Reflections
Sonja Hinrichsen, new genre artist, led the Learning Lab for Educators where participants mapped the city and reflected on neighborhood history, old and new architecture, frontier experience and the role of women in present and past. The resulting installation Reflections incorporates video and sound recordings, photography and text. Each participant in the Lab created a lesson plan based on their experience that can be utilized in their classrooms.

Essential Question: How do we experience history through place?

Sonja Hinrichsen
Reflections

The media installation “Reflections”, a collaboration between three young schoolteachers and myself, is an amalgam of responses to Denver. Prior to my residency at PlatteForum I had read about Denver, but apart from transferring flights at the airport never visited. Reading about Denver a few years ago, particularly one fact had caught my attention: that Denver was built on land that had been guaranteed to the Indians in a treaty only a few years earlier.

Being European the concept of Manifest Destiny has always struck me as something outrageous; as an attempt to officially legalize immoral and inhumane activities, including genocide. I knew that Denver’s history would interest me quite a bit and that it would very likely inform my work.

Once arrived, I was delighted to find myself in the very core of the city’s activity, both in the present as well as in the past: the area where bands of Arapaho had camped since times immemorial, and where the tiny settlements of Denver City and Auraria had sprung up in 1858/9. Some decades later a place of railroad yards and industries that were abandoned and fell into decay during the first part of the 20th century, to then make way for greenbelts and upscale living and office spaces, cafes and restaurants at the brink of the 21st century.

Arriving right into a Denver thunderstorm, my first impressions were the reflections of light, of sky, of clouds in giant glass walls of modern high-rises. Then came the railroad, the frequent tact of exhausted engines, the rattling of unlevelled steel wheels on tracks, the screeching of brakes, the banging of couplers, and the honking of horns. After investigating the railroad and its significance for the building of the American West in two other pieces, realizing that I had the railroad close to touch, made my heart jump. I wanted to bring the trains even closer, have them go right through the space, not just along its outer wall. The railroad equally played a major role for Denver’s success and prosperity as it also marked the end of the civilizations that had lived on these lands for thousands of years. The repetitive patterns of seasons, climates and the change of weather serve as a unit of measuring time and consequently as a bridge between present and past. It seemed inevitable to use the trains and weather as a framework for our installation. Using video, sound, and narrative “Reflections” reflects on a variety of events of Denver’s history, encounters between Native Americans and early settlers, women’s roles in past and present, investigations of neighborhoods through the eyes of older contemporaries and stories that had been handed down to them from their forebears, voices of early Denverites and Native people, and – last but not least – our personal perceptions of this place.
Erica Ristig  
*Whispered Voices*

My work addresses the networks of strong women in Denver’s past and present. It reflects historical women like Maggie “Molly” Brown—one of two organizers for the Conference of Great Women in 1914, Mary Cawker — a single mother of two who effortlessly ran a popular boarding house in the 1860’s, famously known as the 4 Mile House and Emily Griffith—founder of the first free public vocational school in Denver: The Emily Griffith Opportunity School. The historical photographs of these women converse with the texts below, which were gathered during interviews at different women’s shelters around Denver. The strength of women supporting other women is overwhelming in women’s shelters. Thanks to support and care, women in these shelters are able to plant their own roots and take their lives in a new direction. It’s fascinating to me how strong the determination of a woman actually is, and hopefully, as a woman I will become stronger, too.

Sarah Chung  
*Gravity and Memory*

My process is an independent contemplation of a collective human history, where electro-magnetic technologies have dramatically formed our way of life. My interest in Denver’s history began in the urban legends regarding paranormal activity tied to the unacknowledged history that took place on that land beginning with the Arapaho ceremonial grounds now known as Cheesman Park.

Through *Gravity and Memory*, I offer a multi-dimensional meditation of this collective history. My hope is to revisit the past as a way of creating a point of reference for direction towards the future. We live in contradictory times, where modern technologies have revised how we understand the world around us while at the same time have created systems that contribute greatly to polluting our ecosystem. Living in this state of irony and a desire for more sensible systems, I am compelled to revisit the past and comb through bits of veiled histories that may hold some answers to questionable human practices.

In this audio/visual installation I collected and synthesized salvaged commonplace objects, field recordings/video footage and images. Through layering and juxtaposition, I make comparisons between systems, natural patterns, objects and human histories, analyzing how industries have and continue to influence our psychology and ultimately our quality of human life.
Joseph Davidson  
*Highland Stories*

My work has revolved around exploring the history of the Highland neighborhood in Northwest Denver. Over the past year I have been exploring my own sense of belonging and displacement within this diverse urban neighborhood.

As I began researching Highland, I was surprised to learn that my grandfather, and his father, grew up within blocks of where I currently live near the intersection of Federal Boulevard and Speer.

For this piece I recorded my grandfather’s stories about growing up in Highland and illustrated the landmarks that defined his memory of the neighborhood. Through this process I found memory—and history—intimately and durably wed with place. As I pondered historic maps, books, buildings, and memories, I found that the streets, structures and spaces that define our cities serve also to shape and hold our stories.

With this new knowledge, my experience of the neighborhood and Denver has gained depth. With each step, down to the Woodbury Library, over the Speer viaduct to Downtown, I see that my ancestors have walked before me, and in a new light I know where I am.

"My Father Was an Operator - Track 14"

"I remember when my parents would have a big fight and the police would come. My mother was big on calling the police.

My father would go shaved, put on a clean shirt, comb his hair neatly, and meet them at the door:

Well, officers, I understand, and you probably understand, my wife was a little excited... it was nothing about anything serious, and you can see that, we’re all a little wound up here.

And... that was COMMON in the neighborhood! People called the cops when they had the family arguments... and that was fairly frequently!"

"Bootlegging Activities - Track 15"

"My father and his friends Al Reese were rather unsuccessful bootleggers... They made $1m literally in the bathtub!"

By my time, prohibition was over, but the contempt for the law that had grown up during that period was still very vivid."