The Endangered Unruly

by Dodie Bellamy

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I BECAME INTERESTED in Mary Beth Edelson for self-centered reasons. I read that she was born and raised in East Chicago, Indiana, a mere six miles from Hammond, my hometown. Edelson has described East Chicago as a “booming multi-racial steel mill town of immigrants.” My brother worked in the steel mill she’s referencing. Rust Belt Indiana is a place nobody comes from, and nothing interesting ever happens there. But Mary Beth Edelson came from there, so I have an urge to see her as a spiritual mother. She was born in 1933, two years after my actual mother. My mother was the daughter of an alcoholic garbageman, and was proud to have graduated from her technical high school. She took a part-time job as a janitress to help pay for my college. Edelson’s father was a dentist; at age thirteen, she was taking Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, and her mother set up a home studio for her. She went to grad school for art at New York University in 1958, when few women did so. Our class divide throws a wrench in my spiritual-mother fantasy. I’m reminded of the pang I felt when I read Alison Light’s book on Virginia Woolf and her servants. In that divide, my family would have been on the side of the servants who cleaned Woolf’s room of her own. But I still cannot totally discount Edelson’s and my regional affinity. The intolerance for BS, the sick humor—I imagine she’s impatient, like me, and loves stuffed cabbage.

Though well known in feminist circles, Edelson was long marginalized by the international art establishment. Her celebration of the Goddess in much of her early work (replaced by cultural figures such as Lorena Bobbitt and Hollywood femmes fatales, particularly the Gena Rowlands of *Gloria* [1980], in the 1990s) has probably played a big part in that. In her 2012 article “Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s,” art historian Jennie Klein chronicles how, despite a renewed interest in ’70s feminist art, both in the ’90s and more recently, the influence of feminist spirituality has been largely ignored. The Goddess, according to Klein, is the “unacknowledged white elephant in the room of the feminist body of art.”

To familiarize myself with ’70s feminist spirituality, I watched a thirty-two-minute YouTube video from 1980, “Feminist Visions of the Future,” which is a montage of statements by major players of radical second-wave feminism, including Edelson. I learned from Starhawk that belief in the Goddess is not an escape from the world. It is focused on the Earth, relations with human beings, animals, plants, and ecology. The experiential is privileged over gospel. According to Starhawk, religion is a form of poetry, a metaphor for reality and for knowing ourselves. Edelson urged me to embody and endow conventional symbols, such as the spiral, with a sense of newness. Mary Daly convinced me that when one moves beyond the linearity of patriarchal vision, many things that appear disparate are in fact profoundly connected. Narrator Lola Dalton seduced me with a vision of a future where sin and guilt and sexual taboo no longer enslave us; where war, destruction, and hatred have no place or monetary support; where our differences as well as our similarities are celebrated, for all life is interlinked. I learned from Baba Copper that only in a culture of radical consent will there no longer be rape of women or of the earth. Second-wave feminists admitted that women’s spiritual history was unrecoverable, so they tapped into their subconscious and made shit up. Theirs was a utopian project of reimagining the past to reinvent the future.

Edelson’s goddess art awes me, particularly the series “Woman Rising,” from 1973. Even though the images begin with her naked body, these are not simply self-portraits. Edelson photographed herself with concentric circles painted on her midriff, and rings around her areolae, and then she altered the
ten-by-eight-inch prints using oil paint, ink, watercolor, wax pencil, and collage, costuming herself as a goddess or trickster. There is an urgent amateurism to the overpainting, evoking cheesy low-budget FX. The result is a mutable, fantastic body that references archetypal modes without being tied down to a predetermined system. “I also used my body as a ‘found object’ in these early works,” Edelson writes, “with the intention of transforming the body into a ‘found subject.’” She altered the same base photos over and over so that her reconfigured body became a material in the art process as much as the content of it. In one repeated pose, Edelson’s hands boldly scoop up her breasts; this gesture is particularly comic in Winter Saga: Viking with Time on Her Hands. Of another work from the series, Seeing Double, Edelson writes, “I am taking command of the act of looking in this performance by directing my gaze at the viewer with three pairs of eyes. Created before discussions of the male gaze were formulated, nonetheless, this issue is addressed here without the advantage of feminist theory that was yet to come.” The subject of Seeing Double looks more like a space alien that has come to observe Earth than a woman subverting the male gaze. A big appeal of these photos is their relentless otherness. The goddess may take the shape of a human, but she is not humanized. Edelson’s own eyes are painted over, with red sclera and black blobs for pupils. The second pair of eyes, replacing Edelson’s breasts, is really one eye with two black irises and two white dots for nipple-pupils, also floating in red sclera. The third set of eyes hovers above Edelson, satellite-like, with lines connecting them to the breast eye(s). With their red sclera, these eyes appear to look directly at the viewer. I imagine them relaying information back to the breast eyes. They remind me of my hypervigilance when walking down the street, scanning for signs of creepiness that might coalesce into an assailant.
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The satellite eyes recur in *Burning Bright*, 1973, but this time Edelson’s face is collaged over with the head and legs of a tiger. Behind the tiger’s ears, another mysterious, wide-set pair of eyes emerges. Dozens of tiny warrior eyes swarm across Edelson’s body. The image is cut off at the top of the artist’s thighs, but the warrior eyes scurry into the bottom margin. They avoid the concentric circles on Edelson’s midriff, the gut—not the brain—being the center of power and primal wisdom. In *Winter Saga: Viking with Time on Her Hands*, arrows or probes shoot out of the eyes of Edelson’s Viking-helmet head. Curlicues shoot out of her/its mouth, ears, and cunt. In *The Art of Mary Beth Edelson* (2002), this image is reproduced in a section titled “Exercising the Demons.”

