the textures and rhythms of city life through architecture, landscapes, and everyday encounters. Curated by Laura D'Alessandro and June Hund, the exhibition invites viewers to engage with the infinite interpretive possibilities of photographic art. It echoes themes of place, memory, and cultural inheritance central to the Rust Belt experience, offering a nuanced visual narrative of life shaped by the region's industrial legacy and evolving urban identity.

Steve Cagan, a highly recognized Cleveland-based photographer and activist, has dedicated his career to documenting the lives and landscapes shaped by industrial labor and its decline. His series *Industrial Landscapes-Cleveland* captures the stark beauty and enduring spirit of the city's industrial areas, particularly the Flats, during the 1970s and 1980s. Through his lens, Cagan portrays the physical remnants of Cleveland's manufacturing past, emphasizing the dignity of the workers and communities that once thrived there. His work serves as a visual narrative of resilience amid economic transformation, aligning with his broader commitment to socially engaged photography that amplifies the voices of marginalized communities. Cagan's approach reflects a deep understanding of the socio-economic forces at play, offering viewers a nuanced perspective on the complexities of industrial decline and its impact on urban landscapes (Cagan, n.d.).

The artist behind Rust Belt Cleveland is creating a vivid, place-based visual narrative that documents the architecture, culture, and everyday scenes of Cleveland and its surrounding Rust Belt communities (Rust Belt Cleveland, n.d.). Through photography and design, the project captures both the grit and quiet beauty of a region shaped by industry, decline, and resilience. The work celebrates local identity, focusing on the texture of lived experience—vacant buildings, vintage signage, corner bars, and working-class neighborhoods—offering a counter-narrative to broader portrayals of Rust Belt decay. This aligns closely with the themes in your article by

emphasizing memory, cultural inheritance, and the symbolic power of place. Both your work and this project seek to preserve and elevate the emotional and historical significance of the Rust Belt as more than just an economic story—it is a human one, deeply rooted in belonging, transformation, and the poetry of overlooked landscapes.

The article *Bearing Witness to the Boom and Bust in Pennsylvania's Mill Towns* from the Carnegie Museum of Art centers on photographer Nate Larson's poignant effort to document the physical and emotional landscapes of Pennsylvania's industrial towns in the wake of economic collapse. Through his lens, Larson captures scenes that reflect both the remnants of industrial grandeur and the quiet perseverance of communities living in its shadow. The message of the piece underscores the importance of storytelling—visual and otherwise—in preserving the dignity and humanity of people whose lives are deeply interwoven with a vanishing economic past. This directly parallels the themes in your article, which also explores the emotional terrain of the Rust Belt, where memory, identity, and place collide. Both works seek to elevate the lived experience of post-industrial communities, offering a more humanized, reflective view of decline—not as an endpoint, but as a space filled with resilience, cultural inheritance, and ongoing meaning (Carnegie Museum of Art, n.d.).

The *Rust Belt Biennial*, as featured on Lenscratch, is a photographic exhibition that celebrates and critically examines the complex identity of America's Rust Belt region through contemporary photography. Showcasing work from a diverse group of artists, the biennial explores themes such as post-industrial transformation, working-class life, environmental decay, and cultural resilience. The exhibition seeks to challenge stereotypes often associated with the Rust Belt by offering nuanced, artistic interpretations of place and memory. This initiative closely relates to the themes in your article, as it emphasizes the power of visual storytelling in preserving regional identity and illuminating the lived experiences within communities shaped by economic change and industrial legacy (Lenscratch, 2019).

Creative writing, too, draws metaphor from the material environment. In memoir and poetry, images of rusted cars, collapsing porches, and ticking machinery often stand in for emotional states—nostalgia, weariness, resilience. Rust becomes a symbol for aging, memory, and impermanence. As poet and essayist Mary Ruefle (2013) writes, "Every object is a metaphor until it isn't." In the Rust Belt, these metaphors proliferate, because the objects themselves still speak.

Sustainability and ethics are also intrinsic to working with reclaimed materials. In a region often ravaged by environmental neglect and industrial toxicity, the artistic use of industrial waste becomes a statement of care and accountability. Artists like Mel Chin, who integrates environmental science into his work, remind us that creation can also be remediation—turning polluted material into sites of consciousness and healing (Chin, 2015). This ethos is especially relevant in towns like East Liverpool, Ohio, where industrial byproducts have had lasting ecological effects.

To work with Rust Belt materials is to enter a covenant with place and history. It is to see the residue of labor not as refuse, but as relic—charged with story, pain, and possibility. It is to make, not from scratch, but from scar. And in doing so, to affirm that beauty is not only in what we build, but in what we refuse to discard.

VI. Poetics of Place: Writing the Rust Belt

The Rust Belt is as much a language as it is a landscape. Its voice is forged in furnace towns and hollowed mills, shaped by soot-streaked windows and broken streetlights. For writers—especially poets, essayists, and memoirists—the region offers a rich vernacular of grief and endurance, a textured dialect of labor, memory, and transformation. To write the Rust Belt is to give narrative form to its ruins, to transmute place into poetry.

Two of my favorite poems about the Rust Belt, its cities, its industries were written by Carl Sandberg and Philip Levine.

Chicago
By Carl Sandburg (1914)

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders:
They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.
And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.
And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I have seen the marks of wanton hunger.
And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them:
Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.
Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities;
Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness,
Bareheaded,
Shoveling,
Wrecking,
Planning,
Building, breaking, rebuilding,
Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,
Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,
Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle,
Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of the people,
Laughing!
Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation.

