Dona Ann McAdams

PERFORMATIVE ACTS
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Curated by John Killacky

Brattleboro Museum & Art Center
Brattleboro, Vermont
June 22—September 23, 2019

Castleton University Bank Gallery
Rutland, Vermont
October 13, 2019—January 4, 2020

Catamount Arts
St. Johnsbury, Vermont
February 5—April 3, 2020

Helen Day Art Center
Stowe, Vermont
June 19—August 22, 2020

Amy E. Tarrant Gallery at the Flynn
Burlington, Vermont
August 29—November 21, 2020
In the 1980s I often attended performances at P.S. 122, the seminal venue for avant-garde performance in New York. As an artist and curator, I found inspiration, talent, and a community of intense purpose. Identity-based politicized work found its home there.

Oftentimes, I would notice a woman, unobtrusive, off to the side, seated on the floor, taking photographs with a Leica camera. Dona Ann McAdams was the house photographer. During her tenure of 23 years, she captured extraordinarily compelling images of the raw fierceness and passion of this performance scene. From chaotic to profound, everything was allowed in this experimental space. McAdams was revered by the artists as a collaborator who could illuminate their art beyond the stage.

McAdams also adroitly captured the queer liberation and AIDS activism of that time, documenting the urgency of ACT UP actions and LGBT military members marching in solidarity against “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” directives. Select photos of this work, along with her photos of anti-nuclear, pro-choice, war protest, and feminist rallies, are also featured in this exhibition. McAdams’ agitprop sensibility is alive and well today, as evidenced by her photographs of an anti-Trump protest and transgender Vermont gubernatorial candidate Christine Hallquist marching in a Pride parade.

McAdams works not as a detached journalist but as a fully engaged social activist. She is an empathetic artist whose subjects are not the exotic “other” but rather participants and allies in her portraiture. She invites the viewer into the particularity of place and the innate humanity of the people she photographs.

I got to know McAdams personally when we both became ensnared in the Culture Wars in the 1990s. I was the Curator of Performing Arts at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where I presented David Wojnarowicz, Karen Finley, Ron Athey, and other artists who became flashpoints over the “appropriateness” of their receiving support from the National Endowment for the Arts. The surrounding controversies became a lightning rod for malicious conservative outrage.

All these artists shared P.S. 122 as their New York home, so McAdams knew and photographed them all in their full-flung provocative explorations. Despite intense media pressure, McAdams worked with the artists to protect their images from being sensationalized and demonized in conservative media outlets.
Concurrent with her theater work, McAdams spent 14 years running an arts workshop in Coney Island for people living with schizophrenia. The resulting collaborative portraits demonstrate McAdams’ profound empathy with her subjects and illuminate the joy and dignity of people often feared and maligned by mainstream society. Subsequently, McAdams worked with farmers in rural West Virginia and with a group of cloistered nuns in rural upstate New York, capturing the vitality and resiliency of these “unseen” or overlooked communities.

When I moved to Vermont to run the Flynn Center in Burlington, I reconnected with McAdams and her husband, writer Brad Kessler, who now raise goats on their farm in Sandgate, Vermont. At the Flynn, I had the pleasure of hosting an exhibition mounted by the Vermont Folklife Center, A View From The Backstretch, which was the culmination of McAdams’ workshops for backstretch workers at the Saratoga Racetrack. The work is revelatory. Once again, McAdams did not merely observe. She participated as a fully engaged creative partner.

For another exhibition I curated at the Flynn, Animal Power, McAdams loaned a diptych of two oxen, Lou and Bill. Animal rights activists protested when Green Mountain College in Poultney, Vermont, decided to put one of the oxen down after he became injured. In the midst of this controversy, McAdams went into the pasture with these enormous creatures and produced an astoundingly beautiful depiction of elegance and power—another political act with a social conscience.

With her expansive range of working animal photographs, including cows, horses, and her beloved goats, McAdams continues to capture the relationship between subject and artist. In these action portraits, it became clear that the organizing conceit of this exhibition was indeed Performative Acts.

When the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center gave me the opportunity to curate this exhibition, I was thrilled to work with McAdams again, to visit her farm and studio and select a sampling of her resplendent black and white images. She continues to shoot film with her Leica and print her own work in an analog darkroom, work that is of its time but timeless. It is an honor to present her Performative Acts to you.

John Killacky was Executive Director of the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in Burlington, Vermont. He currently serves as a State Representative in the Vermont General Assembly.
History is made and preserved by and for particular classes of people. A camera in some hands can preserve an alternate history.

