

# ARTFORUM



Mary Beth Edelson, 2017. Photo: David Lewis Gallery.

May 17, 2021 at 4:32pm

## MARY BETH EDELSON (1933–2021)

Pioneering feminist artist Mary Beth Edelson died April 20 at the age of eighty-eight. The news was announced by her children Lynn Switzman and Nicholas Edelson. A founder of the groundbreaking feminist magazine *Heresies* and an early member of New York's A.I.R. Gallery, the first all-woman art gallery in the United States, Edelson was a lifelong advocate for women in the arts, and for women's rights and human rights. Through a diverse practice embracing collage, painting, drawing, performance, and photography, she successfully challenged the patriarchal structure

dominant in the 1960s and '70s, paving the way for generations of women artists.

Born in East Chicago, Indiana, in 1933, Edelson began studying at the Art Institute of Chicago at the age of thirteen, going on to earn her BA in fine arts from Greencastle, Indiana's DePauw University, where a work in her thesis exhibition was deemed "unsuitable for ministers and small children" and removed by university officials, sparking campus-wide protests. After obtaining a master's in fine arts from New York University in 1958, Edelson moved to Indianapolis, where she remained for a decade, painting mothers and children, running galleries, and raising her own children. In 1976, after a few years spent living in Washington, DC—where she organized the first National Conference for Women in the Arts—she moved to New York, joining A.I.R. Gallery and becoming part of the all-woman *Heresies* Collective, with whose members she would establish the eponymous publication.

One of her most well known works from this era is a 1972 collaged poster reimagining Leonardo da Vinci's fifteenth-century *Last Supper* painting. In Edelson's version, Georgia O'Keeffe replaces Christ, with women artists including Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson, and Yoko Ono standing in for the disciples. The work is currently held in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. During this time, Edelson, an adherent of the feminist neopaganist goddess movement, also began creating works focusing on the female nude, for which she often photographed herself, in an attempt to rescue the female body from the role of passive object of the male gaze, which it had occupied for centuries. "I also used my body as a 'found object' in these early works with the intention of transforming the body into a 'found subject,'" Edelson once wrote.

In the early 1990s, Edelson became a leader of both the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion and the Women's Action Coalition. Later in the decade she served on the Title IX Task Force, which filed a complaint with the National Endowment of the Arts charging storied New York institutions the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art with underrepresenting the work of women artists. From 2007 to 2009 her work was included alongside that of fellow first-wave feminist artists Judy Chicago and Carolee Schneemann in the traveling exhibition "WACK! Art of the Feminist Revolution." In 2019, she was presented with the National Lifetime Achievement Award by the Women's Caucus for art. Her papers are held in the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.