the Guardian

Art

Mary Beth Edelson obituary

American artist and campaigner at the forefront of the feminist art movement

▲ Mary Beth Edelson's Some Living American Women Artists: Last Supper, 1972-2012, digital archival print with mixed media (the original 1972 collage is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York). Photograph: Accola Griefen Fine Art

Oliver Basciano

Sun 23 May 2021 11.06 EDT

On a boiling hot morning in June 1984, hundreds of women converged on the Museum of Modern Art in New York to protest. MoMA was holding a huge exhibition of recent art and of the 165 artists showing, only 14 were women. The crowd chanted "You don't have to have a penis to be a genius" and wore suffragette sashes. Among them was the artist Mary Beth Edelson. By that point Edelson, who has died aged 88, had spent 20 years at the forefront of the feminist art movement.

In 1972 she created a collage titled Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper. Riffing on the Leonardo da Vinci painting, she replaced the faces of the disciples with those of female artists, among them Yoko Ono, Louise Bourgeois and Helen Frankenthaler. In the place of Jesus is Georgia O'Keeffe. The work became a poster, widely distributed and iconic to those fighting misogyny in the art world.

"The women who really stuck their necks out originally, they tried to cut them off," Edelson recalled in 2013. "The culture didn't want what we were doing and culture is good at punishing people who do things it doesn't want." Frustrated at being shut out of museum collections and major shows, Edelson helped found several organisations run by women, including Heresies, a feminist journal, and AIR Gallery, an art space in New York that is still open today. "If you want to get anything done, form a group" she was fond of saying.

▲ Mary Beth Edelson's Woman Rising Higher Spirit, 1975, china marker on silver gelatin print. Photograph: Accola Griefen Fine Art

In her fight for equality Edelson gravitated towards the neopagan spiritual Goddess movement. Her interest was personal as well as professional and resulted in a series of performances in remote settings conducted mostly in private, but sometimes photographed for exhibition. Woman Rising/Earth (1971-73) features six black-and-white photographs of the artist undressing on a scrubby sand dune on the Outer Banks islands in North Carolina. In a final image, Edelson stands, hands raised triumphantly, the white rags she had been wearing discarded. Over the photographs, the artist drew esoteric triangular symbols.

She would go to extremes to find the right location in which to perform. In 1977 she read about a neolithic cave on the Croatian island of Hvar and resolved to find it. "I needed to do my rituals in an actual prehistoric cave; to experience a neolithic site where I could smell the earth, poke around in the soil, breathe the air, and know that the cave air had circulated through my body and become a part of me ... I sold my car and bought the voyage."

Arriving in what was then Yugoslavia with a friend, Edelson interrogated local people to find the right location, with an inquiry at a cafe bearing fruit. At dawn the next morning she set off up a mountain, and beyond the deserted village of Humac found the cave. There, in the pitch black, she set up a ring of candles on the rocky ground and produced a series of eerie, profound photographs that became the Grapceva Neolithic Cave Series.

The art historian Lucy Lippard wrote of Edelson: "Like the great goddess to whom she has dedicated her art, she has (at least) two aspects - political rage and life-giving affirmation."

▲ Ritual, an undated work by Mary Beth Edelson. Photograph: David Lewis Gallery

Mary Beth was born in East Chicago, Indiana, a steel town, to Mary Lou Johnson, who was active in the local Meals on Wheels programme, and Albert Melvin, a doctor. By the age of eight, she had expressed an interest in art, and embarked on activism as a teenager.

While still at school, she took Saturday courses at the Art Institute of Chicago and, after briefly joining a contemporary dance troupe, in 1951 went to study art at DePauw University, Indiana, with a master's at New York University. On graduation in 1959, she taught at Montclair State College, New Jersey.

In 1964 a first marriage ended acrimoniously, with her ex-husband getting custody of their daughter. A year later she married Alfred Edelson, the head of a stationery company, and, frustrated with the lack of career progression for female tutors at Montclair, the couple moved to Indianapolis and opened the Talbot Street Art Gallery. Mary Beth also formed a local arts association, Professional Artists in Indiana, but was told that if she wanted it taken seriously she would need to find a man to act as spokesperson.

Something snapped, she recalled. "I became furious; 30 years of anger came out and there was no turning back." In 1968, the year before the couple left to live in Washington DC, in a speech at the Herron Art Museum in Indiana, she excoriated her peers for the misogyny she had experienced.

▲ Mary Beth Edelson in 2017. 'The women who really stuck their necks out originally, they tried to cut them off,' she said of her experiences of fighting misogyny in the art world. Photograph: David Lewis Gallery

Living in the capital for five years, in 1972 she co-organised the first National Conference for Women in the Visual Arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which featured Judy Chicago, Elaine de Kooning and Alice Neel among the speakers. She started the project Story Gathering Boxes, which continued until 2014. Participants were asked to write responses to questions such as "what was it like to be a boy [or girl]?" and "what did your father teach you about women?" The work was intended as a "new history", in which ordinary women were listened to.

By now divorced again, in 1975 Edelson, with her partner, the artist Robert Stackhouse, moved to New York, taking a studio a block from the original AIR Gallery in Wooster Street. She had a show at the venue titled Giving Myself a Five Year Retrospective and, two years later, at Halloween, she used the gallery to host a pumpkin-lit group procession titled Proposals for Memorials to 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era. In the same year, 1977, Heresies was founded, and published 27 issues until 1993, each edited by a new group of women and devoted to subjects, including the Great Goddess, Third World Women and Women and Violence, not covered by the mainstream arts press.

Amid the theory-heavy conceptualism of the following decade, Edelson's overtly political work fell out of favour. However, in 1989, another retrospective, titled Shape-Shifter, travelled to five museums across the US.

In the 1990s Edelson started a new body of work, featuring not the goddesses of mythology but celebrity. The subject of her 1993 painting The Last Temptation of Lorena Bobbitt had received enormous press attention four years earlier when Bobbitt had cut off her abusive husband, John Wayne's, penis. Kali/Bobbitt (1994), a sculpture, featured Lorena as a Hindu goddess in S&M gear. The drawing and collage Marilyn Monroe Never Got to Be: Two Things at Once (1997) show the actor staring into a mirror brandishing a pistol; and Right in the Kisser (1997) depicts Judy Garland administering a wicked right hook.

▲ Mary Beth Edelson with her wall collage at Accola Griefen Gallery, New York, 2012. Photograph: Molly Stinchfield

Age did not dim Edelson's activism. She was energetic in the Women's Action Coalition and in 1994 rented a shop front in SoHo, New York, putting up a sign up that proclaimed Combat Zone: Campaign HQ Against Domestic Violence, and organised self-defence classes.

In 2006, retrospectives were held at Malmö Konstmuseum and Migros Museum, Zurich. True to her beliefs in the grassroots scene, when WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution, an influential group show featuring her work, came from Los Angeles to MoMA Ps1 in New York in 2008, Edelman organised an open studios weekend for female artists in the city.

Her work was included in Waking the Witch at Oriel Davies Gallery, Wales, in 2018, which toured to other UK galleries, and in the group show Animalesquem, which opened at Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden, in 2019 before going to the Baltic in Gateshead later that year. It can also be seen in Feminist Avant-Garde of the 70s, an exhibition that has been travelling for more than 10 years since opening at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, in 2010, including a 2016 stop at the Photographers' Gallery in London.

Edelson is survived by her daughter, Lynn, from her first marriage, and son, Nicholas, from her second, and by three grandchildren, Benjamin, Liza and Oscar.

● Mary Beth Edelson, artist, born 6 February 1933; died 20 April 2021