

# **Projects 25 : Dennis Adams : road to victory : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 12-February 28, 1991**

Author

Adams, Dennis, 1948-

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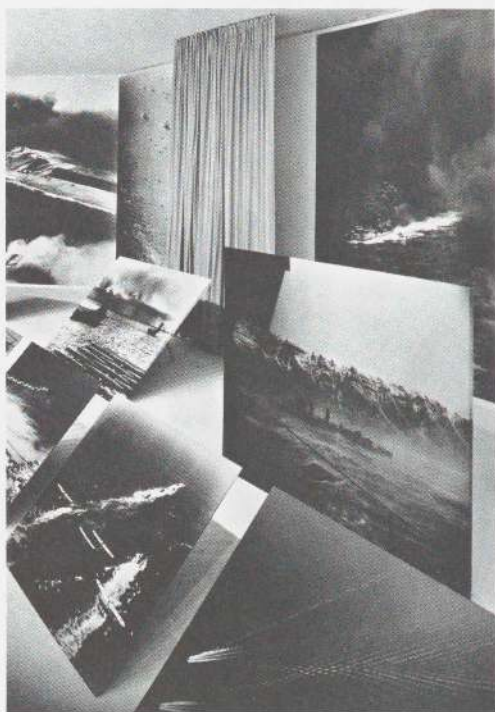
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25

dennis adams

projects



road to victory

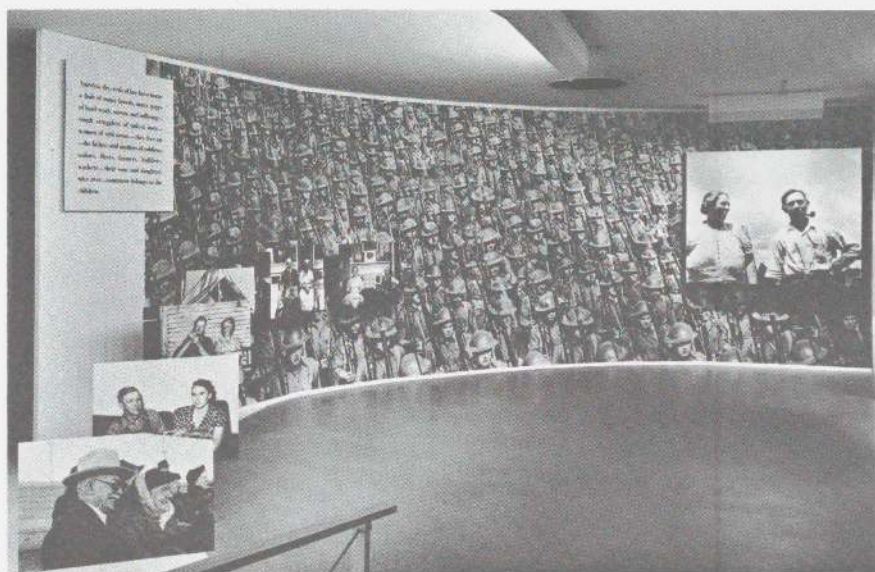
**The Museum of Modern Art**  
**New York**

**January 12–February 28, 1991**



Archive  
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1968

Dennis Adams's work compels the viewer to focus on events pushed to the periphery of public consciousness—events suppressed or distorted in our collective memory. By integrating familiar architectural structures with unexpected photographic images charged with social and political content, he raises questions concerning the fragile and selective nature of memory. Shifting the context of images and reframing them in structures that, in Adams's words, "interface with them in a perverse way," the artist jolts us from our anaesthetizing, fast-paced, mass-media-oriented culture.



Installation view of The Museum of Modern Art's 1942 exhibition *Road to Victory*

The series of works for which Adams is perhaps best known plays upon the familiar form of the urban bus shelter. In Adams's functioning shelters, the space generally reserved for an illuminated advertising poster is used instead to confront viewers with images, usually taken from news or photo archives, which the artist has described as falling "between the frenzy of the current and the dead zone of history." The images have included controversial subjects such as Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn at the Army-McCarthy hearings, defense lawyer Jacques Verges at the Klaus Barbie trial in Lyon, native Canadians protesting outside the Parliament building in Ottawa, and a South African funerary procession.

This troubling, displaced imagery destabilizes and subverts the normal function of the shelter, causing the viewer to pause, interact with something unexpected, and be reminded of events that have been repressed or manipulated in society's collective memory. The sensation of dislocation is enhanced by the physical disruption of the familiar architectural framework and by the disturbing manner in which the structures impinge on the photographs. Adams designs the shelters for the purpose of displaying images publicly, but by eliminating entrances or introducing non-functional elements—benches which are placed outside the shelters, backboards that obscure, invert, or fragment the photographs, planes that push the viewer uncomfortably close against the images—he simultaneously uses the architecture to undermine the clarity of the photographs. For Adams, "[t]he form of each project has to subvert the idea in some way. . . . Each work is structured around this tension."

