

LaMaMaGalleria

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For immediate release – September 14, 2021



Betsy Damon, *7,000 Year Old Woman*, performance at Cayman Gallery, New York, March 21, 1977. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1977/2021. Courtesy of the artist

Betsy Damon

Passages: Rites and Rituals

curated by Monika Fabijanska

October 15 – November 21, 2021

Thu–Sun, 1–7 PM

Opening reception: Thursday, October 14, 6–8 PM

Press Day: Friday, October 15, 1–4 PM

Betsy Damon in conversation with Monika Fabijanska:
Wednesday, October 20, 7 PM

Performance Listen, Respect, Revere (1986):
Wednesday, October 27, 7 PM

New York, NY, September 14, 2021 – La MaMa Galleria is honored to present **Betsy Damon. Passages: Rites and Rituals**. The exhibition will be on view at 47 Great Jones Street, New York, NY (between Bowery and Lafayette St. – please note that the address is different from that of the La MaMa Theater), from October 15 to November 21, 2021, Thursday-Sunday 1–7 PM. The **opening reception** will be held on Thursday, October 14, from 6–8 PM. We are hosting a **press day** on Friday, October 15, 1–4 PM, when the artist will be present to answer questions. The exhibition will be accompanied by **public programs**, including a conversation with the artist on Wednesday, October 20, 7 PM, and the re-performance of Betsy Damon's 1986 *Listen, Respect, Revere* on Wednesday, October 27, 7 PM. On both these evenings the gallery will be open from 6 PM to allow guests to view the show before the event. Masks and the proof of vaccination with ID (for those over the age of 12) are required to enter the gallery.

Passages: Rites and Rituals, curated by Monika Fabijanska, will be the first exhibition of Betsy Damon's radical outdoor performance practice (1976–86). It will feature the documentation of eight public performances, as well as *Body Masks* – erotic photographs from a 1976 private performative session, which have never been presented publicly.

Betsy Damon (American, b. 1940) began doing performance art with the Feminist Art Studio, which she founded at Cornell University in 1972. Activism and community-building have been central to her feminist practice since the 1970s. A leader among lesbian activists in New York, she co-edited the third issue of *Heresies, Lesbian Art and Artists* (1977), and participated in the first lesbian art show in the U.S. (1978), curated by Harmony Hammond at 112 Greene Street, and *The Great American Lesbian Art Show* at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles (1980).

Damon's early performances addressed the erasure of women's narrative from history (*Blind Beggarwoman*, 1979–80, alluding to Homer), and their unspeakable subjects: mutilation and other gender-based violence (*7,000 Old Year Woman*, 1977–78; *Rape Memory*, 1978–79; *What Do You Think About Knives?*, 1980–81). The non-conformist courage of these performances consists not just in their subjects but – strikingly – also taking them out to the streets of New York and other cities, often without institutional umbrella. All of them placed woman's agency in the center of the public space, laying a claim to the agora and negotiating her right with diverse crowds. Some of these spaces were epitomes of patriarchal power, like Wall Street or the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue.

Damon's performances as healing rituals soon grew to include concern for the environment (*A Shrine for Everywoman*, 1980–88 and *Meditations with Stones for the Survival of the Planet*, 1982–late 1980s), and she devoted her later practice to public space projects focused on preserving living water. Today, Damon is among the most relevant pioneer ecofeminist artists; her social practice attracting a growing interest globally.

The distinctive vocabulary of Damon's performance practice – performing outdoors in city streets, inviting audience and other artists' collaboration, employing archetypes and elements of ritual, and her engagement with transnational

feminism – at *Feministische Kunst Internationaal* at Amsterdam's de appel, 1978, and the UN World Conferences on Women in Copenhagen, 1980, and Nairobi, 1985 – informed the development of Damon's later practice.