This poem was first published in Poetry Magazine in 1914 and later included in Sandburg's collection Chicago Poems. It remains one of the most powerful odes to American industry and labor, celebrating Chicago's rugged working-class spirit with a mix of realism and reverence.

Next, let's look at a compelling Rust Belt poem by Philip Levine.

What Work Is
By Philip Levine (1991)

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you're
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you.
This is about waiting, shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.
You rub your glasses with your fingers,
and of course it's someone else's brother,
narrower across the shoulders than
yours but with the same sad slouch, the grin
that does not hide the stubbornness,
the sad refusal to give in to rain, to the hours of wasted waiting,
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
a man is waiting who will say, "No,
we're not hiring today," for any
reason he wants. You love your brother,
now suddenly you can hardly stand
the love flooding you for your brother,
who's not beside you or behind or ahead
because he's home trying to sleep off
a miserable night shift at Cadillac
so he can get up before noon to study his German.
Works eight hours a night so he can sing
Wagner, the opera you hate most,
the worst music ever invented.
How long has it been since you told him
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
opened your eyes wide and said those words,
and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never done something so simple, so obvious,
not because you're too young or too dumb,

not because you're jealous or even mean
or incapable of crying in the presence
of another man, no, just because you don't know what work is.

This poem is not just about factory lines. It's about class, vulnerability, brotherhood, and unspoken love—rooted in the industrial America of the 20th century.

Philip Levine, born in Detroit in 1928, spent part of his life working in auto factories and writing poems that honored the labor and emotional lives of working-class Americans. Like Sandburg, Levine lifts the dignity of labor into the realm of the sacred and poetic—but with a tone more intimate, elegiac, and emotionally raw.

Literary engagement with the Rust Belt is not new, but it has gained renewed urgency as the region grapples with cultural visibility and reinvention. The rise of what some have called "Rust Belt noir" or "post-industrial realism" reflects a literary turn toward stories grounded in working-class experience, post-boom decay, and the search for new meaning amid economic voids (Linkon, 2018). Northeast Ohio has been central to this resurgence, producing writers whose voices echo the region's shifting contours.

Cleveland has emerged as a literary hub of post-industrial expression. The work of Dave Lucas, a Cleveland native and former Ohio Poet Laureate, exemplifies the lyrical intensity Rust Belt writing can achieve. In his collection *Weather* (2011), Lucas evokes the steel-laced skies and weary streets of the region with reverence and restraint. His poems inhabit a Cleveland of empty factories and ghosted neighborhoods, yet they are lit with a quiet resilience: "What's gone is not forgotten, / but reworked in ash and air" (Lucas, 2011).

Midwest Dirge
By Dave Lucas, from Weather (2011)

The weather of rust and quiet,
of streets going nowhere.
The city shut down at sundown.
Sidewalks roll up like maps.
Warehouses of memory.
Churches with no congregations.
Snow like ash. Like fallout.
Smoke from a mill still standing
though no one works the line.
Our fathers' ghosted labor.
A hush you don't hear, but feel
under the skin. The ache
of nothing happening again.

Cleveland also sustains this literary vitality through institutions like the Cleveland State University Poetry Center and local journals such as *Barn Owl Review* and *Great Lakes Review*. These outlets champion emerging voices who engage with Rust Belt themes of grief, displacement, environmental degradation, and the fractured American dream. Their work, often hybrid in form and voice, insists that this region matters, and that its stories are neither obsolete nor peripheral.

Memoirists and essayists in Northeast Ohio have also played a crucial role in mapping the psychic terrain of post-industrial life. Author and Kent State University professor David Giffels has chronicled Akron's rise and fall with both wit and elegy. In books like *All the Way Home* (2008) and *Furnishing Eternity* (2018), Giffels blends family narrative with regional history, portraying the emotional toll of economic collapse while affirming the quirky tenacity of Midwestern life. "Rust," he writes, "isn't just a color or a texture—it's a condition, a history, a slow and steady alchemy" (Giffels, 2018).

His voice joins others—like Sarah Minor, whose work in visual essays and hybrid forms often draws from the industrial and domestic legacies of Northern Ohio, and Thrity Umrigar, who, though originally from India, has made Cleveland her home and writes with fierce compassion about the city's people and discontents. Together, these authors remind us that to write from the Rust Belt is to engage in a complex act of seeing—one that acknowledges absence while illuminating presence.

Even fiction writers have embraced the region's distinct poetic and narrative possibilities. Christopher Barzak, based in Youngstown, blends magical realism with Rust Belt grit in novels like *One for Sorrow* (2007), where the hauntedness of place becomes literal. His narratives reveal that the industrial afterlife isn't just physical—it's spiritual, a lingering atmosphere that shapes the psyche.

The Los Angeles Review's critique of *Rust Belt Boy: Stories of an American Childhood* by Paul Hertneky explores the author's poignant and richly textured account of growing up in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, a once-thriving steel town situated just outside Pittsburgh. The review highlights Hertneky's ability to bring to life the intimate details of his Slovak, Eastern European, and working-class roots, while capturing the collective ethos of a community shaped by labor, ethnic tradition, and the slow erosion of industrial prosperity. Hertneky's book blends memoir and cultural observation, offering a deeply felt meditation on identity, belonging, and the bittersweet pull of home amid economic and social decline. The book's themes resonate strongly with the concerns of this paper, particularly its focus on memory, place, and the emotional terrain of the Rust Belt, where personal and collective histories converge. Both Hertneky's work and the paper at hand contribute to a broader understanding of how lives are shaped by regional transformation, and how resilience, nostalgia, and cultural inheritance endure even as the physical and economic landscapes shift around them.

