

Endnotes

1 Evans’s catsuits are made by Butch Diva, the Brooklyn-based fashion brand created by Tiffany Rhodes. Butch Diva’s motto, “spandex and chaos,” aptly parallels Evans’s performance strategies.

Ayana Evans: Nobody’s Gonna Love You the Way I Do is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Dean Daderko, Ferring Foundation Chief Curator, with support from Grace Early, Exhibitions Assistant.

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Performance: Ayana Evans

Friday, October 9, 6:00–7:00 pm

C.R.E.A.M. Fair

Saturday, October 10, 10:00 am–3:00 pm

Learn More

Visit our website for more information about *Ayana Evans: Nobody’s Gonna Love You the Way I Do*, including an **audio guide**.



Performance portrait of Ayana Evans in Maine. Photo: Dominique Duroseau and Nyugen Smith.

Ayana Evans (b. Chicago, IL) is a NYC-based performance artist whose guerilla-style work has been staged at El Museo del Barrio, The Barnes Foundation, The Bronx Museum, Crystal Bridges Museum, Newark Museum, Queens Museum, and various public spaces. Her performances have been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Bomb Magazine*, *ArtNet*, *Hyperallergic*, and *New York Magazine’s The Cut*. She received the Franklin Furnace Fund (2017–18), NYFA Fellowship (2018), Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship (2021–22), was Professor of the Practice at Brown University (2021–22), and won the 2022 Chamberlain Award at Headlands Art Center. Residencies include Yaddo, Skowhegan, Vermont Studio Center, and Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop. Evans is currently a professor at Fordham University, Brooklyn College, and NYU.



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Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

September 10, 2026–February 7, 2027



Ayana Evans

Nobody’s Gonna Love You the Way I Do



Ayana Evans, *Loophole of Retreat: Sparkle #5: I Love You*, 2022. Performance still, *Loophole of Retreat* symposium, Venice, Italy, October 2022. Photo: Glorija Blazinsek.

Nobody’s Gonna Love You the Way I Do is the Brooklyn-based artist and performer Ayana Evans’s first museum survey exhibition. Celebrating her longstanding dedication to performance and live arts, this exhibition brings together documentation of recent and past works with ephemera, live performance commissions, and opportunities for audiences to become participants. Over the past two decades, Evans has established an unapologetic and emotionally invigorating voice as a performer. Questioning social hierarchies and inequities through her work, she creates spaces where people can be their most authentic selves. Early in her career, Evans began wearing a neon green, zebra-striped catsuit in public to test her self-confidence, while friends with phones recorded the reactions of onlookers.¹

These guerilla performances—dubbed *Operation Catsuit*—began in 2012 and established a touchstone in Evans’s practice. Since then, zebra stripes have remained a constant, while Evans’s own confidence has blossomed. Through her work, Evans confronts the ways race, class, gender, and sex structure social relations. She has also come to understand that the transformative experiences she orchestrated for herself early in her career are a vehicle through which vulnerability produces collective healing. Whether she’s creating intimate or collective experiences, Evans’s work proves itself to be accessible, humorous, challenging, and often profound. Her approach is deeply improvisatory and, ultimately, therapeutic.

Nobody's Gonna Love You the Way I Do celebrates the distinctive approach to performance and live art that Evans has developed over decades. She regularly asks her audiences to act as witnesses and participants. In 2017, for the *Art in Odd Places* festival, Evans unrolled a red carpet over the crosswalk of a busy Manhattan street, lining it with stanchions and red velvet ropes. These elements typically denote exclusivity or exclusion, but Evans turned these signals on their heads. A visible hostess in neon green, Evans invited everyone to the party. Folks discovering the event experienced moments of levity and celebration as Evans offered them feather boas to drape around their shoulders and escorted them across the street as cameras clicked. *I Want Some Sugar with My Sh*** (2017) interrupted the daily commutes of pedestrians and drivers alike, “offering a fantasy moment in the everyday.” For this exhibition, Evans has reprised the work, placing a red carpet lined with velvet ropes and brass stanchions in the midst of the Museum’s lobby. In *Recognition (St. Louis Sugar)* (2026) a coat rack draped with feather boas serves as an open invitation for visitors to have their own red carpet moment.



Ayana Evans, *If Keisha Jumped Off A Bridge Would You Do It Too?*, 2018. Performance still. Photo: Jennifer Coard.

As Evans’s self-confidence grew, so did her awareness of her ability to address pressing societal issues through her work. The public reactions recorded in *Operation Catsuit* revealed to Evans how she was being perceived: people gawk, take her picture (often without her consent), and on occasion, approach to offer her compliments. All of this made Evans realize that as a Black woman, many folks were bringing presumptions and prejudices about who she was to the table. Instead of toning down her aesthetics or her voice, she amped them up, leaned into experimentation, and welcomed the unknown. Embracing the mess, Evans’s performances became less scripted and more improvised. She showed up “ready to do the most,” recognizing that as a performer, the line between her self and a character could be blurred productively. Evans uses her body as a vehicle to address inequities and injustices, in attempts to surpass them. If she feels held back, she

can use performance to confront it publicly. And Evans’s feeling is that if she has complaints, she needs to offer solutions. Importantly, she solicited buy-in for her vision from the very people gathered to experience her actions. Naturally, it worked.

