

“No Reverse Gear”
from *Firsthand: Photographs (1973-1993)* and *The Shooter Series*

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In a series of works begun in 1991, Mary Beth Edelson reproduces the image of an attractive, blond woman pointing a gun with deadly seriousness at the viewer. In an untitled installation, the intent of the armed and dangerous female shooter emblazoned on the linens of a ruffled double bed (actually a still of Gena Rowlands from the film *Gloria*) is not immediately apparent. Does she protect herself from a would-be assailant, or does she hold someone hostage, bringing them, in effect, to her bed at gunpoint? The manner in which she aims her weapon, the classic pose of the cop, detective, or criminal frozen at the moment of lethal confrontation, suggests that she is a professional. The implication is that archetypes of male aggression are substituted for those of feminine vulnerability, and manifest in the guise of a woman who is both beautiful and threatening, and who uses her sexuality as ammunition and her bed as a battleground in a war of the sexes in which she literally calls the shots and comes out on top.

Edelson's shooter shares company with a host of cinematic women who wield weapons and demonstrate the ability to be as ruthless as their male counterparts. Through some force of circumstance, she unleashes an inner power, either as militant defense or destructive rage, and in so doing transgresses the line demarcating conventionally acceptable forms of female behavior. From *Terminator II* to the *Aliens* series to *Thelma and Louise*, she is courageous, ready for combat, and unintimidated by social proscriptions—against women who live beyond the patriarchal code of law. She is dangerous in part because she is so difficult to read.

The questions provoked by the female shooter are legion. For example, does she assimilate the most extreme forms of masculine violence and aggression to the detriment of her own femininity? Do such dramatic contrasts illustrate the dearth of images of female empowerment and the wealth of those of passivity, and point to a representational crisis synonymous with the breakdown of standards of “male” and “female” behavior enforced for centuries? However aleatory her success is at present, by reassigning emblems of hyper-masculinity to women, stereotypes of gentility and victimization are rendered dysfunctional. Impervious to charges that she perpetuates the patriarchy by equating power with the threat of violence, she does not hesitate to speak the language of her oppressors. Throwing off the shackles that have reinforced her subservience and suppressed her self-determination, she has gone too far to turn back, but has yet to achieve complete transformation or validation.

In *Get It?*, 1992, Edelson reproduces the female shooter in a grid pattern printed on silk chiffon. Reference to Andy Warhol's checkerboard images of Marilyn, Liz, and Jackie introduces, again, the ambiguous meaning of the female shooter and her potential serviceability as an icon for the '90s. In conjunction with such emblems of femininity as a ruffled bed or silk chiffon or an apron, she connotes a reversal of power concerning rape, conjugal obligation, incest, the degradation of the female body as property, and other forms of abuse. Whether or not she intends this avenging wonderwoman for real is less pressing an issue than that concerning Edelson herself, as both a lifelong pacifist and the producer of images that include homeless women, herself, and family members photographed with guns in their hands, and the distinction we make between art and a program for social change.

Given the history of her work, in particular her art of the '70s based on theories of Great Goddess, it follows that we question exactly at whom and how often Edelson takes aim—those critics, perhaps, who have relegated her work to a narrowly inscribed “essentialist” realm; those who insist upon a hierarchical nature/culture dichotomy and, accordingly, have lumped together all women artists who used their own bodies in the '60s and '70s to explore their identity, sexuality, and histories, as undifferentiated members of a lesser, non-cognitively oriented “nature cult.” As Edelson states in “Open Letter to Thomas McEvilly,” published in the *New Art Examiner*, April 1989, her longstanding interest has been in “destabilizing preexisting representations of masculine desire and privilege in relationship to the female body.” She goes on to say: “In using my own body as a sacred being, I broke the stereotype that the male gender is the only gender that can identify in a firsthand way with the body and, by extension, the mind and spirit of a primary sacred being. Furthermore, these ritual images were connected to Goddess as an expanded image of woman as a universal being and not limited to the stereotype of woman as “other” My rituals also provided resistance to the

mind/body split, by acknowledging sexuality in spirituality, thus reconciling the experience of a united spirit, body, and mind.

No doubt, Edelson's female shooter rises in defense against patriarchal messengers who privilege "his culture" over "her nature" as a means of policing gender clichés. As visual paradigms, Goddess and the shooter personify polarities that emerge in feminist debate concerning authentic versus acculturated femininity. Does the shooter rise from the ashes of Goddess? Do their differences outweigh their similarities? Although it's possible to regard Goddess and the shooter as antithetical, their alliance focuses on the need to integrate our varied selves and histories, a concept key to Edelson's interest in replacing linear thinking with interrelated processes that are more compatible with our diversity.

