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Mary Beth Edelson, Feminist Art Pioneer, Is Dead at 88

Her revision of "The Last Supper" was a defining image for the movement in the '70s, and her ritualistic performances would be an influence for decades.

Mary Beth Edelson, whose work help define the feminist art movement, in 2017. "She was someone who created iconic symbols for women to rally around," a friend and collaborator said. "She was sort of a magnet for anger and irony both." David Lewis Gallery

By Jillian Steinhauer

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Mary Beth Edelson, a pivotal artist and organizer in the feminist art movement of the 1970s who was known as much for her participation in public protests as for her ritualistic performances, died on April 20 in Ocean Grove, N.J. She was 88.

The cause was end-stage Alzheimer's disease, said her son, Nicholas Edelson.

What may be Ms. Edelson's most famous work is also one of the defining images of the feminist art movement. She made it early in her career, when she was trying to move away from painting and into alternative forms of art. Taking a more conceptual approach, she asked 22 colleagues to suggest ideas of pieces she might create. The artist Ed McGowin suggested that she take a critical look at organized religion as "a point of departure."

"The first thing that came to my mind was the ways that they subjugate women, the way women are cut out of everything," Ms. Edelson recalled in an online interview in 2013. "So, thinking of the iconic image of Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper,' I thought if I took all the male heads out and put female artists' heads in, that would be a good statement for saying, OK, how does this feel when you look at it? How do *you* feel when you get cut out?"

What may be Ms. Edelson's most famous work, the collage "Some Living American Women Artists," is now in the Museum of Modern Art. It reimagined Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" as a feminist image and was widely distributed in poster form.
via the Museum of Modern Art

In the resulting collage, “Some Living American Women Artists” (1972), Georgia O’Keeffe occupies Jesus’ spot at the table, with Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Bourgeois and Yoko Ono among the apostles. Around the border, Ms. Edelson pasted photographs of 69 more female artists, listing their names along the bottom.

The Museum of Modern Art acquired the original work nearly four decades after it was made. In the interim, Ms. Edelson reproduced it as a poster, which sold widely.

The image sparked objections from religious groups, but it also functioned as a directory and a kind of linchpin for the feminist art community.

“She was someone who created iconic symbols for women to rally around,” said the artist Suzanne Lacy, a longtime friend and collaborator. “She was sort of a magnet for anger and irony both.”

The poster was just one way that Ms. Edelson helped foster the movement. She participated in collectives and activist groups; collected ephemera; photographed events and colleagues; and opened her studio for gatherings. Her archive, now owned by the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, “is perhaps the broadest and best visual documentation of the feminist art movement of the 1970s in existence,” the art historian Kathleen Wentrack wrote on Google Arts & Culture, as part of a feature by the Feminist Institute Digital Exhibit Project spotlighting Ms. Edelson.

Ms. Edelson was known for creating group ritual performances, like this one in 2019. via David Lewis Gallery

But as Ms. Edelson often pointed out in interviews, her artistic activity and community focus didn't end with the '70s. "She was an incredibly positive force in that she sort of transcended her generation," said the curator Connie Butler, who organized the 2007 exhibition "WACK!: Art and Feminist Revolution" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. "She continued to be in dialogue with younger artists."

Mary Elizabeth Johnson was born in East Chicago, Ind., on Feb. 6, 1933, to Dr. Albert Melvin Johnson, a dentist, and Mary Lou (Young) Johnson, a homemaker. She showed an early interest in both art and social causes.

In 1947, she began taking Saturday art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. (Her mother set up a studio for her in their house's former coal cellar.) That same year, Mary Beth organized a group to sponsor the emigration of a displaced Romanian family to the United States — without telling her parents until the family had showed up at the house.

via David Lewis Gallery

At Washington High School, she painted stage sets and illustrated the yearbook. She majored in art at DePauw University in Indiana, graduating in 1955. In her book "The Art of Mary Beth Edelson" (2002), she noted that some faculty members had objected to her senior thesis show, for reasons that remain unclear, and that, in her first experience of censorship, her paintings were removed.