When her pivotal work, the installation *The Memory of Clean Water* (1985), a paper pulp death mask of a dried up river, was presented in *ecofeminism(s)* (Thomas Erben Gallery, 2020, cur. Fabijanska), *The New York Times* called it "impactful, historical work." "Damon's art is not well known today – wrote Alex A. Jones in *The Brooklyn Rail* – in part because the process of making *The Memory of Clean Water* inspired her to dedicate her subsequent work to water remediation. [...] How can art function to bring about tangible change in the world? At what point do we abandon the gallery and take to the street?" In 1995 and 1996, Damon organized *Keepers of the Waters*, two outdoor performance and installation art events with local artists, focused on water pollution, in Chengdu, China, and Lhasa in Tibet that fundamentally changed Chinese government's and public's understanding of performance art. An early example of transcultural socially engaged art, it left an indelible mark on avant-garde art of South-West China and led to Damon's award-winning eco-art project *Living Water Garden* in Chengdu, a six-acre city park demonstrating water purification through natural processes (1998).

Betsy Damon. Passages: Rites and Rituals will feature *Body Masks* (1976), *7,000 Year Old Woman* (1977-78), *Rape Memory* (1978-79), *Blind Beggarwoman* (1979-80), *What Do You Think About Knives?* (1980-81), *Meditations on Knives* (1981), *A Shrine for Everywoman* (1980-88), *Meditation with Stones for the Survival of the Planet* (1982–late 1980s), and *Listen, Respect, Revere* (1986). The exhibition will comprise of photographs, videos, documents, and contemporaneous descriptions of these performances by artists who participated in them, such as Su Friedrich, Amy Sillman, Marcia Grubb, Harmony Hammond, and Betsy Damon herself.

One of the last art organizations that preserves the *genius loci* of New York 1970s experimental scene when Damon performed in SoHo streets and galleries, La MaMa Galleria is a particularly fitting venue for this exhibition – some of her most compelling performances came close to experimental theater of that period. They have not been presented publicly since the 1980s.

Betsy Damon. Passages: Rites and Rituals is presented by La MaMa Galleria. Generous funding for the exhibition is provided by an anonymous benefactor and the NYC City Artist Corps grant. Special thanks to Jim and Mary Mattingly. The curator is grateful to Mia Yoo, Adriana Farmiga and Michael Boyd for keeping their hearts – and La MaMa doors – open to experimental performance art. <https://www.lamama.org/shows/betsy-damon-2021>

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Monika Fabijanska is an art historian and independent curator who specializes in women's and feminist art. Her 2020 exhibition *ecofeminism(s)* at Thomas Erben Gallery featured works by Betsy Damon, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Mary Mattingly, Ana Mendieta, Cecilia Vicuña, et al. Critically acclaimed *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Women's Contemporary Art in the U.S.* at Shiva Gallery, John Jay College, CUNY (with catalog) was ranked the fifth best NYC art show in 2018 by *Hyperallergic*. Fabijanska originated the idea and provided curatorial consulting for The Museum of Modern Art acquisition and retrospective exhibition of Polish feminist sculptor Alina Szapocznikow (2012). Her writing on women's art has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Women's Art Journal*, *Degree Critical*, etc. She has collaborated with La MaMa E.T.C. since 2000 on numerous projects, including a series of screenings and exhibition *Tadeusz Kantor's "Theatre of Death,"* which she curated in 2008. www.monikafabijanska.com

For detailed artist's biography, the descriptions of performances, and press images, see Press Kit.

