



IV.

MOVIN' ON ALONG: BARGE AND TOWBOAT BALLET

INVITATION

In May 1991, guest curator Peter Boswell selected me to create an artwork for Pittsburgh's "Sculpture at the Point" exhibition for the 1992 Three Rivers Arts Festival. This three-week-long event was an important festival in the art world, and I wanted to be part of it.

THE SITE

When I first visited the festival's exhibition site at Point State Park, it blew me away; I had never seen an urban park so entwined with its geography. At the tip of the thirty-six-acre site and all along its edges, two big rivers—the Allegheny and the Monongahela—flow into each other to merge into a third, the Ohio River. It's an incredible visual watery confluence, right in downtown Pittsburgh.

Known as the "Forks of the Ohio," this swirl of rivers frames the city. Opposite the tip of the water level park, along the shore across the rivers, everything suddenly rises. A long massive bluff with thick growth steeply rises 367 feet to Point of View Park on Mt. Washington. From the top of this park, there is a remarkably wide overlook view: one can see the whole urban landscape of rivers wrapping around the land below, with the dense high-rise city rising abruptly behind Point State Park.

PITTSBURGH

Apart from its natural proximity to the rivers, I was fascinated by Pittsburgh.

Formerly one of the world's great river-based mining, manufacturing, and shipping centers, whose industrial base had largely disintegrated and evaporated, it was now reinventing itself. Its boom-and-bust history had such an impact on me personally that the city itself became a living character.

PROPOSALS

In the exhibition catalogue, Peter Boswell described what he called my proposed "grand vision:" "She envisioned staging a multi-faceted ballet performed by some of the many vehicles that make Pittsburgh work: garbage trucks, police cars, fire trucks, coal barges, riverboats, and railroad trains and more."¹

Enchanted by the layers of intermodal passageways over and around this flowing site, I especially wanted to coordinate the movement of trains—both those crossing the high bridges over the rivers and also those at water level traveling along the rivers' edges—in relation to the movements of barges on the rivers. I was inspired by the substantial barge traffic—the enormous and deep barges carrying coal and steel scrap and the colossal scale of the clusters of barges tied up along the shore opposite Point State Park.

No one on the festival staff, it turned out, had the energy to attempt to add intermodal train, barge, and municipal

¹ Quote from catalogue of the "Sculpture at the Point" exhibition, Three Rivers Arts Festival, Pittsburgh, 1992.

vehicle layers in the short time frame for planning the festival. The intermodal elements were dropped.

Mostly, I wanted to reveal these converging rivers as a still-functioning work site and to focus on the continuance of movement of work materials on the rivers. Bringing back the use of the classic, emblematic Pittsburgh materials—steel and glass but used in a new way—could show that the city, though changing, still retained the resonance of the “great old industrial days.” By prying the materials away from the older, collapsed manufacturing culture, I could perhaps show how you can lose an industry, but through invention and productive work, still keep “movin’ on along.” A dance with steel, aluminum, and glass on all three rivers would reveal these materials anew; only this time, these materials would be mined not from the earth but from the flow of recycling.

Back in New York City, I sent my ideas to the director of the festival, Jeanne Pearlman, and her festival staff, who became ingenious participants in local and regional research for recycled materials, towboats, barges, and facilities that could load tons of material onto barges. This was not a simple operation since barges filled with recyclables hadn’t ever danced in this town.

I also wanted to honor the old-time steel workers who had worked in mills around Pittsburgh all their lives. The quality of the steel produced here had always been linked to the quality work of this highly skilled labor force. Yet after the industry largely tanked, the skies went dark, no longer lit up day and night by gigantic fiery furnaces powered by the workers’ endless toil. Many companies went bankrupt and abandoned their workers, many of whom had chronic steel-related diseases and injuries. They were left high and dry with no

health insurance and were mad as hell. Pearlman had introduced me to members of the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR), who were leading the organizational effort to get the federal government to restore their health insurance. I invited these members to participate in the artwork and to join me in a public action as part of the ballet. They enthusiastically accepted.

Together with the festival staff, we settled on two simultaneous acts for the ballet. The first would be created on the rivers with towboats and barges filled with shaped recyclables, and the second would be choreographed together with the members of SOAR facing the towboats and barges along the shore at the tip of Point State Park.