— David Wojnarowicz, 1990

There have always been photographers who capture the work of those involved in organized resistance, but there are very few activists who use photography to record the struggle. If Dona Ann McAdams’ only passion were her photography, her legacy—which she continues to shape—would be that of a trailblazer, a visionary, and a uniquely empathetic observer of forgotten, often despised, individuals and communities who have grown tired of bearing burdens they did nothing to create. As a glance at any of her work reveals, though, Dona is more than an observer, more than a gifted collector of moments in time; Dona's photography exudes a familiarity—a brief respite from the pressures of life, a hand over a heart, a subtle grin in the middle of a warzone—because Dona is among, of, and with those she photographs.

Cutting her teeth in Harvey Milk’s Castro as women and queer people demanded more, perfecting her eye in the East Village as a generation fought an epidemic, lending a hand to the fight against injustice and erasure wherever she lands, Dona is an activist, in the truest sense of the word. And, like all great activists, Dona saves lives by virtue of her presence.

Look around: these aren’t photos of activism; these photos are activism. And they’ll continue to save lives long into a distant future.

Matthew Riemer and Leighton Brown are co-authors of We Are Everywhere: Protest, Power, and Pride in the History of Queer Liberation and the creators of queerhistory.com and Instagram’s @lgbt_history.
One day in 1975 I ran out of film while shooting in San Francisco’s Dolores Park. Someone told me there was a camera store on Castro Street, so I wandered over. A man with a mustache and long hair was sitting in a barber’s chair. He asked what I wanted, and when I told him I needed a roll of Tri-X film to keep shooting, he said, “Just one?” Then he offered to set up a charge account for me, so I could come in anytime and get whatever I needed. The man was incredibly helpful and supportive and had a thick Long Island accent, not unlike my own at the time. He introduced himself as Harvey, and the following month I learned who he was. The “Mayor of Castro Street,” the owner of Castro Camera, was running for office. His name was Harvey Milk.

I was 21 at the time and attending classes at the San Francisco Art Institute, lucky enough to have teachers like Hank Wessel and Dennis Hearne and Gary Winogrand. They taught me how to make a good photograph—how to make art—but Harvey Milk taught me how to use that art to encourage social change.

Ever since those days in San Francisco, the artistic and the political have been inseparable for me. When Harvey was assassinated three years later in November 1978, and my father died the following month from a coronary, I was seared to the core. They were both 48 years old, much too young to go. I vowed then not to compromise my work but to make it by any means necessary. Life was too fragile and unfair not to fight for what I believed in. I would use the tools I had available—a camera and a few rolls of film. The Tri-X came from a charge account at Castro Camera. I’ve been shooting the same film ever since.
In McAdams’ works, such details as a significant exchange of glances, the juxtaposition of a figure against an architectural backdrop, or a telling relationship between figures in the foreground and the background appear to have just happened, passively captured by the camera lens. It is only when one sees a number of works together that it becomes clear that McAdams is carefully framing and shaping the images that we see.

— Eleanor Heartney
from *Dona Ann McAdams: Some Women*
Opalka Gallery, 2009
Dona Ann McAdams began documenting performance artists in New York’s East Village in 1983, and she has emerged with a singular record of life in the autonomous zone... In the dynamism and the strangeness and the passion these photos reveal, there’s a kind of incandescence, and you can almost feel it open up a window in your mind.

— C. Carr

from *Caught In the Act: Photographs by Dona Ann McAdams*

Aperture, 1996
She has spent nearly every Friday morning [for 14 years] running an art workshop in Coney Island for a group of individuals who suffer from a variety of mental illnesses... During one session when McAdams was showing her pictures around the communal table of the art room, a woman in the class began drawing in crayon on a photograph of herself, as if the picture was in her own private coloring book. Many of the other workshop regulars began to follow suit, and a routine was established for how the workshop would proceed throughout the following years.

— Jeffrey Hoone
from Dona Ann McAdams: The Garden of Eden
Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery, 1997
Look around: these aren’t photos of activism; these photos are activism. And they’ll continue to save lives long into a distant future.

— Matthew Riemer and Leighton Brown
The backstretch workers know that horses feed them not only in the physical sense, but also in ways profound and even sacred... On the backstretch, I spend my time listening and learning, photographing and holding lead shanks. We domesticated the horse, but they continue to hold out the promise of domesticating us through compassion. I keep wondering: who is leading who—and where?