At the community level, writing collectives, workshops, and residencies across Northeast Ohio support this ongoing literary movement. Organizations like Literary Cleveland and the Wick Poetry Center in Kent offer platforms for intergenerational storytelling, allowing both emerging and established writers to explore identity, place, and transformation in a region that continually redefines itself.

The themes that animate Rust Belt writing—nostalgia, resilience, fracture, place—are timeless, but they are also timely. In an age of widening divides and regional erasure, the literary arts offer a means of anchoring cultural memory and speaking truth to power. As bell hooks reminds us, “Language is also a place of struggle” (hooks, 1989). In the Rust Belt, that struggle takes the form of stories told against forgetting, poems offered against silence.

Writing the Rust Belt, then, is not simply an act of documentation. It is an act of imagination. It is the reclamation of voice from the rubble, the inscription of meaning on the blank walls of shuttered plants and fading towns. It is, in the truest sense, an art of survival.

VII. The Cinematic Rust Belt: Film and Documentary

Few art forms capture the sensory atmosphere of the Rust Belt as fully as film. In cinema, the slow glide of a camera across a crumbling steel mill or an emptied street does more than depict decline—it immerses the viewer in the rhythms of loss, survival, and change. From sweeping documentaries to quiet, character-driven dramas, film has become a powerful vehicle for exploring the emotional and cultural realities of post-industrial life. And increasingly, artists in and around Northeast Ohio are behind the lens.

The Rust Belt's cinematic appeal lies in its visual contradictions: vast, skeletal infrastructure juxtaposed with intimate, often unspoken human stories. Its architecture—soot-stained bricks, decommissioned smokestacks, and boarded storefronts—offers not only backdrops, but metaphors. These landscapes, worn and weary, become characters in themselves. The region's stark beauty lends itself naturally to visual storytelling—what critic John Carlos Rowe (1997) called the "aesthetics of ruin."

Major national films have taken notice. *American Factory* (2019), directed by Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar and filmed in Dayton, Ohio, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary. It chronicles the cultural collision and economic anxieties that emerge when a shuttered GM plant reopens under Chinese ownership. What makes the film so affecting is not only its intimate access, but its nuanced portrayal of identity, dignity, and labor in transition. It signals to the world what many in the Rust Belt have long known: that the economic narrative is inseparable from the human one.

In Cleveland, local filmmakers have long documented the city's social and economic transformations. Karina Longworth, originally from the Midwest and now host of the influential *You Must Remember This* podcast, has spoken of the "cinematic flatness" and moral complexity of the Rust Belt—qualities that define independent films emerging from the region. More rooted still is Cleveland-based director Robert Banks, whose experimental films blend documentary and visual poetry to examine Black life, urban decay, and media saturation. His 16mm film *Paper Shadows* (1994) and more recent *Autumn Leaves* (2018) are explorations of Cleveland's textures—soulful, raw, and shot through with both critique and affection.

Documentary and hybrid forms have also flourished in nearby Kent and Akron, often in connection with university programs. The Docu-series Lab at Kent State University, led by professors in the School of Media and Journalism, mentors student filmmakers to engage directly with post-industrial themes: gentrification, opioid recovery, water infrastructure, and public memory. These emerging creators carry the tradition of cinéma vérité into the present, using accessible digital tools to capture evolving regional identities.

Independent artists and collectives in Northeast Ohio have created powerful community-driven visual narratives. The Cleveland Film Collective, formed in part by artists who transitioned from

journalism, has prioritized hyperlocal storytelling—short films about neighborhood revitalization in Slavic Village, oral histories of steelworkers, and dramatizations of immigrant family life in Asiatown. Their lens is intimate and grounded, often highlighting the quotidian rather than the iconic.

Moreover, regional festivals have become incubators of post-industrial cinema. The Chagrin Documentary Film Festival, held annually in Chagrin Falls, brings together filmmakers from across the Rust Belt and beyond. Its programming frequently centers on stories of transformation, environmental justice, and community rebirth. Films like *The Steel Plant* (dir. Natalie Jones, 2021), which features Massillon and Canton steelworkers, and *Lake Erie: Fragile Giant* (dir. Chris Jordan, 2020), both debuted here, underscoring the region's dual narratives of vulnerability and strength.

Directed by Jack Storey, *Red, White & Blueprints: A Rust Belt Documentary* offers a hopeful, ground-level view of communities across the industrial Midwest, including Cleveland. Storey, a native Clevelander and the founder of the grassroots group Saving Cities, created the film in 2013 to shift the dominant narrative of decline by showcasing ordinary people doing extraordinary things to rebuild their cities. The documentary highlights entrepreneurs, community organizers, and civic leaders who are taking bold steps to reimagine their towns after decades of economic collapse. With a tone that is both realistic and optimistic, the film presents a compelling counter-narrative to despair—one rooted in creativity, commitment, and local ingenuity.

What's most compelling about Rust Belt cinema is its refusal to offer easy answers. These films are not boosterism, nor are they mere elegies. They live in the complicated spaces between past and future, loss and invention. As scholar and film theorist Laura U. Marks (2000) describes in her work on "haptic visuality," the best films of this kind invite a tactile experience—one in which viewers feel the dust, the cold, the rusted surface. The Rust Belt's films don't just show—they immerse.

Poets and novelists of the region also lend cinematic dimensions to their storytelling. Mary Biddinger, Akron-based poet and editor of the *Akron Series in Poetry*, crafts language that feels inherently filmic—framing scenes with motion, flashback, and ambient grit. Her collections, such as *Partial Genius* (2019), offer jump-cuts and visual fragments akin to montage: "The day never quite opened. We slept with our boots on." Her poetry echoes the emotional undercurrents that many Rust Belt filmmakers capture with light and lens.