PREPARATION FOR ACT I

I wanted to show new ways to present recyclable materials’ use value and circulation by situating them on barges. We needed to finalize agreements to borrow materials and rent or get loans of barges. Beyond this we needed to secure cooperation from local handlers that do not usually work with recycled glass, bales of steel, or aluminum—but rather sand and gravel—to use their facilities to load the recyclables onto barges. The infrastructure to do this simply did not exist, nor did a system for designing and installing specific shapes in situ on barges. Solving these gaps required many leaps of imagination and practice to work across different government agencies and marine and materials industries. Ad hoc solutions for the ballet were invented collaboratively among all these groups, working along with the intrepid festival staff. This turned out to be one of the most creative aspects of the artwork.

I created two shapes for two of the barges: a sixty ton recycled-glass

mound in the shape of a diamond to signify value, and a ziggurat construction of eighty bales of flattened recycled steel and aluminum cans as a symbol of structures of elemental power. The glass diamond was achieved by creating a diamond-shaped base that I designed out of heavy timbers nailed onto the surface of a deck barge; then, at the sand and gravel depot, glass was poured from a great height until it accumulated to become a rough diamond—a glistening landscape. Besides being in the ballet, this first barge would be tied up along the shore of the park as a stationary sculpture for the entire three-week duration of the festival. The second barge, a hollow sand one, was filled up to its surface with soil, then covered with a blue tarp, so that the metal bales could be stacked all along its length then stacked incrementally until they became a long floating ziggurat. A third hollow barge, bigger and deeper, would be filled with huge hunks and columns of scrap steel.

This project was exciting yet nerve-racking up until the day of the performance. An oil spill the week before led to a coast guard warning that the rivers might need to be closed and the whole ballet canceled (which didn't happen). The final loading of the metal bales was completed only late the night before the ballet; at the last moment the provider for the scrap steel barge was switched; and the insurance company introduced last-minute negotiations for the barges and materials. Only on the day of the ballet itself did everything get worked out. Whew!

PREPARATION FOR CHOREOGRAPHING THE BARGES ON THE RIVERS

James Guttman, head of Mon River Towing, a major towboat company in Pittsburgh, had tentatively agreed to