In *Fashion Plate c. 500 B.C. Series II*, Edelson again eradicates her face—this time with cross-hatching—and paints a pair of huge eyes on her upper thighs, a sort of pubic surveillance patrol. This image is based on another pose Edelson repeatedly strikes—again she’s naked, again circles are painted around her areolae and concentrically on her abdomen. Here her upper arms extend at her sides, forearms raised at right angles, fingers spread—a gesture that is simultaneously worshipful, beckoning, and repellent. Energy radiates from her masterful palms, suggesting a being who could toss you across the room with a flick of the wrist. She stands upright with her legs wide apart. Edelson: “My early body works, standing with legs wide apart, challenged the notion that no penis equates to a lack. I presented myself as a powerful, self-defining person in this body.”

Edelson uses this wide-legged stance in a group of 1973 images she calls the “Monstre Sacré”: “SHE has many faces depending on who is looking at her. SHE is variously: the hand in the trap—the putrefied body—holy terror—the unimpenetrable devouring female of blood lust... SHE is the offspring of women who were raped, and her rage is insatiable. SHE is unveiled, and up close there are no illusions in her X-ray eyes, she even knows herself.” Her vision is as terrifying as her bloodlust; the two are intimately intertwined. The titles of images in this series...
with power and rage: Nobody Messes with Her; Patriarchal Piss; Red Kali. In Nobody Messes with Her: Fire Bird and Patriarchal Piss, Edelson’s head has been madly scribbled over into configurations that suggest a cyclone or explosion. In the former, her arms are encased in arching red demon legs that sprout from her shoulders, while in the latter, decapitated male heads dripping with blood hang from her arms.

In Red Kali, she stands triumphant on the body of a quickly sketched man, his head and her left foot extending beyond the frame, for her rage is too great to be boxed in by the photo’s right-angled reality. Red Kali references both the fearsome Hindu goddess and female-vengeance archetypes. In the late ’60s and early ’70s, Edelson participated in a five-year Jungian seminar. Though she eventually abandoned the Jungians, she was deeply impressed by the concepts of the collective unconscious and the archetype. By ritualistically restaging mythological images from a range of cultures, Edelson was, in her own words, “summoning Goddess to make house calls.” Or as Lucy Lippard put it, “She re-mythologizes at the same time she de-mythologizes.”

The Art of Mary Beth Edelson begins with a time line of her life, paired with a time line of what was happening in politics, popular culture, feminism, civil-rights activism, and the world at large. This double frame underscores Edelson’s commitment to collectivity and community, how she considered herself to be a product of a larger social network. The span from 1968 to 1974 was enormously productive for Edelson. In 1968, she moved to Washington, DC, where, in 1972, she organized the first National Conference for Women in the Visual Arts and “officially abandon[ed] painting for conceptual art making.” By “painting,” she’s referring to the Abstract Expressionist style she...
Mary Beth Edelson was taught in grad school at NYU. If she was influenced by mainstream Conceptual art practices, the time line doesn’t note it. It focuses, instead, on developments in feminist art. Besides the “Women Rising” series, Edelson orchestrated a collaborative experiment called 22 Others, 1971–73, in which she invited twenty-two friends and associates to her studio to discuss her work and each suggest a piece they’d like to see her produce. Then she followed their instructions. In 1972, she launched her “Story Gathering Boxes” with the intention of creating a “collective mythology.” Edelson asked audience members to write down on note cards the answers to a series of questions such as WHAT DID YOUR MOTHER TEACH YOU ABOUT WOMEN? OR WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE A BOY? The cards were subsequently gathered by category in wooden boxes and displayed on tables flanked by stools so visitors could peruse them. Edelson’s projects from this era exemplify what Lippard characterized in 1980 as “the three major structures feminism has contributed to recent art”: “ritual; collaborative/anonymous/collective methods of art-making and responding to audiences; and public media strategies designed to change the image of female experience.” The radicalism of these collaborative works is sneaky. They are so process-oriented, so community-centered, so politically motivated, that they move beyond the dualism of “good” or “bad” art, subverting my knee-jerk judgment mechanism along with the white-box-gallery machine they react against. In 1975, Edelson moved back to New York and continued her commitment to collectivity, joining A.I.R. Gallery, the first feminist cooperative art gallery in the US. In 1977, she became a founding member of the Heresies Collective, which produced Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics—a journal so influential and visible that even in Indiana I got my hands on it. Until recently, she was still visiting colleges and directing public rituals. The unruliness of Edelson’s goddess images is thrilling. In the ’80s, I read every goddess book I could. My studies profoundly changed my relationship to religion and other patriarchal systems such as Western philosophy. I learned how metaphors imprison us. Women = darkness, passivity, constriction. Men = light, action, expansion. I learned that language is a battlefield, and that how I use words is never neutral. You either reinscribe the status quo or blow it apart. Radical feminist linguists, such as Julia Penelope and Dale Spender, were a fierce bunch, determined to create a new system of logic that would reshape the world. The unrepentant eros of goddess culture influenced my first novel, The Letters of Mina Harker (1998), in a big way. The eponymous Mina is an immoral goddess figure who inhabits Dodie’s body and lives beyond the rules of conventional society. She’s a ravenous sexual being who, as unhuman, is so huge and excessive she can consume all of culture with her terrifying maw. As Edelson did in her goddess photos, I constructed Mina using collage and appropriation. Writing her was exhilarating. Dodie, on the other hand, is portrayed as a frightened little worm trying to conform to the social expectations that Mina continuously fucks up. To my writing friends, I talked about my appropriation of vampire lore and sappy erotic thrillers and Freud’s hysterics.
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but I never mentioned the debt I owe to goddess culture. To own up to the goddess would have been an embarrassment. If only I’d been familiar with Edelson back then. Her confidence and entitlement would have served me well.

