

“Mary Beth Edelson: An Introduction”  
 from *Mary Beth Edelson -- New Work: An Ancient Thirst and A Future Vision*

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I think of Mary Beth Edelson as a priestess looking for a goddess to worship, and confusing this goddess with herself. This is not a case of the new narcissism, but of the old mythological mode of selfhood: no self-discovery without discovery of the primordial source of selfhood - no becoming a particular self without recognition of the general idea of self. That this self is female shows its dialectical rootedness, its urgency through opposition; it is a self that exists in defiance of the masculine self's appropriation of completeness, and that aims at a wholeness of its own. Mary Beth Edelson's Goddess is as much a product of revolt as a recognition of a neglected fate - as much the result of a new female assertiveness as a reminder that old myths never die, they just determine us unawares. The Goddess has taken over Edelson's being, and thereby recovered Her own Being.

The result is a synergistic art - an efflorescence of ritual acts, primitivizing drawings with secret intellectual intention and sophistication, and “grand machines,” not always in scale but in the ambition of their message. It is an art that attempts to reconcile propaganda and high art, nature and society, not without a sense of the difficulty of the task - of the disputed character of the terms. Her art thus becomes that rare phenomenon in art, a “critical zone,” a zone in which basic issues are worked out, confronted, leading to a raw effect that seems to pre-exist the esthetic yet transcends it. She creates one grand “mythological machine” in which all the works are like the fragments of a mosaic, radiant with the sun of feminism yet also an allegorical account of a voyage to a naturally given identity - an individuality that seems to spring spontaneously from the generality of nature. I experience Edelson's feminism as the catalyst for an urgent, revolutionary search for identity - revolutionary in that it seeks identity not only through a socially participatory art, but through identification with a goddess who is Great because she represents resurrected nature, as well as nature's power of renewal.

Edelson takes stylized, mythologically familiar images and gives them a new concreteness and contemporaneity by a variety of means. Sometimes, as in *Goddess Head* (1975) and *Frozen Moment* (1979), she makes photographs of herself in private rituals, publicizing different moments and moods in the development of her symbolic identity. She lends her body to the Goddess, and activates the space - almost always desolate, untouched - through her bearing in it. She goes into seclusion, as though returning to a womb, or cocooning her consciousness, in a landscape sacred because it remains in a pristine natural state, conveying a sense of nature's finality. Her documentation of these meditative moments of Self-discovery - transcendence of everyday self - does not violate them, because she is re-creating a mythical identity, making conscious a reality of the collective unconscious. Even when her pose is macho - and there is a good deal of the feminist machismo in Edelson - it still retains its meditative, hermetic aspect, because of its “idealistic” character.

At other times Edelson gives us “message drawings,” in which an image of the Great Goddess, as well as signs pertinent to her, are displayed, often with text, as if to invite an in depth reading - internalization - of a token form. These drawings are often stark and boldly executed, highly portable, like small travelling altars. They have the same function as the roadside, ceramic Crucifixions in the Tyrol: they create intimacy between a grand universal reality and a very particular person, affording a moment of mental-imagistic - sanctuary in an alien environment. These drawings are like the manifesto propounding “theses” that Luther nailed to the church door - calls for radical change that will purify the sacrament of (female) identity.

Edelson's most prominent, most visible works are her public rituals - ceremonies of female self-recognition and self-identification (recognition leading to re-creation). They range from her “Memorials to 9,000,000 Women Burned As Witches in the Christian Era” (1977) to her “Story Gathering Boxes” (1972 onwards), in which she collects “personal stories from the public that help to reveal our mythology.” It is hard to generalize about them, but what strikes me is a tone of didactic fundamentalism, and repeated references to the basic elements of nature (wood, fire, stone). The rawness is mitigated by the use of these elements to create archetypal books - an archetypal narrative or communication of female history. This fusion of prehistorical and historical is a major accomplishment, a true syn-

thesis in which neither is negated, the full force of both effective. There is a dynamic simplicity to Edelson's art which makes her message penetrate, gives it the urgency of a command and a revelation: be Woman. Edelson has made an enigmatic identity even to women - overt without trivializing its strangeness, destroying its otherness. Paradoxically, by finding a new way to make an alien content of Woman - the Great Goddess - familiar, she may have found a new way of articulating women's self-alienation as well as social alienation today. Her consciousness of the Great Goddess may be a disguised self-consciousness of her alienation as an ordinary woman. Clearly the relationship between the two is fluid, reversible, as though the Edelson performing in *Woman Rising* (1973-74) was making her own alienation from her body visible in the very act of embodying the Great Goddess. A double articulation - transformation - of woman's alienation is achieved, revealing that alienation for what it is: the repression of everything that makes one concretely a woman - womanly. This is not a process of repressive de-sublimation of the body in Edelson, but of expressive re-sublimation of it after alienated re-cognition of it.

Edelson's least primitive, most monumental works are her paintings (although the over-all effect of her rituals is monumental, partly through their participatory dimension). These works are positively - rather than negatively, as in the rituals - heroic. That is, they display the female principle as such - the "eternal feminine" - rather than as a personal (and "natural") identity achieved in the face of great social odds. In the Trickster Rabbit works of 1981 and the classical goddess works of 1982 the Great Goddess is given with fresh self-evidence, whether mischievously or iconically present. She is now a principle of determination, not a principle that has to be demonstrated, "proven." She is no longer the invisible that may or may not exist - an uncertain reality that is made certain and visible through photographs, drawings, rituals, all designed to evoke (almost beg for) her presence. Rather, she is a self-fulfilled, and self-sufficient (as her tricky androgyny indicates) Being, the very mother of Being. These latest works are as presumptuous as She has become audacious. They show a feminism that has realized one of its goals: to reinstate the spiritual majesty of Woman.