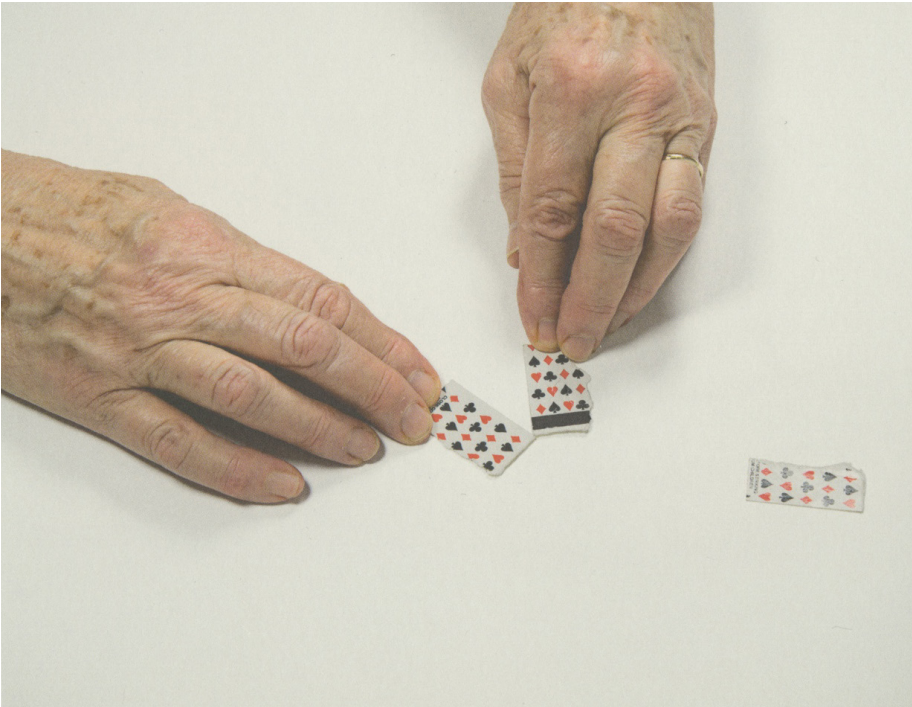
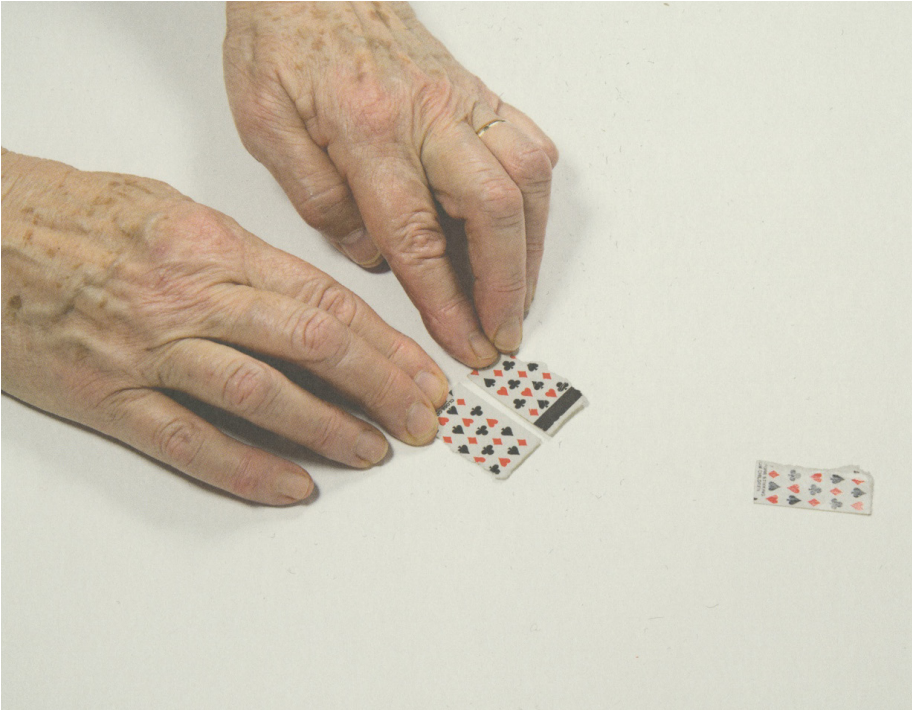
provide towboats (called push boats in Pittsburgh) and barges for the ballet. Before Guttman would give his final approval, he stipulated that I needed to meet with Captain Charles Lowe to convince him that I could handle this choreography project using his push boats on *his* rivers. Guttman cautioned me that Lowe, a great expert on the rivers, was very territorial about who could get near the barges and who should be allowed on the rivers.

I approached this meeting with great trepidation. The day before, I went for a walk along the Allegheny River next to the tip of Point State Park to view the loaded red deck barge that had been brought up from the Mississippi River especially for my ballet. I arrived just as its deckhands were tying it up to the shore. Its green recycled-glass diamond was sparkling in the sun. The stakes for me were extremely high at this point: What if the captain said no the next day? Desperate to be able to say something meaningful to the captain at our meeting the next morning, I asked these deckhands, who weren't from the area and whom I'd never met before, "What is the hardest, trickiest, most dangerous thing you've ever done with your barge and push boats?" Their immediate, unhesitating answer: "Flop a barge." I had never heard this expression before and so they explained it to me.²

The next morning, I boarded the captain's push boat and walked back toward the kitchen where he was sitting at a table, waiting for me, looking at me quite coldly. He gestured that I should sit down across from him. I sat, faced him, and said, "Can you flop a barge?"

Bang! A small smile wandered across his face, almost melting it. "Of course," he said. I must have crossed

² This maneuver can also be called "flip" or "top" a barge.



some line or passed some test, because we got down to work immediately. I told him about other work ballets I had done, including *Marrying the Barges*. He told me about the uniqueness and the dangers of these three rivers, and how if a barge got away from the push boat and hit the columns of a bridge, the bridge could collapse and cause many fatalities.

Lowe said that Mon River Towing would provide three barges. The two push boats they would provide were called the *Express* and the *Explorer*. We worked out the following plan: He would be captain of the *Express*, which would push two barges. One would be the 135-foot-long deck barge that I saw the day before with its huge sixty-ton recycled-glass diamond. The second barge would hold the ziggurat of bales of flattened steel and aluminum cans. His son, Donald Lowe, would be the captain of the *Explorer*. It would push the third deep and long barge filled with hunks of recycled steel girders and other miscellaneous steel material that would come from a remaining active steel mill in the region. I asked if the coast guard could clear all three rivers during the ballet. He said he would try to get their participation.

