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Obituaries

Mary Beth Edelson, provocative artist and feminist activist, dies at 88



Artist Mary Beth Edelson in 2012, with an untitled wall collage at Accola Griefen gallery in New York. (Molly Stinchfield/Accola Griefen Fine Art)

By Harrison Smith

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Mary Beth Edelson, a mischievous leader of the feminist art movement who championed women's empowerment in her work, most famously in a poster that reconfigured Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" by replacing the faces of Jesus and his disciples with those of female artists, died April 20 at a memory care center in Ocean Grove, N.J. She was 88.

Her death was [announced](#) last week by Accola Griefen Fine Art, a New York gallery that represented her. The cause was Alzheimer's disease, said her son, Nicholas Edelson.

Working across painting, collage, photography, sculpture, drawing and performance art, Ms. Edelson made pieces that were by turns tender and aggressive, spiritual and political. She glorified the female body and spirit, depicting herself and other women as powerful goddesses, while fighting to extend the women's movement into the art world, campaigning for female artists to receive the same opportunities as men.

Ms. Edelson spent most of her career in New York, working out of a SoHo loft and mingling with feminist artists including [Carolee Schneemann](#), Nancy Spero and Ana Mendieta, whom she welcomed to the city in 1979 by hosting a [costume party](#) in which friends were invited to come dressed as their favorite female artists. (Ms. Edelson came as Leonor Fini; Louise Bourgeois, among others, came as herself.)

But she spent several key years in Washington, where she picketed all-male gallery exhibitions and in 1972 spearheaded the first National Conference for Women in the Visual Arts. Held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the event served as a rare forum for more than 350 female artists, historians, critics and curators, many of whom recounted years of sexism from men who dismissed women's art as "dainty and unoriginal."



A later version of Ms. Edelson's 1972 collage "Some Living American Women Artists." The original is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. (Accola Griefen Fine Art)

That same year, Ms. Edelson took a reproduction of the "Last Supper" and turned it into a feminist collage, making room at the table — once occupied entirely by men, including the 12 disciples — for artists including [Helen Frankenthaler](#), [Lee Krasner](#), [Alma Thomas](#) and Yoko Ono. Titled "[Some Living American Women Artists](#)," the piece featured Georgia O'Keeffe in lieu of Jesus, with photos of another 69 female artists surrounding the tableau.

"When I first made it, I thought it was too humorous to be taken seriously," she later told the San Antonio Express-News. "Some of my feminist friends objected to it because they thought female artists were so far from being able to claim the kind of power the poster suggested. They thought it was a Madison Avenue image of what we hoped the feminist movement would become."

But her collage, later released as a poster, served as a road map for gallerists and curators in search of female artists, according to art dealer and historian Kat Griefen. In an essay for the Brooklyn Rail, [she wrote](#) that Ms. Edelson's collage, along with an earlier slide registry of women's art developed by writer Lucy Lippard, "made it possible not only to discover the work of women artists but also to offer a manner by which to locate them."

Ms. Edelson later promoted female artists as a founder of the feminist publication *Heresies* and as a leader of AIR Gallery, which opened in New York in September 1972 as the first nonprofit, artist-run gallery for women in the United States. She also gravitated toward the neopagan goddess movement, engrossing herself in the study of ancient religions and the psychological theories of Carl Jung.

As part of her “Woman Rising” series, she photographed herself performing private rituals on the beaches of the Outer Banks in North Carolina, where she stripped naked and raised her arms to the heavens. Determined to perform the rituals at a neolithic site, she sold her car to pay for a 1977 pilgrimage to a cave linked to goddess worship in Yugoslavia, now part of Croatia.

“I felt like the center of the universe,” she wrote in an article for [Heresies](#), describing the cave ceremony. She exhibited artifacts from the trip at AIR later that year, in addition to organizing a “sacred ritual performance” [on Halloween](#), complete with a burning ladder, a recitation of the names of burned witches and a five-block procession to Washington Square Park, where pumpkins were carried aloft on poles.



“Dea of Syria,” a 1975 piece that Ms. Edelson made with wax pencil, watercolor and ink on silver gelatin print. (Accola Griefen Fine Art)

Ms. Edelson was born Mary Elizabeth Johnson in East Chicago, Ind., on Feb. 6, 1933. Her father, the son of Swedish immigrants, was a dentist; her mother was a homemaker who later directed a hospital volunteer group and helped launch a local Meals on Wheels program.

As a child, Ms. Edelson demonstrated an early interest in art and activism. She organized a campaign to sponsor a displaced Romanian family's immigration to the United States and, at age 13, started attending Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. At home, she worked out of the former coal cellar, which her mother painted white and illuminated with her father's old dental lights.

Ms. Edelson studied art at DePauw University in Indiana. She graduated in 1955 and then moved to Florida with her first husband, Richard Snyder. They divorced about six months later, and she later moved to Manhattan, where she received a master of fine arts degree from New York University and taught at Montclair State College (now a university) in New Jersey.

After marrying Jerome Strauss, a lawyer, she moved to Indianapolis, where she ran the Talbot art gallery in the 1960s. That marriage ended in divorce as well, and Ms. Edelson lost custody of their daughter, Lynn, in a court case that author Phyllis Chesler chronicled in the 1986 book "Mothers on Trial."

By Ms. Edelson's account, her ex-husband argued that she was a "bohemian." In an interview, she called him her "most powerful teacher," adding that "whenever I think my success has moved me out of the female ghetto, I remember: I am without [Lynn]."

Ms. Edelson was married and divorced a third time, to [Alfred Edelson](#), who ran a stationery company. They lived together in Washington, where she taught at the Corcoran and started one of her longest art projects, putting out "story gathering boxes" at art galleries where she invited visitors to answer questions such as, "What did your mother teach you about men?"

"At the time, the 1970s, I thought galleries had become too cold and antiseptic, white boxes that made you feel as if you should just see the art and get out. I wanted people to feel comfortable, to sit down and participate in the art," she told the Express-News.

She later lived for nearly three decades with artist Robert Stackhouse. In addition to her son from her third marriage, Nicholas Edelson of Manhattan, survivors include a daughter from her second marriage, Lynn Switzman of Prince George, Canada; a sister; a brother; and three grandchildren.

In the 1990s, Ms. Edelson turned to pop culture imagery, making drawings and collages that recast Marilyn Monroe as a radical feminist. Her 1994 sculpture “Kali Bobbitt” — a six-armed mannequin wielding a butcher’s knife and phallus — was created in homage to Lorena Bobbitt, who had cut off her husband’s penis the previous year after accusing him of rape and domestic abuse.

Ms. Edelson continued working as an activist, volunteering with the Women’s Action Coalition, a feminist protest group, and turning a SoHo storefront into the headquarters of an anti-domestic violence campaign. In 2007, she received a late-career boost when some of her work was featured in “WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution,” a group show that toured at museums around the world.

In its wake, the Museum of Modern Art acquired some of her collages, including “Some Living American Women Artists” and [“Death of Patriarchy/AIR Anatomy Lesson”](#) (1976), which recast a Rembrandt painting showing a group of all-male doctors. At the center of the picture was Ms. Edelson, dissecting a cadaver labeled “The Patriarchy.”