

ARTFORUM

22 Others, 1973

Kate Sutton
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Mary Beth Edelson
THE SUZANNE GEISS COMPANY
76 Grand Street
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Mary Beth Edelson's 1972 collage *Some Living American Women Artists* features—as its title suggests—a coterie of female artists cut and pasted over the sallow faces of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Georgia O'Keeffe presides at the center, all cool composure in the borrowed body of Christ, while her disciples number Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Nevelson and Bourgeois, and a thickly spectacled Nancy Graves. Though relatively tame in the time of memes, when the piece was first displayed it was read as taking on the church and patriarchy, and thus was quickly taken up as a banner for feminism.

Often overlooked is the fact that *Some Living American Women Artists* was made following the prompt of a

male artist, within the framework of Edelson's two-year experiment "22 Others": From 1971–73, the artist invited twenty-two colleagues to her studio, instructing each to provide her with a directive to make a new piece. Edelson conceived the project as an attempt to surpass her own ego and access the Jungian collective unconscious, deeming it "not only a self-inner, but also a self-other process." "22 Others" debuted in Washington, DC, in 1973, with an exhibition split between the Henri Gallery and the Corcoran Gallery of Art.



View: "Mary Beth Edelson: 22 Others," 2013

Forty years later, the Suzanne Geiss Company has chosen to restage the exhibition, with an eye more towards recuperating Edelson's ego than getting past it. The main space features three large paintings of surreal, grey-scale interiors with undulating floors approximating seascapes. One canvas spills out into the gallery in waves of oversized pillows (in deference to instructions to make a work three-dimensional). On a nearby pedestal a continuous flame burns along the rim of a thin golden halo in *Fire Altar*, 1972—Edelson's response to a prompt to investigate "transformation." A different kind of transfiguration takes place in *Story Gathering Box of Wooden Tablets*, 1972, a set of tiles neatly filed in a wooden box on a table. Each bears a symbol suggestive of an element of a universal, Jungian language, lacking any set syntax. What shines here isn't Edelson's technical prowess—passion trumps precision and instructions, provided in a photocopied artist's book, are followed loosely at best—but rather her ardent conviction that these carved symbols speak simultaneously for the "self-inner" and "self-other." In other words, we can have our collective unconscious, and Edelson too.