Ms. Edelson married her college sweetheart, Richard Snyder, in 1955 and moved with him to Florida, but they divorced after six months. She then studied art at New York University, receiving a master's degree in 1958.

After marrying Jerome Strauss, a lawyer, she moved to Indianapolis, where she continued to paint and taught at a college preparatory school. She gave birth to a daughter before divorcing again in 1964 and married Alfred Edelson, the head of a stationery manufacturing company, with whom she had a son. In 1968 they moved to Washington, where her consciousness and career as a feminist artist really began.

In 1972, Ms. Edelson began a project that would last for decades: her "Story-Gathering Boxes," which contain cards with prompts for viewers to respond to. Chad Kleitsch

Ms. Edelson started performing rituals in 1970: She would find a spot in nature, remove her clothes and photograph herself in varying poses as a way, she said, of using her body to channel ancient goddesses who represented a forgotten history of female spirituality and power. She drew on and marked the surface of the photographs with energetic lines and images of animals and ancient characters.

"I presented a powerful, autonomous female who created and performed her own rituals, overthrowing contemporary stereotypes right and left," she wrote.

That work set her on course for the rest of her career, as she continued to stage private rituals — clothed after 1977 — as well as public, participatory ones.

In 1972, she began another project that would last for decades: her "Story-Gathering Boxes," which contain cards with prompts for viewers to respond to, such as "What did your father teach you about men?"

While she was finding her voice as an artist, she was also becoming more of an activist. When the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington mounted a biennial that included only men, she and a group of others protested. That sparked the National Conference for Women in the Arts, which she helped organize in 1972, convening women from all over the country.

Although her time in Washington was formative, it was also difficult: Ms. Edelson got another divorce, began a 27-year relationship with the artist Robert Stackhouse (they never married), and lost her daughter in a custody battle with Mr. Strauss. She was eager to return to New York City, and in 1975 she bought a loft in a cooperative building in SoHo.

Ms. Edelson's 2019 installation "Shape Shifter" at the David Lewis Gallery in New York. via David Lewis Gallery

Ms. Edelson dived into the feminist scene, joining A.I.R. Gallery, the first women's cooperative gallery in the country, and co-founding the Heresies collective, which began publishing a journal in 1977.

But the ensuing decade saw a critical backlash that dismissed her brand of spiritual, goddess-inspired feminism as unsophisticated and essentialist. "This was powerful work, but its marginalization by the mainstream should be proof enough that it was not complicit with their program," she wrote in 1986. "In fact, the work was treated as taboo."

Pressing on, she silk-screened images of gun-toting women in movies and made large wall paintings and small bronzes. The tide started to turn in the 1990s, as a new generation of politically aware artists looked to their forebears.

Ms. Edelson gained renewed attention, both for her older art and for new work like "Combat Zone" (1994), a project about domestic violence that operated out of a space in SoHo and featured art — mostly notably a sculpture of Lorena Bobbitt as the Hindu goddess Kali — as well as programs like self-defense workshops.

In addition to her son, Ms. Edelson is survived by her daughter, Lynn (Strauss) Switzman; her sister, Jayne Glass; her brother, Allan Johnson; and three grandchildren.

In her seventh decade, Ms. Edelson's work finally made its way into the mainstream. After five of her pieces were included in the "WACK!" exhibition, they were acquired by MoMA. She also found commercial gallery representation.

Ms. Edelson, right, at a Whitney Museum of American Art event in 2004 with the curator Olga M. Viso, left, and the artist Linda Cunningham. Bill Cunningham/The New York Times

Still, Ms. Edelson never had a major museum-organized retrospective in the United States, and she was well aware of the forces that determined who did, and how even feminist pioneers like her were presented. In a 2007 interview, she mused on how, despite the collaborative nature of the women's movement, individuals were often singled out in retrospect and "credited for being the creative geniuses of different ideas that were actually totally produced and imagined and created by a group of people."

"That context is so very often lost when they talk about the work from the '70s," she added. "I think it's so important to keep that foremost in your mind."