Acknowledging from the outset the deficiencies of any single image to encompass the totality of feminine experience, to contrast the female shooter of the '90s with manifestations of Goddess of the '70s is to contrast, metaphorically, two period explorations of female identity and representation. Whereas one reveals a mysterious, original, and primal feminine, the other self-consciously appropriates in order to construct a "fast food" composite self; whereas one is all gender, the other is de-gendered; whereas one is sacred, the other is profane. We could continue apace, but with an imperative to look beyond preliminary dialectics toward synthesis. Like day and night, Goddess and the shooter are polarized, yet only insofar as they exist within a larger continuum. While radically different in style, they are the pillars of an "in-process" manifesto grounded in the desire to recuperate and create representational models of female enablement that transcend the restrictive limitations of either/or paradigms.

Relative to their milieu, both Goddess and the shooter denounce convention through theatrical displacement of prevailing taboos. In *Thelma and Louise*, for example, the crime of the two heroine outlaws is their rejection of family and male authority (whether at the hands of husbands, boyfriends, rapists or the law). The moral message is clear—women cannot choose. To violate the long-standing patriarchal threat concerning women's control of their own bodies is to risk condemnation. To deny one's "biological role," is to be defined as a character in conflict—a well-known tactic for tricking women into doubting their own femininity. Those who exercise choke, instead of obedience, are severely chastised (witch, whore, criminal, lunatic, they are called), for in sacrificing their vulnerability they ultimately endanger the social economy of the patriarchy.

The female shooter in Edelson's work may originate from cinematic fiction, but in real life she personifies many contemporary women, from those who seek combat duty, to those on the WAC Phone Tree who instantly respond to the urgent need for a political action. In works that include *Loosened Hair*, 1992, in which the tough, gun-toting heroine of *Terminator II* in paramilitary garb is juxtaposed with a medieval double-headed female form, and *Community Spirit*, 1992, a palimpsest of randomly printed images of women aiming and firing guns, Edelson explores the proliferation of images of women who are, in her own words, "heroic freedom fighters." Responding to a first draft of this essay, Edelson remarked, "Even though we have a stake in shooting down the idea of the hero in male terms, does that mean we can't acknowledge the heroic female freedom fighter who sacrifices herself that we may all someday be free?" In her use of "updated" archetypes of female empowerment, Edelson emphasizes the transformation "from an imagined model made up in my head to an activated woman in real contemporary time." "The rituals I performed in the '70s," she noted in a recent conversation, "while addressing political issues of the day (e.g., women as priests in the Catholic Church, and the treatment of women in organized religion in general), still occupied mythic space in order to pull up their power ... but another transformation has taken place, a transformation away from mythic space into real time."

The proliferation of female shooters, and their wide media distribution at present, guarantees a large degree of familiarity with the subtleties of their meanings that does not extend to Goddess imagery, particularly as it was understood and implemented two decades ago. It follows, that contemporary interpretation of Edelson's work of the '70s easily loses sight of the distinctions that existed between her creative use of historical source materials, derived in part from ancient mythology, and the conceptual underpinnings of her work, developed in response to the psychological and political ramifications of women's rights to control their own bodies, representations, and histories. In discussions concerning her early interest in *Great Goddess*, Edelson remarks, "The rise of women's spirituality in the early '70s came in reaction to the dryness (unsexiness) of the early movement. The desire was for more process,

experientialness, and play, as we recognized that we had rejected our spiritual selves because we had associated that as being ruled over by patriarchy." The diversity of the Goddess movement—the interest in collective experience, ritual performances, sexual liberation, rage and celebration, and the anticipation of the end of the patriarchal era—was its strength. Times change. Great Goddess is, shall we say, more difficult to invoke. Lest we forget, however, many of us did at one time wear flowers in our hair, and dance under the dawning stars of the Age of Aquarius, and lyrically chant about making love not war. We can look back to the many counter-culturalisms that once flourished, including the Goddess movement, and see in them one of the great experiments in social utopianism of the 20th century, as well as the relative successes and failings of that brief spiritual revolution in which a new concept of sisterhood was born.

Edelson's photographic transformations of herself—as in the Moon Mouth Series, 1973-74, and Goddess Head, 1975—into incarnations of Great Goddess are among the most significant and influential feminist artworks of that time. Hers were private rituals in nature, in which she functioned as both photographer and performer. Throughout the '70s, she produced images of her nude body, and by means of various markings superimposed upon the photographs, obscured her facial identity so as to visualize gender, rather than to limit its meaning to self-portraiture. With respect to feminist artists such as Edelson, the problem is not that they failed to cement a totalizing and universal image of woman, or that they were unable to supplant the oppressive stereotypes foisted upon them and their work, but that they were ever required to do so in the first place. Rather, their accomplishment was to reject patriarchal codes regulating female behavior and representation. In contrast to much art made by women in the '90s that explores theories of representation, identity formation, and sexual politics, Edelson's Goddess manifestations of the '70s seem like good, clean fun; yet it is doubtful that we would be where we are today, without her early work.