We began to play out possible barge movements, using little rectangles cut from playing cards, pushing them around with our fingers. In this simple way, we worked out the choreography.

PREPARATION FOR ACT II WITH SOAR

During my research, I met with the members of SOAR at their offices and we went to work immediately. Wanting to build the choreography directly out of their work patterns and experience, I asked them to describe how they worked in the steel factories. They explained that the work environment

was so noisy that you could hardly hear anyone speak. Steel was very heavy; the pieces were huge, often fiery hot and still molten. Communication with others on the floor and with crane operators moving high overhead was all physical and gestural, made with hand and arm movements. You had to pay attention to these gestures from others or you could get injured or killed. We developed a movement vocabulary that used these very same gestures they used on the work floor: *Take it up* (raise arm and point finger up), *Bring it down* (lower arm and point finger down), *Scrap it* (a chop-chop cutting gesture meaning "Remove this piece; not good"), *Take it away, over here* (swing arms toward self), and *Take it away, over there* (swing arms away from self).

We also choreographed a secondary group of movements where the retired workers held placards as if at a demonstration. On one side was their demand "National Health Insurance Now!" But for the blank side of the placards, we created a list of short poetic demands that they wrote out in big letters. These demands were for a kind of spiritual recycling of very active retirees. They insisted on literally presenting another side of themselves beyond their dire need for health insurance in order to be seen also as holistic individuals and not just aggressive demonstrators. The sequence for manipulating the placards was worked out: "Hold up the 'Health Insurance' side. Then rotate the sign to our 'Special Message.' Lift the message up and down. Wave the sign overhead from side to side four times. Then turn the signs into a 'shovel' and make a shovel-scooping movement four times. Repeat."

The messages they drew on the backs of the placards were:

RECYCLE GLASS!
RECYCLE STEEL!
RECYCLE HOPE!
RECYCLE KNOW-HOW!
RECYCLE EXPERIENCE!
RECYCLE WISDOM!
RECYCLE DREAMS!

THE BALLET

ACT I: AT THE CONFLUENCE OF THE THREE RIVERS ON JUNE 21, 1992

The coast guard cleared the three rivers for two hours. The following is a description of the movements of the ballet based on my drawn diagrams. The quotations that follow are from a telephone conversation that I had in 2013 with Captain Charles Lowe, ninety years old, who still recalled the ballet from twenty-one years ago with great emotion.

CRISSCROSS

The two push boats came from opposite directions: *Express* came down Monongahela River (the Mon) pushing two linked barges to the West End Bridge, turned around, and faced the audience on the Point. *Explorer* came from the other direction down Allegheny River to the Point pushing the longest barge. The two boats met at the Point and crossed each other. *Explorer* then went up the Mon to the Fort Pitt Bridge, turned around, and came back to the Point.

FLOP A BARGE AN EXTREMELY DRAMATIC MANEUVER

The *Express* flopped a barge to the barge on the left: moving one barge from one side to the other of another stationary barge in midstream, working with the current by “knocking the steel wires and ratchets loose, yet lengthening the lines that tie them together yet keeping

them in check for safety,” manipulating the barges against each other with the boats moving backward and forward. Then *Express* “unflopped” it.

The flop maneuver in the wide-open waters at the confluence of rivers looked magical and went off smooth as silk.

It was so mysterious that I asked Guttman to amplify Captain Lowe’s short description and to comment on the drama and what I sensed was the danger in this move, and to clarify unflopping the barge. He explained: “The process of flopping a barge serves the purpose of placing a barge in a group of barges (a ‘tow’ of barges) so that the ‘tow’ is uniform in its width. The towboat never is unattached from the ‘tow’ and uses a combination of river current and a series of coming forward and backing (reverse) propulsion maneuvers in conjunction with precise manipulation of a barge line or rope which is controlled by the deck crew.”

He continued: “The drama is that the barge that is being maneuvered appears to be somewhat inanimate because the captain and the deckhands are on the towboat. In reality each barge and its cargo weigh over 2,000 tons and once the idle barge starts moving its inertia makes it a formidable force. With river current behind it, the barge would soon reach the speed of the current if it got loose from the boat. So to move the barge from one side of the tow to the other by merely using a 60’ line or rope is quite a feat which saves a lot of time because the alternative is to tie off the other barges and then go pick up the idle barge. And there are limited options as to where they would have been able to tie off the other barges.”

