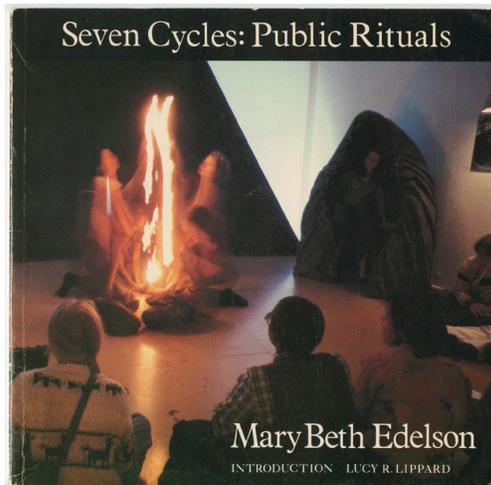


ARTFORUM

Mary Beth Edelson Artist Book

by Shelley Rice
December 1980



Mary Beth Edelson, *Seven Cycles Public Rituals* 1980
artists book (cover)

MARY BETH EDELSON's self-published and strongly feminist book, *Seven Cycles: Public Rituals* (with an introduction by Lucy R. Lippard), is, essentially, a retrospective. It documents, through photographs, working notes, drawings and explanatory texts, aspects of her work from 1971 to 1980. "Aspects" is an important word, because the book does not give equal weight to all of the artist's accomplishments. Edelson has produced works in a number of different visual media, and though many of the art objects she has created are documented (in small photographs) throughout the book, they are not its primary focus. The emphasis in *Seven Cycles* is, instead, on the rituals and performances (many of which incorporated, or gave birth to, objects) that represent the collective aspects of Edelson's art.

Seven Cycles begins in 1971 with a project entitled "22 Others," in which the artist invited 22 people to suggest pieces they would like to see her produce. The project was Edelson's first attempt at collective creativity. Her commitment to collective energy is a recurrent theme throughout the book, and is the basis of the political and social activism inherent in her work. Edelson has found a number of ways to use her art as a medium for tapping into energies

outside the self. Her private performances in remote landscapes, documented by photographs, merge nature's energies and her own body image into archetypal symbols of feminine power; her university workshops, three of which are described in the book, are conceived as fusions of teacher/student energies. But the collective activism underlying Edelson's art is most obviously manifested in the participatory rituals documented in *Seven Cycles*.

Many of these transitory rituals were both mourning rites for, and celebrations of, women's lost history. Works like *Your 5,000 Years Are Up!* and *Memorials to 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era* were intended to connect contemporary women to their pasts—and thus provide them with access to the sources of energy they will need to shape a different future. This incorporation of past, present and future in one work of art is also a characteristic of Edelson's pieces dealing with female mythology. The *Story Gathering Boxes*, begun in 1972, for instance, contain old myths about parents, stones, blood, goddesses and witches, but they are also repositories for new stories on these subjects told by contemporary people.

The compulsion behind all Edelson's art since 1971 is her need to get to the mysterious heart of the female experience—and to transform it into new creative forms with such collective strength and regenerative energy that they can no longer be buried by patriarchal cultures. This process of transformation is powerfully described in *Women Rising*, a private photographically documented performance in which the artist used her own body to symbolize that of Everywoman. In the performance, Everywoman rises from her ravaged position on the earth to become the manifestation of natural feminine power. This rite of passage is, according to Edelson, Everywoman's declaration that "I am, and I am large and I am my body and I am not going away."

Seven Cycles: Public Rituals makes a similar statement. Self-published in a time of backlash against feminism, it stands as Edelson's assertion of pride in her history as a woman and an artist—as her refusal to be forgotten, to "go away."