For contemporary audiences, reconciliation with Goddess art of the '70s has yet to be fully accomplished. On one hand, in this work, metaphorically, we face our own loss of innocence. On the other hand, many interpret its embrace of mythology far too literally and narrowly, or only see a woman displaying her body, and lack sympathy with her spiritual and political intentions. Commenting on this aspect of the reception of her work, Edelson notes, "I dared show my naked body without being flirtatious, without averting my eyes—often looking straight into the eyes of the viewer. Eyes, seeing the viewer, having the power to look—were emphasized. These images were not like any other representations of female nudes at the time. What differentiated them—the ground that I broke—was that no other artist presented her body in an ANTI-male-gaze stance before I did in 1973." A leader in that first-wave of feminist art, Edelson, like many other women artists whose real crime was the use of their bodies in an unauthorized manner, was consigned to "essentialist" oblivion: once a Goddess artist, always a Goddess artist. Works of the late '70s such as *Cliff Hanger*, 1978, *The Nature of Balancing*, 1979, and *Fireflights in Deep Space*, 1979, function in response to the conundrum which later surrounded the goddess series. The figure is still in nature, though unrecognizable as gendered, and dematerializes into pure movement, flinging, flying, fleeting into space.

Recently, Edelson returned to a site of her youthful inventions. It's 1992 in the cave, a place once sacred to and symbolic of the feminine spirit, self-enlightenment, and spiritual rejuvenation. Her return is telling, in the prosaic sense of not being able to go home again. In *Caught in the Act*, 1992, Edelson sits atop a ladder reading a newspaper headlined with a feature on WAC. The cave is flooded. Despite the attempt at a casual pose, she looks stranded. The disjunction of the everyday and the extraordinary resonates as well in other images set in proximity to the cave. She dances on top of a table surrounded by chairs, but everything is wrong: The furniture is out of place in that environment, and her gestures are frozen and clinched. What once worked, does so no longer. Significantly, what is most noticeable are qualities of stiffness, formality, and inappropriateness. In *Staged Exit*, 1992, a figure materializes from the rapids of a waterfall, and negotiates a ladder propped from boulder to shoreline. Hands outstretched, feet groping for secure footing, what might have been an ethereal visualization of watery birth is labored and, as with the cave photographs, intentionally staged to look artificial.

The ways in which Edelson's contemporary images of herself in nature don't work—or at least not as one might expect given her past concerns—is critical to their meaning. Symbolically, nature is an historic site for feminist art. For Edelson—and no doubt for any woman artist—to make images of herself in nature in 1992, is not only to reflect upon where she once was but, in a sense, to parody the age-old insistence on the duality of nature/female and culture/male, as in the conjunction of a watery cave and a newspaper text on WAC, or a feminine bed and a female shooter. Though intrinsically related to her own stories and experiences, Edelson's work has never been exclusively autobi-

ographical. While she may restage aspects of her image history in order to renovate its meanings, we find an ongoing commentary on the process of constructing feminine identity—the work which, truly, is never done. From atop the ladder, in the cold eerie glow of the flooded cave, reading about WAC (she is an active member), it would seem, as well, that Edelson addresses her critics most directly—those who disparage the history of feminist art, seeing it as essentialist, and therefore limited in intellectual or conceptual scope. She overstates incongruence and puts a spotlight on difference. She boldly puts herself where she has been before and no longer quite belongs. In a series of self-portraits made in 1985, *Backlash: Veiled, Manipulated, Depressed, Doubled Voiced, Trivialized, Gagged and Erased*, and then rediscovered in 1992 when organizing her photograph file, she stages her struggle quite literally, revealing through expressive body language the inherent difficulties of this process. Edelson is now unabashed in revealing her own discomfort with the symbolism of the cave or, as suggested by the shooter and bed, in speaking about the difficulty of integrating vulnerability and power or, in attempting to recuperate the past into the present. As though to signal that she has come out fighting, in *Street Talk*, 1992, Edelson dons boxing gloves and works out in front of the camera. In the background, pasted over graffiti, are posters narrating events synonymous with current feminist concerns—WAC is watching, Ana Mendieta's death is memorialized—that announce renewed activism.

Great Goddess is no more inclusive a concept, or true or real, than that of the glamorous shooter: Both are fictions, as are all image archetypes and icons, and as such have vast reservoirs of meaning. Through them we recognize fragmentary elements of self, never the complete picture. Through them we can export internalized conflict, desire, and fantasy into an image that is at best partially fulfilling, and always mediated by cultural fictions' that play back what we want, and what we are told we should be. We argue about those cultural fictions—this one, yes; that one, no—and who we are in relation to them, and have all the apparatus to dispel them, yet we remain haunted by the influence such images exert upon how we perceive ourselves. The invitation of Goddess and the shooter alike is to play, for out of the play come new possibilities and the ability both to realize ourselves creatively and to transform ourselves into something completely different.