At a gathering of the College Art Association in Philadelphia in 2019, instead of offering a typical academic lecture, Evans instigated action and participation. She called the assembled audience out of their lecture seats to the stage at the front of the room. Standing atop a table, she asked the assembled arts professionals if they would catch her if she dove into their arms. Before she did, she established trust, asking them, “Are you going to catch this Black body?” When she was satisfied with their collective agreement, Evans asked the crowd to turn to their neighbors and affirm their shared commitment. Then, to cheers, Evans launched herself onto the crowd’s upstretched arms, floating over them as Nina Simone’s *Mississippi Goddamn* played over loudspeakers before she was lowered—safely—to the floor. As unorthodox and wild as this performance may seem, it is typical of Evans’s practice. She drew a crowd together around a shared goal, offering a visceral and vulnerable sense of the challenges women and people of color experience everyday, before forging a way forward.

Vulnerability and simplicity color much of Evans’s work. In an early endurance work, Evans put on a pink floor-length gown and high heels before engaging in three hours of non-stop jumping jacks. Such unabashed humor and absurdity plays a decisive role in Evans’s practice: Beginning in 2015, Evans began wearing a sign on her back that reads “I JUST CAME HERE TO FIND A HUSBAND,” the statement’s humor tempered by the directness of asking for what one wants.



Ayana Evans, *I Just Came Here to Find a Husband*, 2015–17. Performance still. Photo provided.



Ayana Evans at VIVA! Art Action, Montreal. Performance still. Photo: Paul Litherland.

Performance work is temporal, making it feel difficult to convey the profound experiences available to live audiences. For this reason, Evans has regularly worked with collaborators to record her actions. Documentation of prior events forms the majority of this exhibition, and demonstrates the range of approaches the artist has taken to live arts over past decades. *Quarantine Performance: Stopping Traffic* (2020) shows the artist taking to the streets of New York during COVID lockdown, undressing as she walks down the center of a heavily trafficked street, with cars making their way around her—even beeping in encouragement. An earlier series of performances in domestic spaces had recently circulated on social media. These live feed performances were another way the artist fostered community and connection during an uncertain moment of COVID-caused isolation. In 2021, as lockdowns continued, Evans worked with students and faculty at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to digitally direct a group of participants in an outdoor-sited action. Led by a university professor, an extensive group of students took part in the creation of costumes, choreography, and documentation as they met on a football field to sing and dance to Al Green’s 1972 hit *Let’s Stay Together* and the Tina Turner classic *Better Be Good to Me* from 1984. Even without Evans’s direct participation, the students and supervisors managed to harness and challenge pandemic-era fears of separation by gathering together, discovering a safe alternative, and addressing many people’s overwhelming anxiety and unease.

As Evans has evolved over decades, she has committed herself to using her work therapeutically to heal collective and more personal wounds. *Sparkle #5: I Love You* was presented in Venice, Italy in conjunction with the presentation of Simone Leigh’s 2022 United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. During the symposium entitled *Loophole of Retreat*, which centered the experiences of Black women and femmes, Evans orchestrated a ritual that inspired joy and community. Together, the crowd raised tulle fabric overhead and

facilitated passage underneath it for other audience members; laid down together in collective rest to honor themselves, loved ones, and ancestors; and danced together, shaking feather boas in the air. *Sparkle #5: I Love You* affirmed the cultural and social contributions of folks who often find themselves marginalized, putting them at the center of the action.

Sparkle #7: After the Fire / Touch (2025)—Evans’s recent performance for VIVA! Art Action in Montréal—strikes a more personal healing note. After imploring folks to keep numerous inflated beach balls up in the air, Evans laid on a table in the center of the room. Working with a translator, she revealed a month prior, she suffered a fire that destroyed her home and worldly possessions. This was closely followed by the failure of an attempt with her partner to become pregnant. Evans called on her audience to form a human web of touch with her at the center, and led them in a rousing chorus of Céline Dion’s hit song *It’s All Coming Back to Me Now*. The healing energies Evans conjures are palpable as she then moves on to lead the assembled crowd in a conga line. After all of this, she quiets the crowd before announcing—in typical fashion—“it’s over.” In these instances, and so many others, what emerges is Evans’s consistently clear, caring, and sometimes wild approach to speaking her truth, committing to healing, and creating the world she wants to inhabit.



Ayana Evans, *Loophole of Retreat: Sparkle #5: I Love You*, 2022. Performance still, *Loophole of Retreat* symposium, Venice, Italy, October 2022. Photo: Glorija Blazinsek.