Ultimately, cinematic storytelling from the Rust Belt resists both despair and nostalgia. It recognizes that ruin and regeneration are often simultaneous, that history can be shot in reverse and played forward again. These films and moving-image works serve not only as mirrors but as lanterns—illuminating what still flickers in the fog of post-industrial life.

VIII. Public Art, Graffiti, and the Democratic Imagination

If the gallery is a cathedral, the street is a commons. Nowhere is the artistic soul of the Rust Belt more visibly and vitally expressed than in its public art. On brick walls, beneath bridges, and across the decaying skin of industry, art rises from vacancy and speaks where silence once settled. From sanctioned murals and sculpture trails to unauthorized graffiti and ephemeral installations, public art in the Rust Belt embodies a deeply democratic spirit—shaped by its people, its past, and its pain.

The Rust Belt's public art emerges not from institutional opulence, but from necessity and improvisation. It is made with what's at hand: spray paint, salvaged steel, reclaimed wood, and stories carried in calloused hands. Public art reclaims space—not just for beauty, but for voice, presence, and belonging. In cities where the economic narrative has too often been one of subtraction, public art becomes addition, resistance, and imagination made visible.

Nowhere is this more raw and immediate than in the region's graffiti culture. Often maligned as vandalism, graffiti in the Rust Belt occupies a more complex space: a visual protest, a memory act, a territorial ritual, and sometimes, a personal elegy. On train cars, water towers, viaducts, and mill walls, graffiti proclaims, *I was here*. And in many post-industrial cities, where so much has been erased, that statement matters.

In Cleveland, the abandoned factories along Train Avenue and the graffitied underpasses near Tremont and Slavic Village serve as unwritten walls of testimony. Here, tags, throw-ups, and elaborate pieces form a kind of urban tapestry, layered with generations of names, crews, and unsanctioned expressions. These sites, rich with texture and tension, invite reflection: is this ruin, or renewal? Dissent, or design?

Scholars like Jeff Ferrell (1996), in *Crimes of Style*, argue that graffiti is a form of urban communication—especially in cities marked by exclusion. It makes visible the people and communities who are often unseen in official narratives. In the Rust Belt, graffiti can be a survival language, a code of assertion in places where mainstream representation has failed.

That said, not all graffiti exists outside of artistic infrastructure. Many Rust Belt cities have embraced muralism as a sanctioned outgrowth of graffiti practice, blending street art with civic engagement. In Akron, for example, the *Summit Artspace* and local groups have hosted legal walls and youth graffiti workshops, inviting at-risk teens to reimagine their city through stylized lettering and visual storytelling. These initiatives channel raw energy into intentional expression—without policing out its authenticity.

Cleveland's Midtown Murals initiative includes artists with graffiti roots, like Darius Steward, who brings the fluidity and edge of street art into his large-scale figurative work. Meanwhile, the Collective Arts Network Journal has chronicled the evolution of Cleveland's street art scene,

documenting how public visual language has shaped neighborhood identity and sparked dialogue between generations of artists.

Graffiti also interfaces with more traditional public art in the region. The Scranton Flats Sculpture Trail, for instance, often hosts spray-can interventions alongside commissioned installations—reminding us that urban space is dynamic, and that any surface may become a site of meaning. Temporary graffiti can exist in dialogue with more permanent art, together narrating a living, layered city.

Beyond graffiti, Northeast Ohio is home to a wide array of public art that transforms dereliction into dialogue. The Station Hope performance event at Cleveland's St. John's Episcopal Church blends theater, spoken word, and light projection to commemorate social justice struggles past and present. In Youngstown, student art installations supported by YSU's Department of Art and local organizations activate empty storefronts with sculpture, poetry, and light-based art.

Ephemeral works—chalk murals, pop-up poetry, wheatpasted posters—add to this living gallery. These forms, fleeting and fragile, match the precarity of the post-industrial landscape. As theorist Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) writes in *Relational Aesthetics*, art in shared public space becomes a site of encounter and meaning-making, where the boundaries between artist and audience dissolve.

In this sense, public art in the Rust Belt is not simply decorative. It is elemental. It claims what capitalism has discarded, and it invites the community back into the story. It says: you belong here. Your memory matters. Your mark counts.

As the urbanist Jane Jacobs (1961) reminded us, "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." In the Rust Belt, public art—whether etched in steel or scrawled in aerosol—creates the city anew, every day.

IX. Small Town Echoes: Rural Rust Belt Inspiration

While Rust Belt narratives often orbit the urban gravity of cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, the soul of post-industrial America resides just as vividly in its smaller towns. These are places where the smokestacks rose just as high, where the work was just as hard, and where the silence that followed the closures was perhaps even more deafening. For artists and writers, these rural and small-town Rust Belt communities—especially in the Ohio Valley—offer fertile ground for expression, shaped by both intimacy and erasure.

I know this terrain intimately. I grew up in Martins Ferry, Ohio, in the heart of the Ohio Valley, where the clang of industry once echoed from ridge to river. As a boy, I watched the mills hum with life—and later, fall quiet. The steel mills in Martins Ferry, Yorkville, and Steubenville once employed thousands of men, including my grandfathers and neighbors. Their closure left not only economic voids but psychic ruptures. Similarly, the great Weirton Steel plant across the river in West Virginia, once the largest private employer in the state, shrank from its commanding industrial height to a fraction of its former self.

