

Edelson



Mary Beth Edelson: Six Story Gathering Boxes (1972–2014)

Curated by Amy Smith-Stewart

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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New Myths/Old Myths, 1973
Courtesy of the artist

This participatory exhibition brings together six of Mary Beth Edelson’s ground-breaking story gathering boxes—a project initiated in 1972 that is still ongoing today—seminal contributions that encapsulated an evolving feminist art legacy and evidenced the very first vestiges of what is familiarly known today as “social practice.” These works, taken as a whole, engage audience interconnectivity to establish an exhibition hinged upon “interaction” in order to explore the diverse ways in which we relate to collaborative art and its impact on the world beyond the museum.

Mary Beth Edelson’s art making spans six and a half decades and traverses media ranging from performance to photography, painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, artist books, collages, video, and collaborative art. Centered on the experimental and oriented towards feminist and activist principles, she makes art that is predicated upon a cooperative experience focused on viewers’ involvement and reflection.

Edelson grew up in the immigrant steel mill town of East Chicago, Indiana. The oldest of three children born to parents who were active in the local community, by the age of thirteen Edelson had already shown her activist roots, organizing a “Peace Cell” group to sponsor a refugee family fleeing a labor camp in Germany.¹ Throughout her teens, she took weekend art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago and designed stage sets for high school productions. Edelson attended DePauw University from 1951 to 1955, majoring in art and minoring in speech and philosophy. There she defended her senior thesis project, which was censored and then removed from the university’s Union Building Gallery by faculty as “an affront to ministers and small children.”² She moved to New York City in 1958, receiving her MA from New York University in 1959. After graduating she relocated to Indianapolis, where she opened her first solo museum exhibition.

In 1968, Edelson moved to Washington, DC, where she continued as both an exhibiting artist and an early pioneer in the feminist art movement. She was instrumental in the organization of the first Conference for Women in the Visual Arts (CWVA) held in Washington, DC, at The Corcoran Gallery in 1972 and the follow-up series of seminars at the Smithsonian Institution in 1973; an early and active member of the A.I.R gallery in New York, 1975–82; a founding member of the influential *Heresies Magazine*, a feminist publication based in New York City that was founded in 1977 and continued publishing into the 1990s; and an active contributor to WAC, the Women’s Action Coalition, from 1991–95. It was the 22 *Others* exhibition at the Henri Gallery in 1973, resulting in such renowned works as *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper*³ and the early story gathering boxes, that signaled Edelson’s artistic position.

She returned to New York in 1975, where she remains to this day. Her work has been widely exhibited and published internationally, represented in the “literature of fields as diverse as psychology, women’s studies, feminist theory, photography, theology and art.”⁴

The story gathering boxes comprise two types: those containing wooden tablets created with many different media, such as leather, paint, ink, graphite, and watercolor, encompassing texts and imagery on specific themes such as gender, sexuality, goddesses, myths, and spirituality; and those that involve a set of paper tablets with questions stamped at the top, prompting a handwritten response from the viewer on topics ranging from gender to immigration. Visitors are invited to participate by contributing their accounts, which are collected and archived so that they can be read as time capsules revealing more than four decades of changing culture.⁵ The story gathering boxes have traveled extensively in Europe, Scandinavia, North, South, and Central America, as well as Japan.



Edelson's inspiration for the shape of the physical boxes is based on sacred ancient Egyptian canopic chests.⁶ Made for tactile accessibility, they are fabricated out of poplar wood and each contains four interior chambers to hold either paper tablets (blank cards with topics stamped on them in combination with gathered stories) or poplar tablets (painted or drawn on in various media, usually with a capacity of between thirty-two and fifty-two tablets). The boxes are commonly displayed on tables with stools, providing a space where visitors can sit and spend time viewing and taking part in the work's intimacy. Edelson intended them to be a "rebellion against the implied message of art galleries that you are to look but not touch. You are welcome to breeze through the exhibition but not linger. You are to stand but not sit."⁷ Their enduring influence lies in their ability to be at once self-reflective and synergistic, an exchange that employs art as a means to captivate and honor the visitor's investment.



