

Decades of

Exter

Influence

06-16-2006 - 08-27-2006

Extended Remix

09-15-2006 - 10-29-2006

CURATED BY CYDNEY PAYTON

Out of Place

Kim Dickey

And here I am in Colorado! I kept thinking gleefully. Damn! damn! damn! I'm making it! And after a refreshing sleep filled with cobwebby dreams of my past life in the East, I got up, washed in the station men's room, and strode off...I said to myself, Wow! What'll Denver be like! I got on that hot road, and off I went in a brand-new car driven by a Denver businessman of about thirty-five. He went seventy. I tingled all over; I counted the minutes and subtracted the miles...and before I knew it we were going over the wholesale fruitmarkets outside Denver; there were smokestacks, smoke, railyards, red-brick buildings, and the distant downtown gray-stone buildings, and here I was in Denver. He let me off at Larimer Street. I stumbled along with the most wicked grin of joy in the world, among the bums and beat cowboys of Larimer Street.

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

When I arrived in Boulder, Colorado, in 1986, I planned to stay only the four months a temporary job required. I wasn't initially moved by the forested foothills rising from the vast (and now crowded) plains. About a month later, as I was hiking, what can only be called a "vision" of the entire history of the place rose from the ground at me - not in pictures or in narrative form, but in an indescribable whole, a burst of land, history, culture that was the place. I recalled that my grandparents and great grandparents had lived in Colorado. I lived there off and on for nine years.

Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*



Denver skyline, 1958.
Photo courtesy of Denver
Public Library Western
Collection, Otto Roach,
x.29140.

Places affect us on some level, by both their physical attributes and cultural traditions. Geography, climate and history, real or imagined, exert influences on a culture. The West has a kind of mythic history, and while it has been the site of real struggle, loss, triumph over harsh conditions and adversity, these histories have fed our imaginations, inspired ballads and produced legends that often glorify and romanticize that past. Many artists, writers and filmmakers have been lured to the West by these cultural myths and found the terrain to be both exciting and real.

I wasn't alone in being drawn to a mythic western culture I had known through the country and western music of Don Gibson, George Jones, Willie Nelson, Charlie Rich and Hank Snow, to name a few favorites, or the beautifully brutal western films of John Ford and Sam Peckinpah, even Wim Wenders, or novels by Jim Harrison, Cormac McCarthy and Annie Proulx. These often bleak and sometimes romantic visions of the West, however, have long been rejected by artists and curators working here as an unsophisticated reading of the culture, though artists such as Chuck Forsman, Carlos Frésquez and Jeff Starr, among many others, have creatively critiqued these characterizations of the West in the subject of their works.

In speaking with other artists on this point, I tried to identify what it was about the West that could be considered legitimately influential, or even simply acknowledged. The superficial metaphors I inherited from fiction represented the Wes

"The only place now is a little dark room with a computer." - Jeff Starr

as a place of reinvention, escape, utopian visions of a simpler life, a greater connection to the Earth and a life spent outside rather than inside. But are all these notions no more than myths? If so, they are myths that still compel artists to move west.

In considering the subject of influence suggested by this exhibition, *Decades of Influence: Colorado Art 1985 to Present*, I became curious about how this place, Colorado, influenced artists, as opposed to the artists' impact on this culture. How does space, cultural and physical, impinge on art production and shape our experiences as artists? I wondered also how these questions reflected on the more general question of how any environment affects cultural production.

I decided to pose questions concerning our relationship to place to a number of artists who had lived in Colorado for the majority of their careers or who left after spending many years here. Additionally, all of the artists I interviewed lived along the Front Range. But this inquiry was not about place as the subject of art or about site-specific work.¹ Whether these artists, or others in this exhibit, bring a critical eye to this region through their artwork was not germane to my inquiry. Every artist in this show, however, has shared this place as the site of making. And while the seven interviews I conducted certainly do not reflect the full range of artistic practices and experiences in this state, they begin to shed some local light on a subject that seems ever more important in a global era.

Is place important?