Just downriver, East Liverpool was famous as the "Pottery Capital of the Nation." For generations, its kilns and clay shaped the domestic life of America—dinnerware, teapots, ceramic tiles. But by the late 20th century, most of these pottery works had closed or drastically downsized, victims of globalization and automation. Further south, Bellaire's glassworks—which once produced everything from stemware to marbles—now exist primarily in memory and museums. These industries weren't just economic engines; they were cultural markers, shaping the rhythms of life, the architecture of towns, and even the regional aesthetic: a kind of gritty elegance born of fire and precision.

Today, the remnants of that industrial past are etched across the Ohio Valley's landscape like fading script—abandoned warehouses, brick smokestacks jutting from overgrown lots, glass shards embedded in alley walls. But to the perceptive artist, these are not ruins; they are relics. They offer not nostalgia, but narrative. And they whisper to those willing to listen.

The creative possibilities in these towns are vast. Visual artists like Andrew Borowiec, who has spent decades photographing the Ohio River corridor, frame these places with both starkness and grace. His lens often focuses not on spectacle, but on stillness: a porch light burning at dusk, a rusted gate half-open, the melancholy geometry of empty factories. His work captures the essence of towns like Bellaire and Steubenville—not as footnotes to industrial history, but as living texts.

Literary voices from the region, like James Wright, have long drawn power from these landscapes. In "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," Wright paints the town's weariness and masculine ache with surgical tenderness: "Therefore, / Their sons grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October." His poetry, rooted in local detail, reverberates far beyond the valley, offering a poetic template for future generations of writers.

Small towns in the Rust Belt often foster a closer, more tactile relationship to place. Artists live in the same houses their grandparents once did. They know the mill roads, not just from history books but from memory. This proximity allows for a deep kind of truth-telling—raw, layered, and resistant to simplification. When a photographer walks into an abandoned factory in Yorkville or a poet sits on the riverbank in Toronto, Ohio, they bring with them not only tools, but inheritance.

Community arts initiatives are also beginning to root themselves in these towns. In East Liverpool, the Museum of Ceramics has become a hub for both historical preservation and contemporary clay art, hosting exhibitions that merge tradition with experimentation. In Steubenville, large-scale murals now decorate the downtown, many of them celebrating the town's immigrant past and industrial legacy. These visual narratives serve as public acts of remembrance and reclamation.

Writers' workshops and oral history projects in towns like Bellaire and Martins Ferry have begun to gather the stories of former mill workers, railroad men, and pottery artisans—transforming fading memories into lasting archives. These efforts are not simply preservational; they're inspirational. They remind younger artists of the cultural depth embedded in their own backyards.

To engage creatively with these small towns is not to romanticize decline. It is to acknowledge a more nuanced truth: that meaning often survives where prosperity does not. That beauty can be coaxed from fracture. That identity can be forged not just in boom, but in aftermath.

For artists, the Ohio Valley and towns like it offer more than material—they offer metaphors. They are places where fire once gave form to metal and glass, and where today, a different kind of fire—creative, restless, reverent—still glows. These towns are quieter now. But they are not silent. They are waiting to be seen, heard, and reimagined.

X. The Spiritual and the Sublime: The Sacred in the Rust

There is a quiet holiness in the Rust Belt—one not marked by marble altars or gilded domes, but by crumbling bricks, open sky, and the hushed echoes of machines long silenced. Among abandoned factories, rust-covered bridges, and the skeletal remains of steel mills, artists and writers often find not just history or metaphor, but something sacred. A sense of stillness. A presence. A whisper of grace.

This sacredness is not always religious in the formal sense, though organized religion has deep roots here. In Steubenville, the presence of Franciscan University underscores the region's Catholic heritage, and towns like Bellaire, Yorkville, and East Liverpool are dotted with aging churches that once anchored immigrant working-class communities. Yet what many artists encounter in the Rust Belt is a different kind of spirituality—emerging not from scripture, but from silence, decay, and endurance.

For creatives walking through these towns, the spiritual dimension lies in attention. As visual artist Amber N. Ford, a Cleveland-based photographer known for her poignant, socially engaged portraits, once described, "There's a stillness in these spaces that invites a different kind of seeing—a deep looking that goes beyond surface." Her work often captures the soul of neglected spaces and overlooked people, reframing decay as dignity.

This depth of presence is what theologian Paul Tillich (1957) called the "dimension of depth"—a spiritual perception found in ordinary things when viewed with openness and care. In this way, the Rust Belt becomes a contemplative space, a kind of secular sanctuary. The ruins of mills and potteries are not just evidence of what has been lost, but thresholds to something deeper: reflection, reckoning, renewal.

Poetry also finds the sacred in these landscapes. Mary Biddinger, an Akron-based poet and editor, brings a sacred attention to the overlooked corners of urban life. In her collection *Small Enterprise* (2015), holiness emerges not from grandeur but from intimacy: "the cracked window light," "a child's mitten nailed to the fence," "the thrum of something not yet gone." Her poetry distills the spiritual from the mundane, often invoking the feel of a half-remembered hymn.

Other voices, like Arielle Greenberg**,** who spent time teaching in Ohio before relocating, describe the post-industrial landscape as a site of secular pilgrimage—where walking through ruins becomes an act of witness. In her hybrid essay work, Greenberg emphasizes the idea of "spiritual salvage"—the process of finding beauty and resonance in broken things. This metaphor resonates deeply across Rust Belt towns, where the very bones of buildings seem to hum with longing.