Edelson's questions can be answered by everyone, transcending age, race, gender, or culture, metamorphosing the purely subjective by forming a critical mass that encompasses generations and cuts across geography. She articulated that their power lies in their ability "for conceptualizing truth not as infallible historical facts, but as the inherent trueness in our own collective stories."⁸ In posing the questions, Edelson asks us to scrutinize our cultural evolution, its build-ups and breakdowns, its developing legacy, through the lens of individual accounts collected and imparted publicly. Thereby, she assumes the role of archivist, curator, and caretaker, offering up a re-presentation of our greater social narrative. Moreover, influential curator and critic Lucy R. Lippard notes: "By collecting everywoman's tales, Edelson is accumulating the fragments of a 'new history.'"⁹

Of the six boxes selected for the exhibition, two contain wooden tablets in their original boxes: *Great Mother* (1973) and *New Myths/Old Myths* (1973). *Great Mother* contains forty-eight wooden tablets, painted with mixed media, and focuses on the theme of the goddess, from the primordial earth mother Gaia, the Paleolithic Venus of Willendorf, Bodhisattva Tara, the Greek goddess Athena, the tricksters Greek Baubo and Irish Sheela-na-gig, Hellenistic Sophia, and the Aztec goddess Mayahuel, to the Christian Virgin Mary. *Great Mother* was exhibited forty years ago in The Aldrich exhibition *Contemporary Reflections* (1973–74). *New Myths/Old Myths* contains forty-eight wooden tablets, mostly painted but also combined with diverse materials, and its contents orbit around a single retrospective question: "What are our contemporary myths?"¹⁰ Edelson unites her own research with statements collected from participants. The box is broken down into archetypal themes: Creation, Stages of Maturation, Transformation, and Cross/Circle.¹¹



Installation view of eleven *Story Gathering Boxes* dated 1971–78 at Franklin Furnace, New York, 1978. During the opening of the exhibition, some participants wrote new stories while others read previously written stories.

There are four paper tablet boxes on view in the exhibition; together they span forty-two years: *Gender Parity* (1972–ongoing), *Purveyor of Hope* (1972–ongoing), *Childhood* (1995–ongoing), and *Family Immigration Stories* (2014–ongoing).

Four questions are posed in *Gender Parity*:

What Did Your Mother Teach You About Women?
What Did Your Mother Teach You About Men?
What Did Your Father Teach You About Women?
What Did Your Father Teach You About Men?

What did these questions mean in 1972, what do they mean today in 2014, and what will they mean forty years from now in 2054? In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists led the charge to recover significant female writers, philosophers, and artists excluded from the academic canon.

In this work, Edelson uses a democratic principle of inclusion as a means to challenge a system of hegemony. As we flip through the gathered selection of responses, we are left to guess their points of origin, time, and circumstance, as they are unsigned and not individually dated. What becomes paramount here is Edelson's choice in this particular line of questioning and its meaningful insistence on an open-ended, unbiased, and timeless methodological approach. The fact that the project has no end point, as it will outlive even the artist herself, allows it to circulate in perpetuity, remaining forever relevant.

More than twenty years later, *Childhood*, like *Gender Parity*, asks us to ponder gender, but from an alternative perspective: “*What was it like to be a girl? What was it like to be a boy?*” This question seems more relevant than ever before as gender norms are challenged by the increasing legitimization of transgender sexual orientation and the legalization of gay marriage.

Purveyor of Hope asks viewers to envisage the future. As we project forward, we have to think back. Consider the political climate when Edelson first made the story gathering boxes: abortion is legalized, war persists in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal is beginning, the Olympic Terrorist Attack has taken place, and Congress approves the Equal Rights Amendment (although it is never ratified). And now think about our current global climate: the war in Afghanistan, civil war in Syria, the crisis in the Ukraine, drones, school shootings, and border wars. Edelson motivates us to examine our present-day world and what we’d like it to become.

Make up a new beginning
Describe the future as you would like for it to be
What is the most alienating thing you encounter in your daily life?
If you had the power to change one thing what would it be?

By asking us to consider our own agency in a progressive future, Edelson activates us by positioning us within the work. Using a transparent form of messaging and a gesture of generosity, Edelson compels us by exercising a hands-on approach to making art that is ultimately about connectivity. As Edelson asserts, these works are “on-going repositories of living myths from our time, written by people who were not journalists or contriving to tell a particular story from a preconceived vantage point, but simply the spontaneous real life stories of a people.”¹²

Edelson’s newest box to date, *Family Immigration Stories*, was made especially for the exhibition and asks us to contemplate one of the most contested topics of our post-9/11 times. As with all of the prior story boxes, Edelson utilizes an inclusive ritual of inquiry as her chosen method. Through the lens of four prompts, we are asked to acknowledge this highly politicized issue vis-à-vis our own family genealogy:

Stories about immigration from your mother’s side of the family.
Stories about immigration from your father’s side of the family.
The worst stories you have heard about immigration.
The most inspiring stories you have heard about immigration.

