

Extra Criticum

Thoughtful and candid discussion and commentary on the performing arts by "those who do."

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Where Memory, Community, and Art Meet: Part II

In [Part I](#) we were introduced to Marianne Petit, artist, animator, and teacher, and her project [Recollecting Adams](#). Here, we're going to get specific.

Was it difficult finding the three minute nuggets in their recollections?

Well, I easily have an hour or more collected per person and there are easily a bunch of incredible stories told by each person. I'm glad they sound like three-minute nuggets! There's a bit of audio editing at work--some episodes are quite edited, and others less so. It depends upon the person. I don't really edit the content of the stories or the spirit in which they're being said, so the truth is I don't think anyone has ever really noticed that I edited their interview!

How did you find the subjects? Was it difficult to get the people talking?

The subjects are all people I've met over the past few years where I thought, I need to record this person! The interviews are fairly unstructured. At first everyone is always a little uncomfortable with a microphone and recorder, so I sort of start with a basic question about their childhoods in Adams. But the conversation seems to move pretty quickly into the terrain that seems most appropriate to that person, and it has never been the same for any two people. It's been pretty amazing that way--some people talk about the church, others talk about the mills when they were running, others talk about what happened when they closed--and all from very different perspectives. While everyone agrees that there are pretty important big themes to convey that they all share, the parts that are important to them vary significantly. And those are the parts that they really enthusiastically talk about.



A single recollection is powerful, but taken as a whole they become extremely powerful. We're seeing a whole community.

The head of the town historical society told me, when discussing immigration to this area and the longevity of the mills here, that the Polish people who settled here really didn't come here to pursue the individualistic American dream. They really came here to build a community. As a result the mills ran longer here because people were willing to work for less than in other areas. But they also formed an incredibly strong tie to the place as well. I think when people talk about themselves here, they see themselves as being part of the town and community as well.

*How many episodes of **Recollecting Adams** are you planning on doing?*

Between 20 and 25. I hope! That's feels a bit daunting right now.

Where is the funding coming from to make these?

Recollecting Adams is a 2008 commission of New Radio Performing Arts (Ether-Ore) for its Turbulence web site. It was made possible with funding from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. It is also part of the larger project "Networked Realities: (Re)Connecting the Adamses" a collaboration of Turbulence and [Greylock Arts](#) and Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Gallery51.

Matt, my partner, and I have had a longstanding relationship with Turbulence, which is this amazing organization that has been funding net art for about 13 years. In 1996 I was one of the first artists commissioned and then in 2005 Matt and I did a work, with our friend Elizabeth Mikesell, entitled "[The Saddest Thing I Own](#)" which was a repository of the saddest things people own and the stories that accompany them. What happened with that site was pretty crazy - it got boingboinged in the first hour of our launch and we had 40,000 visitors in the first day and close to 150,000 in the first three. And we got hundreds of submissions of incredible, and incredibly sad objects and their stories. It was shocking. It became really clear that people experience all sorts of truly tragic things and then have these remnants and no one to share them with.

I'm also working on series called [When I Was Three](#). There's no funding for that, it's a total labor of love.

Can you tell me a little bit about how you are getting [Recollecting Adams](#) and [When I Was Three](#) out there for the world to see?

Well, that's the hard part, isn't it? Obviously, the fact that everything is electronic and on the Internet makes the whole idea of self-distribution, self-publishing, so much easier than the old days. But still how do you get people to look?

In general, I try to send out e-mails to anyone that I think might have an interest. I figure if one out five e-mails gets a response that is a tremendously high success rate and I can happily ignore the 80% silence. So, for example, when [SMITH Magazine](#) wrote a wonderful article in their "Sites We Love" blog, that was huge for me. It makes it easier to send out the next round of e-mails that may get no response. Also, it's nice to not only be acknowledged by a publication that I love, but mostly to connect with kindred spirits--which I guess brings me to the next point.

With [Recollecting](#), there are communities of people who have definitely been very responsive--people who are interested in non-fiction and/or first person narrative, collective storytelling, history, community arts practices, etc., and that's very encouraging. I need to think more about what this means--not only for the project, but how I define myself as an artist, if that makes any sense. I ask friends for advice all the time, and take their suggestions very seriously. I asked you and you said, "You know, your local PBS affiliate might be interested." I sent an e-mail to the programming director and some of the producers. And now the animations are going to appear on WGBY this summer, which is pretty thrilling.

It made my week when you told me that worked out. Do you have a hit list that you work your way down?

I'm not particularly hierarchical about distribution. I know some artists would never ever consider certain venues, like YouTube, for example. That said, those same people might not necessarily think of illustrated first person storytelling as "art" either, you know? I figure, you never know who is reading or watching and where, so ... why not? Since the series is local, when Megan Whilden, the director of cultural programming in Pittsfield suggested putting them on public access cable, I realized she was right. Not everyone in this area has Internet access. So I've contacted our local stations and will bring some files to them later this month. As part of that, I talked with Turbulence about the possibility of distributing the episodes in places where people are already looking for video entertainment, and they were very supportive of the idea. It's hard to get people to come to a standalone site. So, I just made YouTube, Blip, Vimeo and iTunes channels for [Recollecting](#). I'm not sure what to do about those channels yet--how to publicize or push them. I guess that's a next step. (Note: [When I was Three](#) is also available as a podcast through the iTunes store.)

But you know this is hard. And, there are levels to this--levels where people are very friendly and open and then levels where suddenly you don't gain access. It's interesting to see--some places clearly have e-mail addresses you can send to and other places clearly don't want you contacting them. So how do you break through to them? I don't know. Also, at a certain point, I think I need to step back and really think through what the ultimate goal is, you know? I mean, I know people who are just endlessly self-promotional and it's just tedious. But I find that it's easy to get caught up in pretty conventional notions of achievement and success that are stupid and make you feel badly about yourself. And the truth is, some of my most favorite artists and projects fall in-between categories and are hard to define.

I'd like to get these stories out into the world, because I love these storytellers and this place and I want the world to know about it. And I'd like to have the ability to keep making projects like this.

Marianne R. Petit is an artist, animator, and teacher. As an associate Arts Professor at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications located within the Tisch School of the Arts, she teaches courses in digital media, collective storytelling, and oversees the Technology and Social Justice and Assistive Technology curriculum. In addition, she is the co-founder of [Greylock Arts](#), a non-commercial arts space located in the Northern Berkshires dedicated to technology and emerging arts practice. Her artwork has been broadcast on the Independent Film Channel and has appeared in festivals and exhibitions internationally. For more about Marianne and to see some of her work, visit her [website](#).

June 15, 2009 in [*by David Licata, Interviews, Web/Tech](#) | [Permalink](#)  [ShareThis](#)

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