



## Cutting Out Men's Head

### Mary Beth Edelson

WACK! Curator Connie Butler sits down with artist Mary Beth Edelson  
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Connie Butler: You have been a major figure in terms of being a keeper of the flame. In addition to your own work as an artist, you've made it your practice and your role to be one center of an international feminist community. One question that frequently comes up about WACK! is what happens when you make a show like this that historicizes a moment that was so against being institutionalized? Does making a show like this and historicizing this work in some way close the door or end the discussion?

Mary Beth Edelson: It has opened up the discussion. It has enlivened the women who were part of the 1970s feminist revolution. We haven't been paid much attention to in recent years, and for a lot of us, it began to feel like people were never going to understand how profound this movement was. There was absolute joy when people found out that this exhibition was going to happen. I think that what we wanted to do was change the culture and the hierarchy and try to introduce a different kind of process that people use to interact with each other. And that's where the collaborative, collective part of the movement was very important. We hoped to introduce that way of thinking and that way of interacting within this hierarchy.

CB: Can you talk about your own personal work in the collages, and the themes that you dealt with?

MBE: I started making collages when I was in Washington D.C. I was interested in the collective unconscious. I asked twentytwo people in my community to come to the studio, discuss my work, and then suggest a piece they would like to see me do. One of the suggestions was for me to think about organized religion and do an art piece that pointed out the negative aspects, making the social/political aspects obvious in the piece. The way organized religion treats women is really the most negative thing to me. So I thought, "I am going to cut out the male heads and put in women's heads."

CB: Talk a little bit about the performance work that you did using your own body that exists now as photographs.

MB: Taking pictures of my nude body was a gut response to claiming my body, but it was also this other strange thing that women have of picking their bodies apart. My breasts are too small or too big, or my hips are too this. So I took these photographs and didn't tell anyone that I was doing them because I was so sure that the body I photographed would be so awful that I wouldn't want to use it. This was a revelation to me; to take a photograph of my body and then think, "Well I'm not so bad!"

After I took those photographs I began to manipulate them. I was painting various identities on top of those. Explorations of my own identity. That was a big subject at that time when feminism first hit. Who are we? Who are we as a group? Who are we as individuals? What can we do? Everything was being reexamined. Using my naked body seemed like the most transparent way for me to do it. I never used it as a titillating sexual subject. I dealt with sexuality within it, but I was the ferocious monster when I did it. I like to make that distinction because that was different from the way Carolee Schneemann or Hannah Wilke approached their body. And early on, so many times, the three of us were lumped together as if we were all doing the same thing.

CB: Let's talk about the WACK! exhibition catalogue and the cover which has become the source of much discussion both behind the scenes and in magazines. It has become a sort of touchstone for a lot of really interesting discussion about the use of the body and representation of the body. You took an image by Martha Rosler, a collage of dozens of women's bodies taken out of a 1972 Playboy magazine from a body of work called Beauty Knows No Pain. You have now made a work riffing on that cover. Can you talk about the cover, your thoughts about it, and how it inspired you to respond to it?

MBE: It didn't inspire me! It inspired the group to do it. The cover is such an excellent example of feminist collaboration. The only problem I had with it was when I first saw it, I thought, "Well that's not our cover!" Then I thought about it and I started laughing and I said to myself, "Connie Butler is gutsier than I thought!" and I rather enjoyed it for that. Because so many of the feminist artists have done work that has been censored,



Mary Beth Edelson, Courtesy P.S.1 Archive

done work that has been censored, this was like pushing that edge of the envelope with the women themselves censoring it. Nine of us went out to have dinner and drinks after the L.A. opening where the main discussion was this cover. As we continued talking about it, Barbara Hammer looks at me and says, "Mary Beth, using your collage method, why don't you substitute the women's heads in the exhibition for the ones on that cover?" We all just shrieked with joy. And here it is.