— Dona Ann McAdams
from *A View From The Backstretch*
National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame, 2010
Dona Ann McAdams was born in Queens, New York, in 1954, and grew up in Lake Ronkonkoma. McAdams studied photography at the San Francisco Art Institute. She received an M.F.A. in Visual Arts from Rutgers University and a B.A. in Cultural Anthropology from Empire State College.

McAdams' photography has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the International Center for Photography, the Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), the Library for Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, Robert Miller Gallery, and Primavera Fotográfica a Barcelona, among other venues. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Centre Pompidou and Bibliothèque nationale de France.

McAdams has received grants from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Polaroid Foundation, and the New York State Council of the Arts. Her many awards include the Dorothea Lange–Paul Taylor Prize given by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, a Bessie Award for Sustained Achievement in Performance Documentation, and an Obie Award for Distinguished Contribution to Off-Broadway theatre. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, The London Times, The Chicago Tribune, Time, Newsweek, Stern, and Doubletake. Her book of performance photography, Caught in the Act, was published by Aperture.

Since 1983 McAdams has been committed to bringing cameras and photography into marginalized and underserved communities. She has built community darkrooms and taught photography inside New York City homeless shelters and day programs for people living with severe mental illness, on the backstretch of a thoroughbred race track, and inside a small farming community in West Virginia. In 2010 she collaborated with Maurice Sendak and Lynn Caponera to establish the Sendak Fellowship, a residency program for people who tell stories with illustration. She lives on a goat dairy farm in southwestern Vermont.
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

7  Turkey Point Nuclear Power Plant, Miami, Florida, 1980, silver gelatin photograph, 12.25 x 18.25 inches

10  Reno, Nevada, 1978, silver gelatin photograph, 12 x 18 inches

11  Geary Street, San Francisco, California, 1974, silver gelatin photograph, 11.75 x 17.75 inches

12  Saratoga Race Course, Saratoga Springs, New York, 2005, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 12 inches

13  Bourbon Street, New Orleans, 1978, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 12 inches

14  Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1978, silver gelatin photograph, 11.5 x 17.75 inches

15  Madrid, 1988, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 12 inches

16  Melvin Lawrence, Polymeadows Farm, Shaftsbury, Vermont, 2000, silver gelatin photograph, 11.75 x 17.75 inches

17  Georgie Hurd, Williamsburg, West Virginia, 1997, silver gelatin photograph, 12.25 x 18.5 inches

19  Karen Finley, St. Valentine’s Day Massacre, The Pyramid Club, NYC, 1989, silver gelatin photograph, 18 x 12 inches

20  Ishmael Houston-Jones, The End of Everything, The Kitchen, NYC, 1988, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 12 inches

21  Meredith Monk, Volcano Songs, PS122, NYC, 1994, silver gelatin photograph, 12.25 x 18 inches

22  Allen Ginsberg, PS122, NYC, 1991, silver gelatin photograph, 9 x 6 inches

23  Lori E. Seid assists Ethyl Eichelberger, PS122, NYC, 1987, silver gelatin photograph, 9 x 6 inches *

24  David Wojnarowicz, reading from 'Tongues of Flame' for The Decade Show, The Studio Museum of Harlem, NYC, 1990, silver gelatin photograph, 9 x 6 inches

25  Diamanda Galas, Plague Mass, PS122, NYC, 1991, silver gelatin photograph, 9 x 6 inches
26  *Lisa Kron, Paradykes Lost, WOW Café, NYC, 1988*, silver gelatin photograph, 7.75 x 11.75 inches

27  *Ron Athey, Martyrs and Saints, PS122, NYC, 1993*, silver gelatin photograph, 18 x 12 inches

30  Dona Ann McAdams and Jack Gilbert, *Jack Gilbert, Brooklyn Day Program, Coney Island, NY*, silver gelatin photograph with applied oil pastel and colored pencil, 8 x 10 inches

31  Dona Ann McAdams and Mamie Jones, *Mamie Jones, Brooklyn Day Program, Coney Island, NY*, silver gelatin photograph with applied oil pastel and colored pencil, 8 x 10 inches

32  Dona Ann McAdams and Jane Smith, *Seymour Greenspan, Brooklyn Day Program, Coney Island, NY*, silver gelatin photograph with applied oil pastel and colored pencil, 10 x 8 inches

33  Dona Ann McAdams and Jane Smith, *Ravin Bass, Brooklyn Day Program, Coney Island, NY*, silver gelatin photograph with applied oil pastel and colored pencil, 10 x 8 inches