For press inquiries, images and interview requests, please contact the gallery at lamamagalleria@gmail.com or the curator directly at monika@monikafabijanska.com Detailed updates for press: www.monikafabijanska.com



Images L-R: Betsy Damon, *Body Masks*, 1976. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1976/2021 | Betsy Damon, *7,000 Year Old Woman*, performance on Prince Street, New York, May 21, 1977. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1977/2021 | Betsy Damon, *Blind Beggarwoman*, performance on Wall Street, New York, October 18, 1979. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1979/2021 | Betsy Damon, *Listen, Respect, Revere*, performance at Brecht Forum, New York, 1986. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1986/2021. Images courtesy the artist

BETSY DAMON'S PERFORMANCES – TIMELINE AND IMAGES FOR PRESS

Body Masks (performative session in the studio), November 1976

Betsy Damon's performance practice arose from personal collaborations with other women artists, friends, and sometimes lovers – outdoors in nature settings or in the privacy of the artist's studio space. The erotic series *Body Masks* was created at the time of intense experimentation when Damon was already divorced, and turned from painting to sculpture, installation and performance, often using natural materials such as feathers and tree bark. THESE WORKS HAVE NEVER BEEN SHOWN BEFORE.



Caption: Betsy Damon, *Body Masks*, 1976. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1976/2021. Courtesy of the artist

7,000 Year Old Woman (gallery and street performances), 1977-78

- Cayman Gallery, New York, NY, March 21, 1977
- Prince Street near West Broadway, New York, NY (a street event), May 21, 1977
- Wall Street, New York, NY (a street event), October 31, 1977
- Skidmore College Student Center, Saratoga Springs, NY, December 1977
- Pioneer Court off Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL (a street event organized with artist Marcia Grubb), May 12, 1978
- Northampton, MA (a street event, with music by Western Wind Ensemble), August 1978
- Cummington Community of the Arts, MA, August 1978



Caption: Betsy Damon, *7,000 Year Old Woman*, performance on Prince Street, New York, May 21, 1977. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1977/2021. Courtesy of the artist

Damon's groundbreaking performance, *7,000 Year Old Woman*, was first performed at Cayman Gallery in New York. Covered with bags filled with flour, the artist cut them open with a knife, gradually exposing her naked (in some galleries) or almost naked (in the street) body. *7,000 Year Old Woman* was an exploration of woman's experience throughout history – and Damon's own impatient quest into who she was – beyond the traditionally ascribed social roles. Accessing the unspoken, unwritten, unrecorded history of women through a public ritual, she created a figure associated by some critics with a goddess, but Damon has denied such limiting reading of her performance.

The 7000 Year Old Woman. Who is she? [...] She is my sister, mother, grandmother, friend and lover. She has been the origin of my womanhood for the last 7,000 years and she is me, the 'I' about which I know very little... Because I grew more and more in awe of her and did not know much about her, the first step in depicting her was to give her a name. I have come to understand that I clarify her effigy. I have some skill and discipline, but she has enchantments of her own. I get to know her through the performances; this means I learn to exist through her. (Betsy Damon, *Heresies*, 1977)



Caption: Betsy Damon, *7,000 Year Old Woman*, performance on Prince Street, New York, May 21, 1977. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1977/2021. Courtesy of the artist

Rape Memory (gallery performances), 1978-79

- *7,000 Year Old Woman – Rape Memory*, Feministische Kunst Internationaal, de appel, Amsterdam, Holland, December 6, 1978
- *Blind Beggarwoman – Rape Memory*, Artemisia Gallery, Chicago, IL, March 1979
- *Blind Beggarwoman – Rape Memory*, Medusa's Revenge, New York, NY, October 1979

Damon's most poignant performance emerged from listening to herstory. *Rape Memory*, a development from the *7,000 Year Old Woman*, offers archetypes, narration, a healing ritual, and an insight into the subconscious illuminated by the experience of the participation in CR groups. In it, Damon's idiom comes very close to the experimental theater of that time. One of the best artworks about rape culture by a woman, and still almost unknown, it focuses on the victim's repression of memory and the silencing women by the society.

Like most of Damon's performances, resulting from workshops, it is based on the active participation of other artists, friends, and audience. There exist video recordings of all three performances of *Rape Memory*, showing that each was unique.