Increasingly, Adams has been critiquing the museum setting as a repository of "official" history. In 1989 at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, he hung four abstract School-of-Paris paintings dating from the French-Algerian war on a wall which was suspended above a reflected image of a street demonstration that occurred at the instant of Algerian independence. In juxtaposing these two very different types of imagery, Adams intended to emphasize how museums can reinforce established cultural norms in which the disquieting nature of political and social events is often ignored and thereby suppressed. In reflecting the image of the street demonstration under the wall that supports the abstract paintings, the artist aimed to confront the museum's authoritative position. In describing this installation, Adams has said, "I wanted to create both a sense of levitation and vertigo, an unsettling image that would unmask the architectural as a primary instrument in the construction and maintenance of power."

Adams's *projects* installation, titled *Road to Victory*, refers to the wartime exhibition of the same name held at The Museum of Modern Art in 1942 and organized by Edward Steichen, then a lieutenant commander in the United States Navy (and, from 1947 to 1962, director of the Museum's Department of Photography). Steichen selected the photographs for the exhibition to illustrate the unity of America's people and the strength of

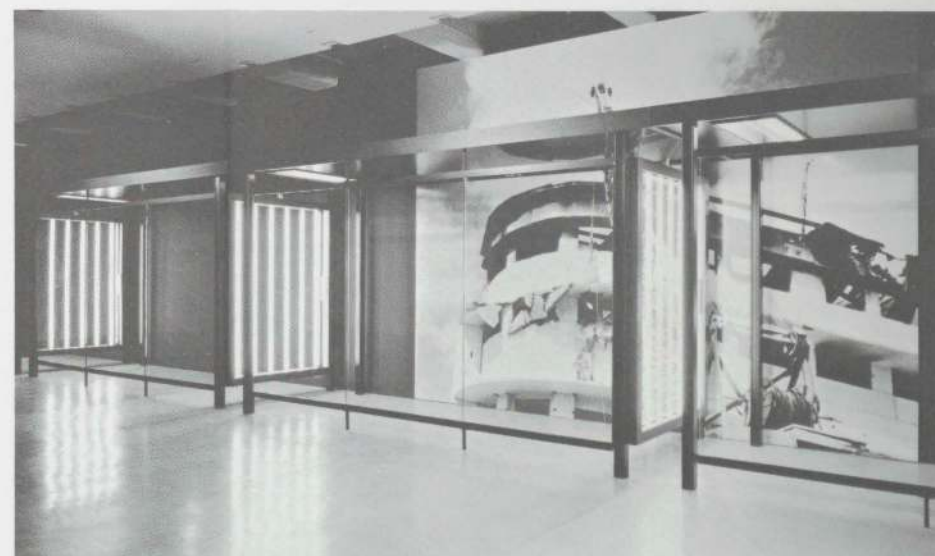
their beliefs at a time of great national tension. The photographs were accompanied by a text by the poet Carl Sandburg and the elaborate installation, designed by Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer, took the shape of an actual road bordered by overlapping tiers of photographic panels.

Metaphorically alluding to the Steichen exhibition, Adams has installed a series of large objects which resemble museum display vitrines and are tinted the gray color of the nearby museum windows. As a group, the vitrines constitute a wall, enclosing and defining the gallery space. Reflected on mirrored surfaces below the vitrines are World War I aerial reconnaissance photographs taken under Steichen's supervision while he commanded the Photographic Division of the American Air Service. Only fragments of the photographs appear and, since they are further reflected among the structures, they have a mysterious, phantasmagoric effect which evokes the uncertainty of collective memory. After passing these objects viewers arrive at documentary photographs of the Steichen exhibition.

In referring to the reconnaissance photographs and views of Steichen's 1942 exhibition, Adams intends to show that museum exhibitions are not ideologically neutral, but rather

affirm prevailing cultural and social standards. He has chosen the Steichen exhibition (which was organized just at the time when the United States entered World War II) to demonstrate how documentary photographs, through their selection and their display methodology, can be adapted to propaganda purposes in a manner analogous to the way advertising communicates with and persuades consumers. In the same way that the vibrant and triumphant images in the 1942 exhibition deflect attention from the suffering war entails, so do the depersonalized photographs of World War I battlefields, reflected under the tomb-shape vitrines, resemble abstract patterns that distance and aestheticize the war-torn frenzy they depict. Furthermore, by introducing into an exhibition context images not created with aesthetic considerations in mind—and which, according to the artist, we would not expect to confront in a museum—Adams seeks to erode the museum's status as cultural arbiter.

In Steichen's exhibition the installation architecture, to a great extent, dictated the meaning of the photographs. Giant photographic murals, free floating or jutting out from the floors and walls of that epic exhibition pulled viewers along the raised ramp that served as the "road" of the title, presenting them with dramatic scenes culminating in a vast mural of American marching troops. Adams's vitrine structures subvert the architectural form and display techniques of the Steichen exhibition. As he did with the bus shelters, he appropriates a familiar format, and then, as he puts it, undermines "its function as a vehicle for ideological conditioning." Stripping the vitrines of their normal function—they are empty; the object of their display is now inverted, reflected, and illuminated beneath darkened vitrines—Adams metaphorically destabilizes the museum's position as the archive of established culture.



