

ArtReview

Hello to all that

by Martin Herbert

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Mary Beth Edelson, *Shape Shifter*, 2019 (installation view). Courtesy David Lewis, New York

On social media the other day, I made a quip: ‘We’re all art historians now’. As with many jokes, or at least many of mine, it was half-serious: when there are no new exhibitions except (inevitably dissatisfying) digital ones, the mind is borne back upon the past. Usually I see more shows than I can write about, and sometimes I don’t happen to write about the ones I really like; on occasion the experience of seeing a show exceeds the parameters of an exhibition review, being tangled up with life, happenstance, sadness. So I want to say something about Mary Beth Edelson’s exhibition in New York exactly a year ago, which I found extraordinary at the time and which has lingered in my memory since, but in order to do so I have to step, at least temporarily, outside the confines of the art and the strictures of the review format.

Edelson is a pioneering American feminist artist, born in Chicago in 1933 and, until recently, a long-term denizen of downtown Manhattan. Something of her character can perhaps be gauged from this quote, in an Artforum interview from 2011: ‘There is a feminist adage: the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. To which I say: Let’s get some other tools! Fuck his house – who goes there anyway?’ My wife, the artist Eva Grubinger, has known Edelson for many years and introduced me to her in 2015 at the opening of a survey of feminist art in Hamburg. Edelson was friendly but flinty. I didn’t really know her work at that time and didn’t talk to her beyond hellos – you assume there’ll be another moment, or it doesn’t really matter, and for now two friends were catching up. Then, for a while, it was apparently hard to contact her. Last year, when I was back in the city, I saw that she had a solo show at David Lewis Gallery on the Lower East Side. A good sign, I thought.

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The exhibition, titled *Shape Shifter*, was modestly scaled but nevertheless the most captivating show I saw during that trip, and a highlight of my gallery-going year. (I took Carol Bove, about whom I was writing a book; no slouch herself, Bove said she was hugely impressed.) But it wasn't new work. It was, like Edelson's previous show in the same venue, art from the 1970s freshly de-mothballed. The main event was a roomful of painted-plywood cutout 'figures', or semiabstractions, or totems, dating from 1974–75: to get in there, you had to step around one, a circle impaled on a triangle, which all but blocked the door. The room, with these human-size and roughly patterned entities gathered around the viewer – heliocentric hemispheres atop triangles, others with schematic upraised arms, one like a giant bird – felt deeply ritualistic, borderline occult, also celebratory, tapping something primordial. 'The ascending archetypal symbol [sic] of the feminine unfold today in the psyche of modern Everywoman,' Edelson was quoted as saying in the press release, 'They encompass the multiple forms of the Great Goddess—Reaching across the centuries we take the hand of our Ancient Sisters.'

The rest of the show comprised small, startlingly intense black-and-white photographs made at various points during the 1970s. In one, Edelson – assumedly – appeared in a Neolithic cave, sitting in a ring of lights, some kind of strange, streaky illumination whipping its way towards her through the half-dark. In a trio of prints, something dark and blurry shakes high grasses. In another sequence, a cloth-wrapped figure rolls off the side of a cliff. In perhaps the most indelible work, *Woman Rising / Sky*, from 1973, Edelson stands on scrubland at (seemingly) dusk, arms outraised, an echoing white V – simple postproduction, it seems – shooting upwards above her, cracking the deepening sky. An installation view of a 1974–75 exhibition shows Edelson, then around forty, striking a balletic pose while surrounded by her then-new cutout figures, hand on hip, right foot brought up to left calf.



Mary Beth Edelson, *Woman Rising Sky*, 1973, silver gelatin print, 107 x 107 cm. Courtesy David Lewis, New York

Mary Beth hadn't been answering her phone, and I'd been asked to ask the gallery how, or where, she was. It turned out she was now in an assisted-living facility somewhere outside the city; I left an email address, asking if the gallery owner could pass on the details, but no email came. Of course, people get old and shift shape for the worse. But the experience of *Shape Shifter*, for me, was indivisible from a larger context, larger shifts. Edelson is yet another woman artist relatively sidelined for much of her later life (partly for her determined gravitation towards feminist spirituality, but partly due to good-old artworld sexism), then revived in her twilight years, just about too late for it to matter much to her. That factor played against the vivaciousness and unabashed mysticism of Edelson's 1970s art – more alive, it seemed, than any other art being shown in the city at the time, and in tune with the esoteric art being made now – making the show wholly bittersweet alongside more mortal concerns: how quickly and irrevocably people decline in old age, the wasting of intellect and the loss of knowledge, the fadeout of an artistic vanguard and the revival of toxic masculinity and gender imparity in our own time. *Ars longa...*, of course, and bringing this work back into the world had to be a net positive, but it wasn't an untainted one. Had Edelson even seen the show? All of these emotional and ethical aspects swirled around in the gallery. And in the street as we walked away. This wouldn't be everyone's experience of the work, but it couldn't help being mine.

A couple of months after that, *Artforum* published a laudatory, lengthy feature on Edelson's 1970s work, one that nevertheless had a valedictory tone: the author, Dodie Bellamy, closed by noting that an 'entire generation of feminist visionaries will soon be gone'. A while later, on social media again, I scratched out a hypothetical, a short-story pitch: a gallerist starts working with a 'difficult' woman artist of advanced age who, in a twist, turns out to be immortal. Again, only half-joking. I was thinking, first, of an Italian artist I'd recently watched being wheeled around her first retrospective, aged ninety-one and virtually blind. And I was thinking, inevitably, of Mary Beth Edelson.

Shape Shifter, an exhibition of 1970s work by Mary Beth Edelson, was on view at David Lewis Gallery, New York, 3 March – 21 April 2019