I approach Edelson’s work with a mixture of excitement and mourning. All of her art, at its core, is a form of collage—the altered photos, sculptures, rituals, community-sourced work. She thrusts me back to the utopian spirit of second-wave feminism. Only through a revolution in consciousness could the patriarchy be overthrown, and these women believed that their glorious collectivity was going to make that happen.

Of all the things global capitalism has stolen from us, perhaps the worst is a sense of hope. I mourn the loss of that hope, but also, on a more pragmatic level: How can anybody consider feminist art and not mourn the recent passing of Carolee Schneemann and Barbara Hammer, both of whom were under appreciated by the mainstream art machine? The artist monographs I own on Edelson’s work—Seven Cycles: Public Rituals (1980) and The Art of Mary Beth Edelson—are self-published, which is both awesome and sad.

From a videotaped conversation between Edelson and Schneemann, transcribed in The Art of Mary Beth Edelson:

Mary Beth: Well, we were pioneers, the way you approached the physicality of the female body from a woman’s perspective in the United States in the 60s was groundbreaking.

Carolee: Well, pioneers will be punished. None of that work is collected. None of it sold—none of it. The appreciation comes in the form of a mythology that grows up around your being useful to other artists.

In 2002, when this conversation was published, Edelson had a thriving career in Europe but no gallery in the US. Then, in 2007, in the germinal show “WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution,” curator Connie Butler exhibited five of her collages, including Edelson’s most famous piece, a reworking of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper titled Some Living American Women Artists, 1972, which features Georgia O’Keefe as Christ. Subsequently, New York’s Museum of Modern Art purchased all five collages. Edelson, represented by David Lewis Gallery in New York, now has shows coming out of her ears, including the 2018–19 retrospective “Nobody Messes with Her” at the Kunsthalle Münster, Germany. But, at eighty-six, Edelson is no longer in such great health. Not enough recognition, and what comes is too late—this is the typical career path of radical feminist artists, especially those whose work focuses on sexuality and the body.

On YouTube, I watch a 2013 two-part interview with Edelson produced by Art This Week Productions. At eighty, she’s still vivid, with an understated sensuality. She’s trim with short spiky hair, dressed in a black T-shirt and wide-legged pants. Long cascades of feathers hang from her ears. She talks about how on the street she makes eye contact with those who tend not to be looked at, who are made to feel invisible. She gives a tour of her amazing SoHo loft, since dismantled. The Feminist Institute Digital Exhibit Project photographed the entire studio with a 360-degree camera, and the resulting spherical images are available online at Google Arts & Culture. Edelson is not in any of the photos. It’s just her living stuff and her “over 25,000 protest posters, wall drawings, correspondence, artworks and other ephemera.” All this miraculous materiality abstracted to pure, woozy 3-D images that I have much difficulty navigating.

To suggest spiritual transformation, in many photos Edelson dissolves her body, covering it with stippling or swirling spirals—and in the late-’70s black-and-white photographs of herself nude in natural landscapes, ghosting her form through long exposures and swaddling herself in transparent cloth. But in Dematerializing: Slipping into a reconsidered story, 1975, she gougés the paper over and over with a sharp point. Though the image is occluded, the wounding of the piece heightens the photo’s physicality. Thus, the violence of Edelson’s process suggests a resistance to her own erasure. The Google-izing of Edelson’s studio, while an amazing feat, evokes the tragedy of an irretrievable past. When I spy one of her naked-goddess photos, I long to reach back to a kinder, kinkier, crazier, more naive time, when sex and spirituality and politics were linked, when women painted their bodies and ran around naked together. An entire generation of feminist visionaries will soon be gone. It’s time for their successors to stop bashing that past and to begin to reimagine it.

Dodie Bellamy is the subject of the 2018-19 “On Our Mind” program at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco. Her most recent collection of prose is When the Sick Rule the World (Semiotext (e), 2015). (See Contributors.)