Jeff Starr says, "My experience of the West is filtered through spaghetti westerns and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Does place matter? I'll go out on a limb and say, 'no.' The only place [now] is a little dark room with a computer."²

By the term "place" I mean the space we come to know intimately as the sites we live in and are surrounded by, as well as the cultural myths associated with them. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann states that the "consideration of art in relation to place has been rich and varied, and stretches from ancient Greece to the present....At a time in which the concept of 'globalization' is much debated, the dimension of space also demands attention. It is discussed in many disciplines, although the practice of thinking in terms of space is especially important in the social sciences and humanities. Space may be conceived as something closed, structured and bounded, and in this way it pertains most obviously to geography."³

There is a renewed interest in site, landscape, borders and territory in contemporary art discourse, and specifically in what constitutes "the local." These questions seem to be part of wider social and political movements that examine and define what is unique about a place. This issue has taken on a greater sense of urgency in the face of the corporate homogenization of our towns and cities and the anonymous character of suburban sprawl.

¹ For interesting discussions on the nature of site specificity in current art practice, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), and Erika Suderburg, ed., *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

² Jeff Starr, phone interview, May 22, 2006.

³ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

With increased access to the internet and a growing connection to the global market, shared culture is now taken for granted. Circulation of ideas and resources is so fluid today that it is difficult to track the influences one place has upon another with any accuracy. Vast distances and limited communication - factors that caused artists living in Colorado as late as the 1970s and early 1980s to travel annually for cultural sustenance - are no longer considered hurdles.

"[There are] some artists who are so self-focused, if they were on the moon it wouldn't matter," says artist George Woodman, who also suggests that "where you are does affect the way you work." That the responses to my initial, general question resulted in opposite reactions was fascinating and seemed predicated on what constitutes shared culture. Is it what we find in our immediate surroundings, or at our fingertips? The answer to this question was elusive but came into better focus by considering where these artists chose to live and how they came to those decisions.

How did you come to Colorado?

"We just found ourselves here," says artist Jeff Starr. Either because of a family move or to follow a lover, or a job, many of us did just that - found ourselves here. The great majority of artists I've met in Colorado were not born here.

"People don't choose where they live; it is a series of accidents," George Woodman explains. Many came to study at local universities and then stayed on after graduating, contributing to a growing community of artists. For Denver and Boulder, the impact of the universities on the burgeoning artist population cannot be underestimated, for it seems the independent film scene alone owes a great debt to Bruce Conner's and Stan Brakhage's influence at the University of Colorado at Boulder and in Denver.

Where else have you lived?

"Today the term regionalism...continues to be used pejoratively, to mean corny backwater art....In fact, though, all art is regional, including that made in our 'art capital' New York City. In itself extremely provincial, New York's art world is rarely considered 'regional' because it directly receives and transmits international influences. The difference between New York and 'local' art scenes is that other places know what New York is up to but New York remains divinely oblivious to what's happening off the market and reviewing map." Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*.

Throughout my conversations with other artists, the issue of how this place affects us was addressed by referencing other places. Many had spent time in New York and mentioned it, thus creating a dialogue between the East Coast and the West, with particular attention to the criteria necessary for artistic survival. This dialogue

"Our distance from the great cultural centers may be an advantage. Our view is uncluttered."
-Sidney Goldfarb

among artists who have lived in both places has a long history. Clark Richert, Mark Sink, Linda Herritt and Betty and George Woodman all spent years in New York and in Colorado, finally choosing one place over the other to settle. Essential needs such as the time and space to work and an uninhibited freedom to create were sought in New York, but many found those were more easily obtained in Colorado.

Dale Chisman moved to New York for fifteen years, but he came back in the mid-1980s and realized after a time that "the longer I stayed [in Colorado], the more I liked it. It was hard to leave New York, because of the fervor there, but it was difficult to make ends meet and frustrating to try and show.

"I'm not sure how much you can argue for independence - everyone got *Artforum*."
-George Woodman

"I found it refreshing out here. There were still artists I knew here, and when I came back, I decided it was a good place to work. There was cheap and available space and a sense of community among the artists. Art issues were discussed among artists rather than gallery politics. Clark [Richert] founded 'art bar,' where once a month artists got together at a bar to discuss issues, but as it dissolved into drunken orgies, it later became 'art brunch.'"