Public art, too, plays a vital role in evoking the sublime. Cleveland's Station Hope, staged annually at the historic St. John's Episcopal Church, transforms a site of abolitionist activism into a modern shrine to justice and collective memory. Through performance, installation, and light, artists

reanimate the past—not just to remember, but to channel moral energy into the present. In these moments, art becomes ritual, and space becomes sacred.

Sound artists in towns like Youngstown and Wheeling have begun creating ambient compositions from the natural and industrial echoes of the region—wind through broken windows, the groan of rusted beams, the slow drip of rain in empty halls. These sonic landscapes are contemplative and immersive, functioning like secular hymns—drawing listeners into the mood and materiality of place.

Even ephemeral graffiti, often dismissed as vandalism, can take on spiritual weight. A tag sprayed beneath a viaduct in Steubenville reads: *He who endures*. In the context of a shuttered mill town, those words are more than defiance—they are devotion. They echo the prayers of those who remain, those who remember, and those who still believe in what could be.

This is the Rust Belt's unique spiritual grammar: not creeds or commandments, but textures, echoes, gestures. Here, the sacred lives in the patience of empty space. It reveals itself in rust patterns like Rorschach tests on steel. It speaks through absence and the humility of weathered things. The spiritual in these places is not doctrinal—it is experiential.

For artists and writers, the invitation is clear: to enter these spaces with reverence, to see beyond ruin, and to create not from despair, but from attention. The Rust Belt reminds us that the divine often dwells in the broken, and that creation—true creation—begins not in perfection, but in what remains.

XI. Toward a Rust Belt Aesthetic: A Guide for Creators

To create from and within the Rust Belt is not to aestheticize decay or mine nostalgia—it is to engage in a profound act of witness, reclamation, and reinvention. The Rust Belt aesthetic is not a singular style but a sensibility: grounded, textured, humble, haunted, and often hopeful. It speaks through grit and silence. It emerges from the margins. And it offers artists, writers, and makers an expansive field in which to explore time, truth, and transformation.

But what does it mean—practically and philosophically—to work within a Rust Belt aesthetic?

Begin with Place, Not Concept

Rust Belt art begins with place. It is rooted in lived geography: the cracked sidewalks of Lorain, the coal-streaked riverbanks of Steubenville, the brick back alleys of East Liverpool, and the railyards of Youngstown. These aren't just settings—they are characters. For artists and writers, this means starting not with abstraction, but with the specificity of streets, names, smells, and sounds. The more particular the detail, the more universal its emotional truth.

As poet Philip Metres, who teaches at John Carroll University in Cleveland, notes in his work on conflict and cultural memory, "place is not background—it's the stage on which memory performs." His poetry and translations often braid location with language, drawing connections between the spiritual and the political, the intimate and the systemic.

Embrace Material Honesty

The Rust Belt is a region of materials: rusted steel, weathered brick, slag, glass, coal, and clay. The aesthetic that rises from this history is one of material honesty—using what is found, what is given, what is weathered by time. Artists like Charmaine Spencer, a Cleveland-based sculptor who works with reclaimed wood and fiber, embody this ethic. Her installations speak to resilience and environmental memory, layering textures that evoke both domestic care and industrial decay.

Writers too can embrace this ethos by leaning into the language of labor, machinery, and tactile process. Let the sound of the punch press or the scent of river mud find its way into the rhythm of the line. Let materials guide metaphor.

Honor Memory Without Mythologizing

One of the most common pitfalls in Rust Belt art is the drift toward nostalgia without nuance. To honor the memory of a town or a trade is not to romanticize its pain or deny its complexities. The challenge is to hold space for contradiction—to see both the dignity and the damage, the solidarity and the silence.

Creative nonfiction by Northeast Ohio writers such as Alissa Nutting and David Giffels exemplifies this balance. Their work doesn't clean up the mess—it reveals it. And in doing so, it humanizes both the region and the artist.

Collaborate with Community

The Rust Belt aesthetic is rarely solitary. Many of the region's most powerful projects are collaborative, site-specific, and community-embedded. Whether it's a public mural co-created with local residents, an oral history archive compiled by students and elders, or a zine produced at a pop-up workshop, the art that thrives here is often democratic in both form and function.

Groups like Literary Cleveland, SPACES Gallery, and the Youngstown Cultural Arts Center exemplify this ethos—blurring the line between artist and audience and treating the creative act as both civic engagement and personal expression.

See Ruin as Canvas, Not Conclusion

A defining principle of Rust Belt creativity is the ability to see beyond wreckage. Where others see abandonment, the artist sees potential: for story, for sound, for shape. This requires not a blindness to decay, but an attunement to emergence—the green shoots pushing through asphalt, the glint of glass in broken pavement, the rhythm in a collapsing wall.

In his fieldwork on cultural regeneration, urban theorist Richard Sennett (2008) writes, "Decay can be generative. In every unfinished thing, there is an invitation to begin again." The Rust Belt is full of such invitations.

Work Slowly, Stay Humble, Dig Deep

There's a humility at the heart of this aesthetic—an understanding that no artist owns a place, and no place is static. The Rust Belt demands listening before speaking, walking before sketching, remembering before imagining. It rewards slow attention and long-standing presence. It invites creators to dig deep—not just into archives or attics, but into emotion, history, and their own relationships to work and worth.

In this spirit, Akron's High Arts Festival and Cleveland's Rooms to Let project both model the power of immersive, time-based creative inquiry. Their work unfolds over seasons, neighborhoods, and years—not in a rush to produce, but in a desire to understand.