34  Dona Ann McAdams and Jane Smith, *Jane Smith, Brooklyn Day Program, Coney Island, NY*, silver gelatin photograph with applied oil pastel and colored pencil, 10 x 8 inches

35  Dona Ann McAdams and Jane Smith, *Susan Wilson, Brooklyn Day Program, Coney Island, NY*, silver gelatin photograph with applied oil pastel and colored pencil, 10 x 8 inches

38  *ACT UP at the Waldorf Astoria, NYC, 1990*, silver gelatin photograph, 12.25 x 18 inches

39  *I Want You to End the Military Ban, March on Washington, DC, 1993*, silver gelatin photograph, 7.75 x 11.75 inches

40  *Gulf War Parade, NYC, 1991*, silver gelatin photograph, 12 x 8 inches

41  *March Against the War in Nicaragua, Artist Call, Washington, DC, 1983*, silver gelatin photograph, 12 x 8 inches

42  *City Hall, NYC, 1994*, silver gelatin photograph, 12 x 18 inches
Carnival Knowledge, *The Second Coming*, NYC, 1984, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 12 inches‡

Christine Hallquist, *Pride Parade*, Burlington, Vermont, 2018, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 11.75 inches

Kremlin Annex Protest at Lafayette Park, Washington, DC, 2018, silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 12 inches

Amy and Goose, *Oklahoma Training Track*, Saratoga Springs, New York, 2013, silver gelatin photograph, 12 x 18 inches


Evening attire at Pat Kelly’s barn. *Main Track*, Saratoga Race Course, Saratoga Springs, New York, 2007, diptych, two silver gelatin photographs, 11.75 x 17.75 inches each

Lou and Bill, *Green Mountain College*, Vermont, 2012, diptych, two silver gelatin photographs, 17.75 x 12 inches each

The Sisters of St. Mary’s Convent, Northern Spy Farm, Vermont, 2015, silver gelatin photograph, 12 x 18 inches

Goat Song, Northern Spy Farm, Vermont, 2007, silver gelatin photograph, 12 x 18 inches

Dona Ann McAdams tribute video created by Maya Yu Zhang and Catherine Galasso for the 2018 Movement Research Gala.

* The beloved performer Ethyl Eichelberger was about to perform a song from “Minnie The Maid” when her accordion strap broke. The packed audience gasped, but Ethyl just kept her rapid-fire ad-libs going. As I quickly pushed a piano onto the stage behind her, she said, “Now, if only I had a piano,” to the roar and cheers of the audience. Re-orienting herself on her knees to play, she quipped, “Now if only I had a darn piano bench,” just as I circled around the piano with one! Dona caught that exact moment—one of my favorites from a lifetime of phenomenal moments caught by Dona Ann McAdams. Within that one photograph, Dona captured the love, trust, joy, and community of live performance. — Lori E. Seid

‡ Carnival Knowledge, a feminist performance collective, invited porn star and performance artist Annie Sprinkle and Club 90 to participate in their 1984 event at Franklin Furnace. McAdams shot this publicity still in a Broadway loft, suggesting that the participants pose topless with signs identifying them as either “feminist” or “porn star,” but many traded signs in a show of solidarity. This image was widely reproduced in publications ranging from *Hustler* to *The Village Voice*. The performance itself involved tea and cookies and reminded the audience that sex workers are mothers, daughter, and wives—just like their feminist counterparts.
We at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center have long known that Vermont is filled with hidden artistic treasures. Nonetheless, the news that Dona Ann McAdams, unflinching photographer of the 1980s avant-garde performance scene, has been raising goats on a rocky hillside farm in the tiny town of Sandgate (pop. 391) since 1998 was revelatory. It was John Killacky who enlightened us, and we can’t thank him enough for that.

It has been a joy working with Killacky and McAdams to illuminate the scope of McAdams’ photography over the past four decades. The work is incisive, uncompromising, and forthright, just like the artist herself. Yet it is also meticulously crafted and suffused with empathy, especially for those who inhabit the margins of mainstream society.

We are honored to be collaborating with the institutions listed on page 1 to share McAdams’ work with viewers in all corners of Vermont. When the exhibit’s statewide tour wraps up in late 2020, McAdams might no longer be quite as “hidden” as she once was, but she will surely remain one of our most notable artistic treasures.

— Danny Lichtenfeld, Director
Brattleboro Museum & Art Center

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