

Extra Criticum

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Where Memory, Community, and Art Meet: Part I



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](#).

Tell me about Recollecting Adams?

[Recollecting Adams](#) is an episodic illustrated storytelling project. It's a year long project, with new episodes launching approximately every two weeks. It uses first person storytelling and very simple animation to paint a portrait of Adams, a small town located in the Northern Berkshires.

Where did the idea come from?

We run a non-commercial gallery/arts space in Adams, and it became very clear from the moment we opened our doors that people in this town love to talk and love to tell stories.

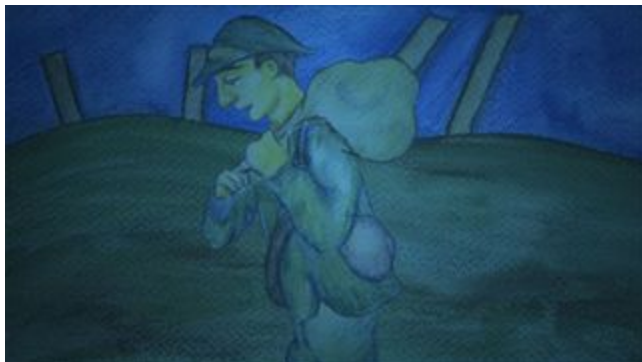
Our building was built in 1915 and the storefront was a ladies' clothing shop for many years. Later on it became a music store, where many people took accordion or guitar lessons, or bought vinyl records. In our first days people would routinely stop by, not only to see what we were doing with the space, but to also share their memories of the history of the building. They would point to a spot and say, "This is where I bought gloves," or "This is where we would sit during lessons." It was fascinating. And then, if we were sitting outside or cleaning our windows, people would stop not only to share their memories of the building, but of the whole street as well. We would hear about how this now very depressed commercial district was once a vibrant shopping area and how people used to spend their time there.

It was really clear that we were now part of a community that not only knew its history but loved its history. They loved telling stories about memories or things that happened to them, but would inevitably tie those personal pieces

into the bigger picture of what was happening more collectively. So, by listening to them talk, not only did you hear their individual stories, but they painted an incredibly rich portrait of a place and time as well.

Why are these stories important?

Oh, for so many reasons. I've had people tell me that they had no idea what it was like for their grandparents who worked in the mills, because they never wanted to talk about it. You know a person your whole life and you don't know what something was actually like for them. And we're not talking about a minor event. We're talking about a huge part of their lives.



I think that happens a lot. People don't want to share their stories for whatever reason. Sometimes they're ashamed or they just don't think they're important, that there is no story there to tell. And let's face it, in our culture we tend to emphasize the big stories of "important" people. But obviously it is those so-called little stories that inform our lives and build societies.

And in terms of place, it's really easy to characterize a place--in this case "old mill town"--that strips it of all nuance and ongoing dynamics. So, you paint a portrait of a once thriving place of hard work that now looks like a struggling skeleton of what it once was. But the truth is that there is still life and energy there.

The animation is beautiful and simple. And the first one, "From Poland to Slovakia to Adams" looks like watercolors. The second, "After the Polish Dance" looks like a black and white woodcut, what were you trying to do with the different styles? How do you arrive at a style for a particular episode?

Thank you! You know, I've been on sabbatical this semester and I just have been craving, for years now, a sort of more exploratory "time in the studio" period as opposed to delivering projects on a deadline. I had to launch the series on a deadline, but felt I didn't really have a sense of the series at all when I did. I just had one episode. So, I just figured I wouldn't be locked down to a "look" for the whole thing because I just wanted to play more aesthetically. I wanted to draw again and just draw and experiment--so some episodes end up being cartoony, others more realistic, etc. Also, I really want the people's voices and stories to be the dominant component. So from the first episode I decided that the animation would be very, very, very simple. I wanted it to feel more like an illustrated pop-up book--where you have an image and then something small or repetitive happens to punctuate that part of the story.



The pop-up book aesthetic is very effective. "We Practically Lived at the Church": in three minutes you manage to tackle faith and legacy as well as a child's joy of seeing. It's remarkable, really. Tell me about the process of getting one of these done?

When you talk with someone, you can really sense when someone is talking about something they're interested in talking about, and something they're genuinely excited about. And when you follow up on that piece, it just seems to pour right of them. Mary Ann talking about her childhood at Saint Stans was like that. It just came from her with such enthusiasm. The same happened with Ginger when she talked about her summer vacations ("Summers at Duke's Windsor Pond"). I don't know how it happens and you can't really plan for it in advance. You just sort of follow the conversation and then this moment happens that you sort of know "this is it!"

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Watch **Recollecting Adams**. In the next installment we'll talk more about process, as well as how Marianne is getting the work out there.

(Recollecting Adams is a 2008 commission of New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc., (aka Ether-Ore) for its Turbulence web site. It was made possible with funding from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.)

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