Dennis Adams. *Terminus*. 1990. Four found bus shelters, steel, glass, fluorescent lights, and black-and-white photographs of Noriega's destroyed bunker, Panama City. Courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York. Photo: Peter Bellamy

Adams's desire to challenge forces of authority is representative of a broad tendency among artists as old as modernism itself, from the Russian Constructivists, who sought to transform the consciousness of their society through graphic

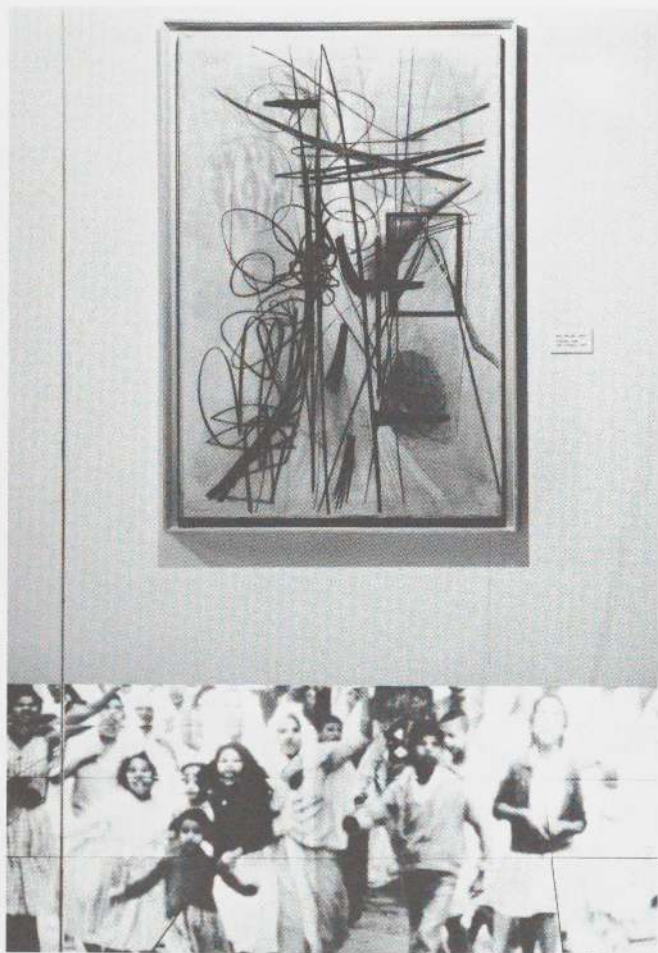


design and architecture, to artists of Adams's own generation, including Jenny Holzer, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Alfredo Jaar, and Louise Lawler, who explore societal and political issues. Within this tradition, Dennis Adams's provocative and resonant work displaces the conventional relationships between architecture and photography to make us recall suppressed events and consider the forms of cultural manipulation that have shaped our collective memory.

Laura Rosenstock

Assistant Curator

Department of Painting and Sculpture



**Dennis Adams. *The Algerian Annex* (detail). 1989. Wood, latex, mirrors, projected slides, found paintings. Installed at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Photo courtesy Kent Fine Art, New York**

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**Cover: Installation view of The Museum of Modern Art's 1942 exhibition *Road to Victory***

# biography

Born Des Moines, Iowa, 1948  
Lives and works in New York City

## Selected individual exhibitions

- 1990** Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, Paris. *Trans Actions*  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.  
*Dennis Adams: Works\**

Kent Fine Art, New York. *Dennis Adams:  
Street Vanities\**

- 1989** Christine Burgin Gallery, New York. *Holy War*  
Galerie Meert Rihoux, Brussels. *Public Access*  
John Weber Gallery, New York. *Dennis Adams:  
Preferred Properties*

## Selected group exhibitions

- 1990** The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto;  
The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.  
*Images in Transition\**

Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges  
Pompidou, Paris. *Passages de l'image\**

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. *Life-Size: A Sense  
of the Real in Recent Art\**

TSWA Four Cities Project, Derry, Ireland.  
*New Works for Different Places\**

Newcastle on Tyne, England. *A New Necessity:  
First Tyne International\**

8th Biennale of Sydney. *The Readymade  
Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20th-Century Art\**

- 1989** Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.  
*Image World: Art and Media Culture\**

Kunstverein in Hamburg. *D & S Ausstellung\**

Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges  
Pompidou, and La Grande Halle, La Villette, Paris.  
*Magiciens de la Terre\**

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. *Images  
Critiques: Adams, Jaar, Jammes, Wall\**

\*A publication accompanied the exhibition.

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New York: Christine Burgin Gallery, 1989.

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*Dennis Adams: The Architecture of Amnesia*.  
New York: Kent Fine Art, 1990.