Caption: Betsy Damon, *7,000 Year Old Woman – Rape Memory*, performance at de appel, Amsterdam, December 6, 1978. Still from video ©Betsy Damon 1978/2021. Courtesy of the artist

Blind Beggarwoman (street performances), 1979-1980

- In front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, NY (a street event), June 15, 1979
- 80 Langton Street, San Francisco, CA (a street event), September 1979
- Wall Street, New York, NY (a street event), October 18, 1979
- New Orleans, LA (5-hour street event for CAA/WCA), January 1980
- Franklin Furnace, New York, NY, February 1980
- Glyptotek Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 1980

Blind Beggarwoman, created within half a year from the first performance of *Rape Memory*, develops the thread of writing women's history. Here, Damon transforms into a blind woman who begs passersby for their stories – alluding to Homer, the blind author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* epics, which were largely based on oral traditions.

Performing *Blind Beggarwoman* in public spaces including those symbolizing patriarchal power – like Wall Street or the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue – attracted groups of passersby representing different social strata. At St. Patrick's, she was accompanied by Virgin Mary – an archetype explored by artist Marcia Grubb; at Wall Street – by Damon's authentically blind friend.

I asked the question: who are the female Homers, the female storytellers, who were the containers of history and memory? On the street, I begged for stories from people's lives, while my eyes were covered with these very obvious patches. I practiced with a friend of mine who was blind. [...] May Stevens got it right—she was the first to recognize that the work was also a mutilation image. Some saw her as the multi-breasted powerful Goddess... I saw her as everywoman, my grandmother, mother, sister. (Betsy Damon, interview with Asia Art Archive)



Caption: Betsy Damon, *Blind Beggarwoman*, performance in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, June 15, 1979. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1979/2021. Courtesy of the artist

*Clothed in rags and tiny bags of dust, her eyes bandaged, she begged for people's stories, her blindness compelling a remarkable intimacy in over one hundred strangers. (Suzanne Lacy, *Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics*, Duke, 2010)*



Caption: Betsy Damon, *Blind Beggarwoman*, performance on Wall Street, New York, October 18, 1979. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1979/2021. Courtesy of the artist

What Do You Think About Knives? (collaborative performances and workshops), 1980-81

- University of Rhode Island Student Union, Kingston, RI, April 28, 1980
- The Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS), Woman's Building, Los Angeles, May 3, 1980
- Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, May 1980
- A.I.R. Gallery, New York, NY, June 9, 1980
- Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C., sponsored by the Washington Project on the Arts and the Washington Women's Art Center (a street event), May 20, 1981

Meditations on Knives (collaborative performances and workshops), 1981

- San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA, May 1981
- *Performance Art Festival*, Williams College, Williamstown, MA, May 9, 1981
- *Performance Art Festival*, Johnson Museum, Ithaca, NY, October 9, 1981

Slightly different but closely related, ***What Do You Think About Knives?*** and ***Meditations on Knives*** were workshops and resulting performances which challenged participants, sometimes including men, to rethink their relationship with knives. Typically for Damon, the work was inspired by the analysis of a simple object laden with rich cultural meaning, referring both to survival and to gendered experiences. Over time, Damon built a vocabulary of feathers, wings, knives, stones – objects carrying symbolical meanings and present in rituals of many cultures.

"Knives... [passed] through her work under a kind of alias, functioning first as icon, then as weapon, then as shelter."
(Dan Cameron, *Extended Sensibilities*, The New Museum, 1982)



Caption: Betsy Damon, *What Do You Think About Knives?*, performance at the University of Rhode Island Student Union, Kingston, RI, April 28, 1980. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1980/2021. Courtesy of the artist



Caption: Betsy Damon, *What Do You Think About Knives?*, performance at the The Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS), Woman's Building, Los Angeles, May 3, 1980. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1980/2021. Courtesy of the artist

A Shrine for Everywoman (performance and installation), 1980-1988

- United Nations World Conference on Women, Glyptotek Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 1980
- United Nations World Conference on Women, Nairobi, Kenya, 1985
- United Nations, Plowshares Café, New York, NY, 1986
- Soho 20 Gallery, New York, NY, 1988

A Shrine for Everywoman marks the beginning of Damon's transnational efforts to connect and offer a space of reflection and healing to women from around the world, in order to learn of their shared **experience**.