The danger: “In the event that there is strong current, the idle barge that is to be picked up becomes a threat when it starts to swing around the tow. If a

collision occurs with the other barges in tow, all of the lines and wires that keep the barges tied together could break under the sudden stress and the barges could break free from the boat and float away with the current until they can be retrieved. This is not a good situation in a river because there are many obstacles such as docks and bridge piers that must be avoided due to the narrow channel. As a matter of fact the term that is used when a barge hits an immovable object is called an allision. Not a term I like to use.”³

And finally I asked, what about when the *Express* “unflopped” it? Guttman explained: “When Captain Lowe unflopped the barge he actually reversed the maneuver to show how a barge can be delivered to a dock when its position in the tow is on the opposite side from the dock. This again saves a lot of time and line handling if the barge can be delivered without having to tie off the tow for the purpose of delivering just one barge.”

The push boats then tied up the three barges at the Mon River Landing across the river next to a group of coal barges. The barges remained there throughout the rest of the ballet. The remaining movements were done just with two push boats.

TOWBOAT DUET

Captain Lowe continued his description: *Express* went up the Mon and *Explorer* went up the Allegheny, then each came down the rivers and maneuvered around to face each other: “Face to face, head to head, head to boat. We did this with no lines, no ropes.

We knew how to move our rudders to be able to do this without ropes. Then we kissed, kissed up. Put heads face up together, worked the rudders. Without ropes. Then we reversed engines.”

At the signal of a whistle, *Explorer* came down to the Point and did a *donut*—a 360-degree turnaround while standing still in the river—then both did a *double donut* one way, clockwise, and a *double donut* counterclockwise the other way. “We locked boats head on, pushed each other, worked our rudders, made circles! Face to face. Like a flower in the middle of the three rivers, we made a flower form in the wakes spread out in the water.” Then both made a 180-degree arc, a *half donut*, facing the Point toward the audience. Both headed down the Mon into the Ohio, reversed engines and backed up the Allegheny to the Duquesne Bridge and came forward, up the Mon, back up the Allegheny, to do the Snake. This final movement was done together, side by side: “*Snake, snake*, slithering together with only thirty, forty, fifty feet between us. A very tight, tough move.”

As the ballet was ending, both boats stopped and did a “riverman’s salute,” one long blast followed by two short blasts of the horns. At that point, taking over the coast guard’s loudspeaker, Captain Lowe announced that he was dedicating this ballet to his late brother Captain Donald R. Lowe, “a legend on these rivers for forty-five years,” who had very recently passed away and was known as the other great push boat captain in Pittsburgh. Captain Charles Lowe, with his whole family standing with him on the push boat, was bursting with pride. Then the two-boat snake “slithered up the Mon” until it was gone.

ACT II: SIMULTANEOUS CHOREOGRAPHY WITH RETIRED STEEL WORKERS ON THE SHORE

Fifty retirees gathered at the tip of Point State Park and performed their movements, working together, at the same time as Act I's movements of push boats and barges were unfolding out on the rivers. Alternating between the group dance of their series of steel-mill floor gestures and raising their placards, they acted out the sequence of waving and scooping movements we had designed. Most importantly, they loudly chanted their poetic demands for spiritual recycling. They were in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, bursting with energy! It was amazing to be around them. The weather was awful, cold and rainy. It didn't put a crimp in the dancers' style at all.

I handed each retired steelworker my statement before we began the ballet. Here are some excerpts:

Thank you for your personal participation in this public artwork.

I wanted to create a work that expresses a desire to celebrate: value in work experience and know-how and value in materials beyond first use. These are precious treasures and should never be wasted. We cannot afford to waste wisdom and dedication and materials.

I could not create something like this without your participation. It is you who makes an artist's idea into something that is real and beautiful for all Pittsburgh.

I thank you from my heart.

Happy Barge and Towboat Ballet.

This is a chapter excerpted from *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Seven Work Ballets*, originally published by Kunstverein Publishing, Grazer Kunstverein, and Sternberg Press in 2015. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Cover and back cover image:
Flop a Barge

Interior images: Mierle Laderman Ukeles choreographing *Flop a Barge*

CREDITS AND DETAILS

MOVIN' ON ALONG: BARGE AND TOWBOAT BALLET

DATE AND TIME

June 21, 1992

12:00–1:00 p.m.: Boats and barges gather
1:45 p.m.: Coast guard clears the waterways
2:00–3:00 p.m.: Ballet
3:10 p.m.: All normal traffic resumes

LOCATION

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States

SITE

On the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers with towboats and barges as they meet at the tip of the Point State Park and then flow together into the Ohio River, and on shore with retired steelworkers at the tip of the thirty-six-acre Point State Park.

