

“Excerpt from *Vanishing Presence*”  
from *Vanishing Presence*

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Mary Beth Edelson, like the other artists here, has not been hindered by the dos and don'ts of the photographic establishment. Edelson was trained as a painter and has also produced sculptures, drawings, performances, and artist's books. Her art reflects the unruly nature of the artistic climate of the 1960s and early 1970s. Her multimedia, multidisciplinary approach was further reinforced by such feminist convictions as that “women's lives, psyches and sexualities were positively multiple, and that the release of this multiplicity was a political act.”<sup>1</sup>

While Edelson's work is multifarious, it is by no means structureless. Her photographs in particular are rigorously conceived. Each photographic sequence is choreographed in advance, using a calligraphic, step-by-step, personal notation system of pictographs, sketches, and writings. Usually photographing in the early morning or late afternoon so that the lens can be left open for longer exposures, she sets the camera in a pre-selected location and makes exposures according to the predetermined conception. Sometimes the results fulfill her expectations; however, what interests her is not whether the images suit the original conception but rather the possibilities implied by the results themselves. “Sometimes a totally new concept would emerge ... it kept the act of not yet knowing very alive in the process.”<sup>2</sup>

Almost from the start, Edelson's photographs served two purposes: first, to produce artworks based on private rituals performed in out-of-the-way, primeval-looking environments ranging from the forests of Maine and the dunes of the North Carolina Outer Banks to the volcanic terrain of Iceland; and second, to document public rituals enacted with groups of people either as part of gallery installations or in the outdoors—the cornfields of Iowa, the rivers of southern Ohio, the mountains of California. These two bodies of work, however, are not entirely distinct. They reflect an attitude of artistic integration in which photography is accepted as a personal aesthetic expression and for its everyday utilitarian, function.

Edelson's photographs are temporal contradictions. A work such as *Fire Flights in Deep Space* (1977; p. III) presents a shrouded figure on its haunches in a cavelike setting before what appears to be an ancient grindstone. She uses a shroud to “obliterate herself” so as not to give the figure a personal identity. The hand movement with the fire stick that creates the light-writing in midair evokes ancient memories. The forms generated by the moving flame itself seem to have universal significance. Yet this private ritual, a seemingly prehistoric occurrence conducted in the isolation of California's Chico Mountains, is made public through a modern mechanical medium. The rituals Edelson performs are not documentary attempts to recreate historical or “primitive” rites from other cultures but rather are her own personal creations. She seems to suggest that each generation must evolve its own rites and that each of us must attempt to realize a primordial experience on our own creative ground. Donald Kuspit concludes that, “This fusion of prehistorical and historical is a major accomplishment, a true synthesis in which neither is negated, the full force of both effective.”<sup>3</sup> Edelson's approach to artmaking in a larger scheme brings together the public and private. As one critic wrote, “She opened her art to the dreams, ideas, desires and responses of friends and audiences, offering a collaborative meeting place with life.”<sup>4</sup>

Her work is about the present in another sense: it is in search of the authentic timeless experience, in other words, an eternal presence. Despite her strong feminist convictions, she resists the notion that women have a privileged relationship to the authentic; all people have the capability “of being in touch with themselves. You have to reach for it within yourself, and not think of it as something you get- from somebody else.” Edelson's work touches a chord deep beneath the surface of culture, recalling our preliterate, pretechnological past—the world of Jungian archetypes. It seeks to be isomorphic with the world “because the archetypal level of the unconscious is the world; they are one and the same.”<sup>5</sup>

Edelson usually presents her photographs as part of large-scale installations, an arrangement that diminishes the independent authority of each photograph. “I also intend for the process to undermine authority and replace that with

an ecology of connections.”<sup>6</sup> Her images seem to lack this authority because they do not presume to depict “reality,” because they have an enchanting unpretentious quality, and because each image is dependent on other images to complete the series. While each series suggests simple narratives with beginnings and endings, these narratives represent ritualistic acts that seem as if they could be perpetually repeated. In *Up from the Earth* (1979; cat. no. 72), for example, the mysterious disappearing figure seems likely to appear again and again. The viewer is thus participating in a visual chant.

Edelson’s photographs project into the future not only through chantlike repetition but also through imagery that suggests departure and flying. In *Raising Firebird Energy* (1978; p. 47) the shrouded form appears to draw energy from the earth and release it in the form of a bird. *The Nature of Balancing* (1979; p. 110) depicts a figure “standing on what looks like the end of the earth,” perched precariously for takeoff and participating in a “shamanic act of ... flying.”<sup>7</sup> In her earliest pictures, made around 1973, Edelson photographed herself unclothed in an effort to learn to accept herself as she is. But in these later works, she is more interested in the question “of who we are and what we are becoming.” Her work acknowledges “the bonds that lead back into the past, down into the unconscious, forward into the future and into a conscious change in the character of art in society.”<sup>8</sup>

1. Lucy R. Lippard, “Fire and Stone: Politics and Ritual,” in *Mary Beth Edelson, Seven Cycles: Public Rituals* (New York: A.I.R. Gallery, 1980), p. 6.
2. Mary Beth Edelson, interview with the author, New York, 18 November 1987.
3. Donald Kuspit, “Mary Beth Edelson,” in *Mary Beth Edelson, New Work: Ancient Thirst and Future Vision*, exh. cat. (Pittsburgh: Hewlett Gallery, Carnegie- Mellon University and College Of Fine Arts, 1983), p. II.
4. Lippard, “Fire and Stone,” p. 6.
5. John Lobell, “Archetypal Art: The Goddess in the Work of Mary Beth Edelson,” unpublished paper, p. 5.
6. Edelson, interview.
7. Ibid.
8. Lippard, “Fire and Stone,” p. 6.

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