Damon invited women to write their thoughts and stories down, which she placed in small bags, special receptacles meant to preserve them and keep them safe, like reliquaries. The bags were then hung in rows on cords, like Buddhist prayer flags, and tied at each end to tall sticks arranged in a circle. [...] The space was meant as a safe one for recovery, spiritual connection, and empowerment. The recognition of the divine in all life forms was an important component of the feminist spirituality movement, which required that nature and the body be honored. (Christine Filippone, *For the Blood of Gaia*, *Woman's Art Journal*, Spring/Summer 2018)

A place to see ourselves and discover others. A place to bag your stories, hopes, fears and visions for the survival of the plants.
(Betsy Damon in Filippone, *For the Blood of Gaia*)



Caption: Betsy Damon, *A Shrine for Everywoman*, performance at the United Nations World Conference on Women, Nairobi, 1985. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1985/2021. Courtesy of the artist

Meditation with Stones for the Survival of the Planet (collaborative performance), 1982-the late 1980s

- Williams College, Williamstown, MA, January 1982
- Franklin Furnace, New York, NY, February 1982
- Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, October 1982
- Association of Mental Health Professionals, Toronto, Canada, June 1983
- In front of American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY, 1983
- Albuquerque, NM, November 1983
- SOHO20 Gallery, New York, NY, November 1983-April 1984
- Travelling performance, from 1983 through the late 1980s

Damon and other pioneering ecofeminist artists recognized that Western patriarchal philosophy and religions have served to exploit both women and nature. *Meditations* were a deeply communal experience, and direct predecessors of Damon's 1985 installation *The Memory of Clean Water*, which pivoted her practice towards art of the remediation of environmental degradation. No longer performance-based, her work remained focused on healing the community and inspiring it to action through symbolical activities in public space.

Participants in "A Meditation with Stones for the Survival of the Planet" brought their favorite rocks to a full moon performance held monthly in a gallery in SoHo. We set a large blue circular cloth in the center of the room, around which everyone stood. After an introduction to gather their energies, the participants were split into groups, with about eight people per group. One group lay head to head, and those standing placed stones on their bodies. When all of the stones were in place, we gathered and intoned a vocal sound over those with the stones on their bodies. Interestingly enough, participants never told each other where to place the stones, yet inevitably they placed stones where there was tension or pain. (Betsy Damon, A Memory of Living Water)



Caption: Betsy Damon, *Meditation with Stones for the Survival of the Planet*, performance in front of American Museum of Natural History New York, 1983. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1983/2021. Courtesy of the artist



Caption: Betsy Damon, *Meditation with Stones for the Survival of the Planet*, performance at SOHO20 Gallery, New York, 1984. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1984/2021. Courtesy of the artist

Listen, Respect, Revere, 1986

- Brecht Forum, New York, NY, 1986

In this narrative piece, with text written and performed by Betsy Damon and choreography for two consumed dancers, all to a drumbeat, the artist questions gender essentialism and traditional gender roles, offering a semantic analysis of basic elements and concepts of her performance practice: stones, listening, reverence, and respect. *Listen, Respect, Revere*, which articulated a perspective about humans in an oppressive society, was performed only once.

It will be re-performed by young queer artists with Betsy Damon reading the text, in a version enhanced for the present on October 27, 2021, 7 PM at the La MaMa Galleria.



Caption: Betsy Damon, *Listen, Respect, Revere*, performance at Brecht Forum, New York, 1986. Archival Print ©Betsy Damon 1986/2021. Courtesy of the artist

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Betsy Damon (American, b. 1940), is a feminist and activist artist whose practice encompasses performance, ecoart, and social action. She received her BA from Skidmore College (1963) and MFA from the Columbia University (1966). Damon currently lives and works in New York City.