In summary: A working vocabulary of the Rust Belt aesthetic

- Textured: rough edges, layered history
- Resilient: made with what survives

- Grounded: drawn from place, not abstraction
- Haunted: aware of what was lost, but not imprisoned by it
- Collaborative: co-created with community and memory
- Hopeful: not in a naïve way, but in a stubborn, persistent way

Practical Suggestions for Artists Seeking Inspiration from the Rust Belt

Here are ten practical and specific ways artists of all kinds can draw inspiration from the Rust Belt." These ideas are rooted in hands-on, sensory, and emotionally engaged experiences that honor both history and transformation.

1. Walk and Document Industrial Ruins at Golden Hour

Photographers, writers, and painters can explore closed factories, rail yards, and abandoned homes during early morning or late evening light. Observe how rust, decay, and nature reclaim the space. Bring a camera or sketchbook and capture not just what is seen, but what is *felt*—how light plays on broken glass or ivy creeps over forgotten doors.

2. Conduct Oral Histories with Former Mill and Factory Workers

Record short interviews with elders who once worked in the steel mills, glassworks, or railroads. Ask them about the smells, rhythms, and community of labor. Poets might use phrases or cadence from these voices. Performers can develop monologues or plays based on these lived experiences.

3. Scavenge Materials for Mixed-Media and Textile Art

Collect usable fragments—sheet metal, old signage, worn fabric, or tools—from architectural salvage yards or allowed-access industrial zones. Use them in sculptures, fiber art, or collages. Let the texture of the material tell part of the story of its place.

4. Write Ekphrastic Poems or Prose Inspired by Rust Belt Photography

Spend time with the works of artists like Andrew Borowiec, LaToya Ruby Frazier, or Dave Jordano. Choose one photo and write a poem, short story, or essay in response. What's happening beyond the frame? What does the silence say?

5. Host "Field Studio Days" in Forgotten Urban Spaces

Take your easel, notepad, musical instrument, or camera into a public Rust Belt space that others overlook—under a bridge, by a decommissioned smokestack, near a floodplain—and make that your open-air studio for a day. Invite others to join and share work onsite.

6. Collaborate with Local Historians or Archivists

Team up with someone from a historical society or regional archive. Dive into old union newsletters, photographs, and city planning documents. Use found text and imagery to inspire visual art, songs, zines, or installations grounded in place-based memory.

7. Create Art in Dialogue with the Landscape

(Conversations with the Landscape)

Choose a single site—a riverbend, slag heap, shuttered warehouse, or overgrown rail spur—and return to it regularly over weeks or months. Sit with it. Listen. Sketch, write, or photograph what it gives you. Ask questions aloud. Treat it like a collaborator. Let your work emerge as a direct conversation with what the land remembers and reveals.

8. Engage in Rust Belt Sound Mapping

Carry a field recorder or your phone and capture the ambient sounds of Rust Belt life—freight trains, dripping water in tunnels, birds in hollowed courtyards, faint church bells. These can become a sound collage, score for a performance, or spark for a written stories or poems.

9. Volunteer in a Rust Belt Community Garden or Reuse Project

Get your hands dirty alongside those turning blighted land into something new. Observe the rhythms of revival. Document these transformations through journaling, illustration, or time-lapse video. Art rooted in renewal can be a powerful counterpoint to art rooted in loss.

10. Stage a Public Pop-Up Exhibition in a Vacant Storefront

Turn an empty or underused space into a temporary gallery or performance venue. Invite others working with Rust Belt themes. Let the work echo the place. Use this as both creative platform and civic engagement—a way to reinsert beauty, dialogue, and vision into the bones of the built environment.

To make art in the Rust Belt is to join a long conversation—one that began in furnace heat and continues in studio light, on loading docks and legal walls, in vacant lots and repurposed schools. The aesthetic is not fixed, because the region isn't either. It shifts. It adapts. It endures.

And in its endurance, it invites you in.

XII. Conclusion: Rust as Reverie, Art as Resurrection

In the end, the Rust Belt is not a closed chapter. It is an open text—scarred, yes, but still breathing, still speaking. And for those who create with care and courage, it is a place of profound possibility.

The mills in Martins Ferry, Yorkville, Steubenville, and Weirton may be shuttered. The potteries of East Liverpool, the glassworks of Bellaire, and the rail yards that once pulsed with purpose may now rest in silence. But from that silence rises a new voice—made of steel dust and snowfall, freight echoes and memory fragments. It is the voice of artists, writers, musicians, and makers who choose to see what remains not as ruin, but as revelation.

Rust, in this context, is not decay alone. It is reverie. A deep dreaming. A layer of time that settles on the visible world and reminds us of what came before, and what still may come. As an aesthetic, rust invites slowness. As a metaphor, it calls for resilience. As a material, it challenges the artist to work with what has been left behind—not to lament it, but to listen to it.

And what does it say?

It says that beauty is not the absence of failure, but the transformation of it.

It says that communities, like kilns, can be fired again.

It says that grief, when given language and form, becomes something more than loss. It becomes *belonging*.

Throughout this paper, we have explored how artists across disciplines—photographers, sculptors, poets, muralists, sound artists, documentarians—are reimagining the Rust Belt not as a relic of American decline but as a living terrain of artistic and emotional depth. Their work is not always easy. It often resists polish. It prefers honesty to perfection, process to product, presence to posture.

This is art as resurrection—not in the religious sense, necessarily, but in the creative sense. To resurrect is to *bring back into being*—to draw breath into still places. It is to gather fragments and arrange them into new forms. It is what every painter does with pigment, what every poet does with memory, what every photographer does with light.