The power resides in the personalization of the political. Edelson hopes to mobilize us to recognize who we are, where we have been, and ultimately how our thinking engages in shaping others.

Taken as a whole, the story gathering boxes underscore a conceptual process hinged on a connective and transformative event, revelatory in its employment of art as a way to stimulate and disseminate audience observation. The accumulation of responses over time—for some boxes now in the many thousands—seen alongside real-time responses in the gallery, has generated a living, breathing, advancing body of work that transcends a purely speculative art happening to become a real-life experience, or, as Laura Cottingham explains, “re-write[s] the codes of fine art’s terms and distribution”¹³ by leveling them. Edelson’s story compilations take us on a journey that both throws us back and hurls us forward, placing us inside the quest to unravel some of the most instrumental markers of societal progress.

Amy Smith-Stewart, curator

Mary Beth Edelson was born in 1933 in East Chicago, Indiana, and has lived and worked in New York City for the past forty years.



Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions h x w x d in inches

Gender Parity, 1972–ongoing

*“What Did Your Mother Teach You About Women/
What Did Your Mother Teach You About Men? What
Did Your Father Teach You About Women/What Did
Your Father Teach You About Men?”*

Poplar wood box, paper tablets with rubber stamped
question, responses by visitors collected over time,
along with cards for new responses
7 ½ x 17 ¼ x 19 ½

Purveyor of Hope, 1972–ongoing

*“Describe the future as you would like for it to be/
Make up a new beginning”*

Poplar wood box, paper tablets with rubber stamped
question, responses by visitors collected over time,
along with cards for new responses
7 ½ x 17 ¼ x 19 ½

Great Mother, 1973

Poplar wood box, 48 wood tablets, paint, mixed media
7 ½ x 17 ¼ x 19 ½

New Myths/Old Myths, 1973

Poplar wood box, 48 wood tablets, paint, mixed media
7 ½ x 17 ¼ x 19 ½

Childhood, 1995–ongoing

“What was it like to be a girl?/What was it like to be a boy?”

Poplar wood box, paper tablets with rubber stamped
question, responses by visitors collected over time,
along with cards for new responses
7 ½ x 17 ¼ x 19 ½

Family Immigration Stories, 2014

*“Stories about immigration from your mother’s/father’s
side of the family, The worst stories/most inspiring
stories you have heard about immigration”*

Poplar wood box, paper tablets with rubber stamped question,
responses by visitors collected over course of exhibition
7 ½ x 17 ¼ x 19 ½

Courtesy of the artist

For more information about the project and to view selections from the Story Gathering Boxes archive, please visit www.storygatheringboxes.com

- 1 As told in Mary Beth Edelson’s *TIMELINE* from 1993 to 2000: http://www.marybethedelson.com/essay_timeline.html
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Edelson replaced the males depicted in Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* with female artists, substituting Georgia O’Keeffe for Jesus.
- 4 Quoted from Mary Beth Edelson’s 2014 narrative biography, which she provided to The Aldrich via email on July 22, 2014.
- 5 See the boxes and their stories at www.storygatheringboxes.com
- 6 As seen in *The Art of Mary Beth Edelson* (self published, 2002), p. 88, under the image caption of an Egyptian alabaster canopic chest with lid that was removed from Pharaoh Tutankhamen’s tomb.
- 7 Paul Bloodgood, “Raw Material Selections from the Story Gathering Boxes 1972–on-going,” from *The Art of Mary Beth Edelson*, p. 82.
- 8 Mary Beth Edelson, “Quality Power: 1961–1968” from *Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal*, eds. Hans Breder & Klaus-Peter Busse (Dortmunder Schriften Zur Kunst, 2005).
- 9 Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (Pantheon Books, 1983).
- 10 http://www.marybethedelson.com/story_boxes.html
- 11 As detailed in a document provided via email by Edelson’s studio on July 24, 2013.
- 12 Mary Beth Edelson, *Seven Cycles: Public Rituals* (self-published, 1980).
- 13 Laura Cottingham, “Shifting Signs: On the Art of Mary Beth Edelson,” from *The Art of Mary Beth Edelson*, p. 29.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Larry Aldrich (1906–2001), Founder

It's Time for Action, showing participant writing in story boxes, Migros Museum, Zurich, 2006



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