A leader among lesbian activists in New York, she co-edited the third issue of *Heresies, Lesbian Art and Artists* (1977), founded the Feminist Art Studio at Cornell University (1972), and the organization No Limits for Women Artists (1982). She participated in the first lesbian art show in the U.S., *A Lesbian Art Show* (1978), curated by Harmony Hammond at 112 Greene Street and *The Great American Lesbian Art Show* at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles (1980). She was also featured in the exhibition *Feministische Kunst Internationaal* at Amsterdam's de appel (1978) and *Extended Sensibilities. Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art* curated by Dan Cameron at the New Museum (1982).

Damon's projects have also been featured in group exhibitions at Thomas Erben Gallery, NYC (*ecofeminism(s)*, 2020), Museum of Modern Art Warsaw (2020), Taipei Biennial (2019), Asia Art Archive in America, NYC (2018), Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh (2012), Aspen Biennial Invitational (1990), Artemisia Gallery, Chicago (1989), P.S.1, NYC (1987, 1982), University of Wisconsin–Madison (1987), SOHO20, NYC (1986, 1984), and The Women's Building, LA (1975), among others. In 2021, she will participate in *EVA International*, Ireland's Biennial in Limerick and the exhibition *Art & Ecology* at SUNY Stony Brook.

Damon's performances created between 1972-89, were presented in the streets of New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. (1977-81), as well as at alternative art and theater spaces, including Franklin Furnace, A.I.R. Gallery and SOHO20 Gallery in NYC, Woman's Building in Los Angeles, Artemisia Gallery in Chicago, IL, de appel in Amsterdam, Holland; and at numerous universities, including San Francisco Art Institute and Cornell University's Johnson Museum (1981). Damon also took her performances to political events – UN World Conference on Women in Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). She organized *Keepers of the Waters* in Chengdu, China (1995) and Lhasa, Tibet (1996) – two series of performance and installation art events with local artists, which proved critical for the development of performance and ecoart in South-West China.

In 1991, Damon founded Keepers of the Waters – an artist-directed nonprofit that actively promotes living water systems. It currently works with governments, students, and citizens on projects in 5 countries.

Some of Damon's ecoart projects include: *Living Waters of Larimer*, Larimer, PA (2012-16) – a community-based project that repurposes rainwater to assist African American neighborhood with economic and sustainable development; design (with Tsing Hua Design Company) of the Olympic Forest Park, Beijing, China (2002-06) – a plant-based water purification park; collaboration with the Beijing Bureau of Hydraulic Research & Engineering, China (2001-03), *Living Water Garden* in Chengdu, China (1998) – a 6-acre park which uses bio-remediation and constructed wetlands to clean river water, and an environmental education center; and *Keepers: Citizens' Rights & Responsibilities*, Minnesota (1991-92) – a collaboration with the Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs and the Water Resource Research Center, to mobilize art, science, and citizens around a community's water. She has been distinguished speaker at numerous universities, museums and water preservation conferences.

Damon received ASLA (American Society of Landscape Architects) Awards for Tong Zhou Project (2006) and Fuzhou University design (2005); 2nd Place for Wen Yu He River (2004) and 3rd Place for Olympic Forest Park design (2003) from the Chinese Planning Bureau, Marion Weber National Award of Merit from Marion Foundation (2000), Excellence on the Waterfront Award for the Living Water Garden in Chengdu, China from The Waterfront Center in Washington, D.C. (1998), and Mid-Life Career Award from the Women's Caucus for Art (1989).

Her radical book, *Water Talks* – part memoir, part how-to manual, written to empower people to take charge of their waters, is forthcoming from the SteinerBooks in January 2022. www.betsydamon.com, www.keepersofthewaters.org