But even more than the space to work and the camaraderie among artists, the artistic freedom Chisman found in Colorado was invaluable. "It encourages you to work, to work intensely on your own ideas. There is not as much pressure to be 'new' as there is in New York. You can also choose to isolate yourself if you need to as opposed to the imposing isolation that exists in New York."

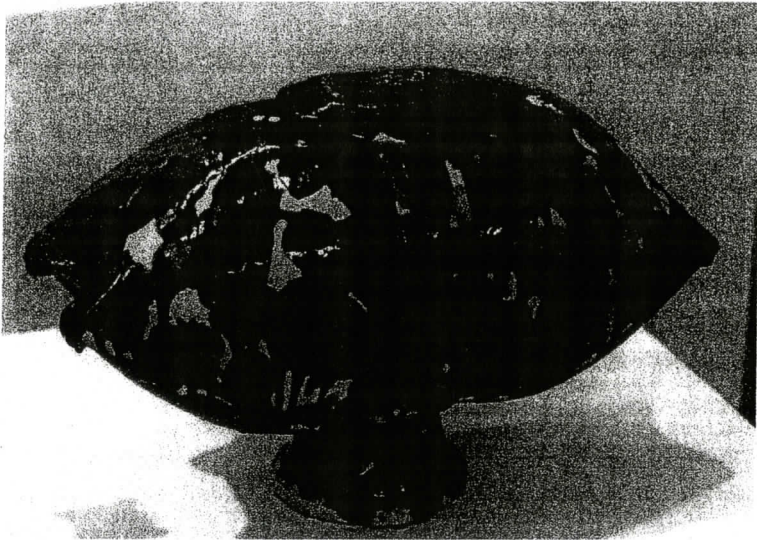
The draw of New York, "the cultural fortress" as George Woodman puts it, was such that "even if one lived in New Jersey, you were too far from the center to benefit," but "to be free from [New York] was to be released from cultural forces." One might say that Denver (or perhaps the state of Colorado) suffers from being a peripheral artistic center flanked by the metropolises of Los Angeles, New York, Santa Fe, Kansas City and Chicago. However, much has been written recently to discount the notion of artistic invention originating in artistic metropolises and then making its way by circulation and diffusion to the smaller cities on the periphery of these cultural sites. This "center-periphery model" has been criticized as a "colonizer's model of the world." In discussing problems associated with Central European cultural centers, Kaufmann writes that "a major defect in historical interpretation and method is said to be that areas or regions outside the supposed core are not given full attention, nor full credit for developments which occurred independently and even previously to the establishment of a global system supposedly structured by Western Europe."⁴ Annabel Wharton is among other theorists who echo the same sentiments, rejecting the claim that regions far from art capitals were working in response to those centers' concerns.⁵

¹ Ibid., 163.

⁵ Annabel Jane Wharton, *Art of Empire: Painting and Architecture of the Byzantine Periphery: A Comparative Study of Four Provinces* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

"Cities have natures of their own, and they will continue to produce works authentic to themselves. But the time of cosmopolitan domination is drawing to a close. We need all of the world's imagination if we are to survive and flourish. Each locus has forces and inspiration of its own, history and weather, earthshape and language, all of what Gary Synder refers to as a 'geopsychic nexus.' And lest it be thought that what I am proposing here is a return to 'regionalism' or any of its handmaidens, take my word for it, I am not....The whole point of decentralization in the arts is not for things to sink back into a kind of local snoring. To pay attention only to what we have nearby is simply to repeat the worst aspect of cultural domination. To increase our expression means also to increase our reception...the stage is definitely set for things to begin expressing themselves in situ. In this sense, our distance from the great cultural centers may be seen as a distinct advantage. Our view is uncluttered. What is it that we see?" Sidney Goldfarb, from "Why Not Here," *Criss-Cross Communications*.⁶

The question of artistic freedom and whether this was the case with the work made in Colorado is difficult to determine. Access to critical artistic discourse was always available through art journals; as George Woodman notes, "I'm not sure how much you can argue for independence - everyone got *Artforum*."



