

**Mary Beth Edelson**  
**„Nobody Messes with Her“**  
 Kunsthalle Münster  
 15.12.2018 – 10.03.2019

Mary Beth Edelson (\*1933) is in some circles known above all as an enthusiastic champion of the neopaganistic Goddess movement, whose key text, „Why Women Need the Goddess,“ appeared in 1978 in *Heresies* magazine, published by the eponymous collective Edelson had cofounded two years earlier. What is most intriguing about her work from this vantage point are arguably the complex individual and group rituals she orchestrated, using text, singing, fire, sounds of the sea and of thunder to harness female cosmic energy, espousing an attitude that was then and still largely is now heretical to the MFA brigade. But while this well-ordered survey exhibition, with its table vitrines and bright lighting, successfully conveys how she was a leading light within a vibrant sisterhood of second-wave feminists, it took too few of the risks that would be necessary to bring her work to life, instead making it seem all too disinfected and bloodless.

Maybe that's asking too much: in part, this is a dilemma familiar from any attempt to present performance art or, more broadly, the work of charismatic artists, after the fact. Documentation was, however, an important part of Edelson's rituals, and she often reworked photographs for display. In works from the series „Woman Rising“ (1973–1977), she applied marker and paint to photographic self-portraits of her standing naked with arms upraised in the outdoors, transforming herself into a range of characters including Wonder Woman, a many-armed divinity, and a double-dipping Judith with a severed bearded head suspended from each arm. In one of many cut-out pieces of varying scale and ambition mounted on canvas on the walls of the Kunsthalle, she puts her own smiling face above the large open vulva of the ancient Irish trickster goddess Sheela-na-gig.



Mary Beth Edelson, *The Nature of Balancing*, 1979  
 Two silver gelatin prints, each 49.5 x 49.5 cm

Edelson's collaged poster multiples, also shown here, are the most famous of her works, but their sense of play has dated badly and they now seem interesting above all as historical snapshots. In *Death of Patriarchy/A.I.R. Anatomy Lesson* (1976) female artists take the place of the rubberneckers at the corpse in Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, while in the Last Supper scene of *Some Living American Women Artists* (1972), Jesus is Georgia O'Keefe, surrounded by other luminaries of twentieth-century American art. The image is garlanded with dozens of small portraits of Edelson's peers and colleagues, named in a legend below: a celebratory, or even revolutionary, generational assertion of the protagonists of what Edelson called „our new women's culture“.

If Edelson's battle cry „Your 5,000 Years Are Up!“ currently seems implausibly optimistic, other aspects of her oeuvre have lost none of their force, at least in

principle. Available for perusal in the show is a DIY-style whirlwind of an artist's book titled *The Art of Mary Beth Edelson* (2002), which brims with Edelson's humour and irreverence. In the style of something like an ESL textbook, it includes documentation of a work with photographic and video components in which she „shops for a new mate“ and a funny feminist-art in-joke about an interior squirrel. The book also features works one could dream of re-activating: above all, perhaps, the artist's *Story Gathering Boxes*, first installed in 1972 as a participatory artwork where visitors were invited to answer questions or respond to triggers to create a crowdsourced archive of information on what the artist summarized as „mothers, fathers, story of your life, philosophy of your life.“ (One asks: „What is expected of you?“ The answer, sealed with a lipstick kiss: „Anal perfection.“) Might it also be possible today to re-stage a group ritual? Memories of Ayşe Erkmen's water bridge at 2017's Skulptur Projekte Münster (now dismantled from its position outside the Kunsthalle) let one imagine finding enough people willing to sit on the banks of a muddy river as part of a guided meditation, recreating

Edelson's *Thinking Things into Being/Ritual on the Earth* (1980) or another one of the rituals she organized in off-grid places not only in the US but also in Yugoslavia and Iceland.

In a panegyric to the artist in an earlier artist's book, from 1980, Lucy Lippard already noted the difficulties in the art world's reception of Edelson's work. Her texts begins: „Mary Beth Edelson's work arises from Feminism's double strength. Like the great Goddess to whom she has dedicated her art, she has (at least) two aspects – political rage and life-giving affirmation. The two merge in an individual identification with the collective ego.“ That's saying a lot. But Lippard's text also implies that the art system privileges men, which it still does; formalism, which it still does; and positions that can more easily be uprooted from the specificity of a living, breathing community; which it still tries to do. That's a problem for the retrospective exhibition format, which here seems in battle with the insistence of Edelson's art that nothing need be this way; that another world is not only possible but already here.

**Alexander Scrimgeour**



Mary Beth Edelson, *Trickster Body*, from the series „Woman Rising“, 1979  
 Oil and collage on silver gelatin print, 25.4 x 20.3 cm