The population of Pittsburgh in 1992 was approximately 370,000.

INVITING INSTITUTION, STAFF, AND OFFICIALS

Three Rivers Arts Festival:

Jeanne Pearlman, Executive Director

Peter Boswell, Festival Guest Curator and Associate Curator, Walker Art Center

Phil Harris, Project Assistant

Peter Boucher, Main Project Volunteer

US Coast Guard:

Lt. Commander David Eley

Chief Anthony Urban

Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR):

Marie Malagrecia, Staff Coordinator

Jane Becker

Babe Dijosio

George Edwards

Anselmo Fernandez

Allegheny County Sheriff's Department:

Sheriff Coon

Lt. Rizzo, Boat Captain

Dick Rush, Boat Captain

MOVEMENTS

ACT I: Ballet with two towboats and three barges with recyclables with the following movements.

TOWBOATS AND BARGES

Crisscross

Flop a Barge: An Extremely Dramatic Maneuver

TOWBOAT DUET

Donut

Double Donut

Half Donut Arc

Snake

Riverman's Salute

ACT II: Simultaneous choreography with fifty retired steel workers on shore with three movements.

AUDIENCE

Along the edge of the rivers at the base of Point State Park.

BOATS, BARGES, CAPTAINS, AND CREW

Two towboats, *M/V Express* and *M/V Explorer*, each 65 feet long and 26 feet wide, were provided by James Guttman, president of Mon River Towing.

Captains:

Charles Lowe, *M/V Express*

Donald Lowe, *M/V Explorer*

Crew:

Bob Deems

Melvin Lowe

Mike Mathers

Robert Matznelli

Jim Simmons

Brian Watson

Evelyn F. Lowe, assistant

Barge 1: Glass-diamond barge, 135 feet long and 26 feet wide:

A deck barge with sixty tons of recycled crushed glass in a diamond shape 135 feet long and 26 feet wide, formed by pouring glass into a twelve-inch-high, diamond-shaped timber crib enclosure that captured the poured glass and established the diamond shape, constructed on the deck. This barge was tied up on the shore of the Point State Park and exhibited as a stationary sculpture throughout the duration of the festival.

Barge 2: Steel and aluminum-cans barge, 135 feet long and 26 feet wide:

A hollow sand barge, filled up to the surface with sand, on which a ziggurat-shaped construction was stacked of eighty bales of flattened steel and aluminum cans. The ziggurat was 98 feet long, 10 feet wide, and 6 feet high.

Barge 3: *MRT 104*, 195 feet long, 35 feet wide, and 12 feet deep:

This open hopper barge was filled with large pieces of recycled structural steel and other miscellaneous steel material, all estimated to weigh 1,500 tons.

Sources of barges and recycled materials:

Davison Sand and Gravel, Steve Jacobs

Dravo Basic Materials Inc., Jim Diecks

Barge Maintenance Inc., Richard Jackson

City of Pittsburgh, Department of Public Safety, Robert McCaughan

City of Pittsburgh, Recycling Division, Mary Beth Rizzuto

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Environmental Resources

PA Glass Recycling Program, Douglas Gibboney

ASSAD Iron and Metals Inc., Jim Snyder

Owens Illinois Glass, Patty Hauser, Cheryl Laughlin, Bill Slater

Dlubak Glass, Dave Dlubak

Tube City IMS

ISRI Keystone Iron and Metal, Mary Lynn Thompson

Franklin Township Recycling Center, John Novaleski

SCRI, Jeff Landford

Alcoa Recycling, Russel Blackburn

Ohio River Towing, Midland Enterprises, David Gladwell

Weirton Steel Corporation, Herb Elish, John Turner, Charles Cronin

Azcon Corporation, Dave Ellis

US Steel Group, Susan M. Kapusta

DOCUMENTATION

Photography:

Kurt Weber

Video footage (unedited):

Rex Nordheimer, Videographer, directing ten cameras around the site

Sound:

Phil Harris