Betty Woodman
Pillow Pitcher
Circa 1980s
Ceramic
27 x 48 x 9 inches
Courtesy of Karen Hall and
Dr. John Woodward

Additionally, some of the oldest visiting artist programs in the country were established at the local universities, bringing the most important artists working at the time to Colorado from all over the country. Artists such as Richard Artschwager, Chris Burden, Deborah Butterfield, Eric Fischl, April Gornik, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, Roni Horn, Allan Kaprow, Mary Kelly, Komar and Melamid, Robert Kushner, Dennis Oppenheim, Judy Pfaff, Adrian Piper, Judith Shea, Allan Sekula, Andres Serrano, Lorna Simpson and Fred Wilson are just a few of the illustrious names who came to speak (and critique students' work) at CU-Boulder's Visiting Artist Program since it began in 1980. "For many years, art in Colorado meant art at the university," George Woodman says.

There is no question, however, that independent artist movements did flourish on their own here. Drop City and later *Criss-Cross Communications*, both the journal and group, are testimony to that fact (Clark Richert was instrumental in both). Some of the inspiration for these ventures came from Buckminster Fuller's ideas about synergy, which proposed that "the interaction between peers could produce something greater than the sum of its parts."⁷ In that spirit, a number of artists who went to school together or were working in the area in the mid-1960s started a formal dialogue on art making that continues to this day. Members of these groups included Dale Chisman, Joe Clower, John DeAndrea, John Fudge, Richard Kallweit, Jerry Kunkel, Jerry Johnson, Jim Johnson, Margaret Neumann, George Woodman and others. While they predate the scope of this exhibition, they still continue to influence artists internationally, and fourteen of the artists who were originally involved are still here working and continue to meet annually.

Similarly, Front Range Women in the Visual Arts, a coalition cofounded in the mid-1970s by Micaela Amato, Sally Elliott, Jaci Fischer, Fran Metzger and Helen Redman, included such notable artists as Suzanne Foster, Margaretta Gilboy Goldstein, Linda

⁶ Sidney Goldfarb, "Why Not Here," *Criss-Cross Communications*, Volume 3, 1976.

⁷ Clark Richert, phone interview, May 23, 2006.

Today, there are nearly seventy members listed by the gallery association in the Denver/Boulder area alone. "Yes, there has been great improvement since then, especially in the museums," Clark Richert says. "Not only are there more artists, the younger ones are better these days than in the past. The creation and development of the Museum of Contemporary Art | Denver is a great hope and sign of the possibilities of the future here."

Dale Chisman echoes these sentiments, saying, "Important art is being produced here as anywhere," and "that Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, in particular, is producing great artists." He has noticed that, since 1995, "more artists are staying rather than leaving [after graduating from local colleges and universities], finding places like New York and Los Angeles too expensive."

Community is a complex notion today, no longer just a result of proximity, but rather of communication. As my husband said the other night, "The people I email with on a regular basis know far more about me, my work and my concerns than the person who occupies the office next to mine. So what is community?"

Despite this contemporary condition, there is a common history being lived here by each of us. Throughout my conversations and readings for this essay, the recurring theme expressed was that a vital community was essential to the survival and success of any cultural center and was necessary to keep artists in a place. Artists who came to this region in the 1950s and 1960s, or who grew up here, had to create their own networks and communities in order to have a dialogue about what they were doing. It didn't simply exist. Culture is created in and out of place.

Thirty years ago, Sidney Goldfarb made the same point in "Why Not Here," an essay examining the climate for artists in Colorado that was published in the third volume of *Criss-Cross Communications*: "What is to be done? Obviously, the first step is to make better use of the materials at hand, i.e. ourselves."

KIM DICKEY is an associate professor in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

I would like to thank Dale Chisman, Linda Herritt, Clark Richert, Jeff Starr, Rebecca Vaughan and Betty and George Woodman for their time and insights during interviews conducted for this essay. I would also like to acknowledge Kirk Ambrose and Robin Rule for their help with this project.



Installation view of
Decades of Influence at CVA.