The Rust Belt demands this kind of seeing. It asks artists not just to represent what is, but to imagine what might be. To use brush, lens, voice, or body to say: *We are still here. We are still making. And this place, like us, is not finished yet.*

In that spirit, my own upcoming photographic essay on the Cleveland Flats, now in development and expected to be completed by mid-summer, builds directly upon the ideas explored here. The Flats—where river, rail, and industry once met in roaring convergence—are today a landscape of

echoes, angles, and renewal. This body of work will reflect the same principles of reverent attention, layered history, and creative re-seeing that have guided this paper. It is not just a photographic document—it is a dialogue with the region's soul.

Let this be both a reflection and a map. A looking back on where we've been. A map for those who would walk the same streets, sit at the same barstools, gather the same rust flakes in their pockets, and ask: *What is the story here? And how might I help tell it—truthfully, tenderly, and well?*

For the Rust Belt is not only a region. It is a practice. A presence. A kind of sacred attention.

And for those who give themselves to it—there is always more to make.

XIII. Epilogue: Tomorrow's Rust, Tomorrow's Renaissance

As the echoes of clanging mills and train horns fade further into the past, the Rust Belt continues its quiet metamorphosis—not into something unrecognizable, but into something reawakened. The scars remain; they are not forgotten. But they are being reinterpreted by a new generation of artists who are less interested in nostalgia and more drawn to reimagination—not simply documenting what was, but shaping what could be.

The Rust Belt's artistic soul has always been one of resilience. What began as a deeply regional expression—a chorus of photographers, poets, painters, and performers bearing witness to economic decline—has matured into something more global in scope and nuanced in intention. The terrain is still deeply local, but the questions artists are asking have expanded: *What does it mean to belong in a world of migration and climate change? What new narratives rise from the silence of emptied places? How do memory, data, and design merge to create meaning in post-industrial space?*

A Shift Toward Interdisciplinary Practice and Social Engagement

If the first wave of Rust Belt art was about lamentation and bearing witness, the next wave is likely to be more interdisciplinary, more collaborative, and more solutions-oriented. Artists are partnering with architects, scientists, activists, and technologists to imagine sustainable neighborhoods, circular economies, and healing ecosystems. Public art is being conceived not just as beautification, but as infrastructure for social repair.

In Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Detroit, we already see this shift: artists-in-residence at city planning offices; muralists co-designing trauma-informed school spaces; poets working with environmental scientists to interpret air and water quality data in visceral, human ways. The arts are not drifting to the margins of civic life—they are being drawn back into its center, as agents of empathy, critical thinking, and reinvention.

New Materials, New Media, New Meaning

At the same time, digital technologies are altering the very fabric of creative practice. Rust Belt artists are experimenting with everything from biomaterials and data-driven installations to immersive environments and augmented reality storytelling. The found-object aesthetic—so central to post-industrial art—has evolved to include not just rusted metal and broken glass, but discarded code, forgotten archives, obsolete algorithms.

And in this evolution, AI is emerging not as a replacement for human creativity, but as a new kind of collaborator—a brush with infinite colors, a pen with memories not its own. Artists across the region are beginning to harness AI not just for convenience, but as a way to interrogate authorship, identity, and memory.

AI can help visualize alternate urban futures, generate speculative histories, or compose music from the sounds of old foundries. It can model the heat maps of displacement or simulate ecosystems from buried data. But AI can also be a mirror—a way to reflect back on ourselves, on what we value, and what we might lose in the race to digitize everything.

The Role of Artists in an Age of Acceleration

As automation accelerates and artificial intelligence becomes ever more pervasive, the role of the artist—especially in the Rust Belt—may be more important than ever. Artists can offer a human-centered counterpoint to the alienation that often accompanies rapid technological change. They remind us that progress without soul is not progress at all.

The Rust Belt may never again be the industrial furnace it once was, but it may become something equally vital: a crucible for ethical innovation, a laboratory for cultural hybridity, and a sanctuary for the slow, attentive, and soulful work of art-making. Its ruins have given us poetry. Its vacant spaces have given us room to reimagine. Its losses have become the raw materials for an emergent aesthetic—one that does not flinch from decline but also does not stop there.

A Closing Reflection

I have seen this transformation in myself. Art has helped me reinvent who I am, more than once—writing through grief, photographing through memory, painting through silence. The Rust Belt has taught me not only where I come from, but what it means to become. And now, standing at the confluence of steel dust and data streams, memory and machine, I believe the Rust Belt's next renaissance is already underway.

It will be rooted in place but open to the world, forged from both pigment and pixel, and driven not only by sorrow, but by vision, courage, and care.

XIV. About the Author

Don Iannone is a native of the Rust Belt Ohio Valley (Martins Ferry and St. Clairsville). He is a photographer, writer, poet, and painter in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. Don teaches graduate business students at Transcontinental University, a European Union-based university. Don holds a Ph.D. in philosophy. He has authored a series of articles on the philosophy and psychology of photography and given many talks on these subjects. Several of his photographs have been shown in exhibits in the U.S. and internationally. From 1978 to 2016, Don worked in economic development and public policy. He led the economic development and environmental centers at Cleveland State University for 15 years, then ran a strategy consulting and research company for 23 years, serving over 100 public and private clients in 32 states and 10 countries. Much of his work was in Rust Belt regions and communities, such as Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Toledo, Northwest Pennsylvania, Fort Wayne, Kokomo, and Erie. An accomplished writer, Don has published eleven poetry collections, ten photographic essays, six nonfiction titles, and a novel, spanning genres that explore the depths of human experience. He can be reach by email: diannone@gmail.com

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