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Oral history interview with Mary Beth Edelson, 2009 February 1-16

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Beth Edelson on 2009 February 1 and 16.. The interview took place at Edelson's home and studio in New York. NY, and was conducted by Judith O. Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Beth Edelson at 110 Mercer Street, in SoHo, on February 1, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one. You begin when you wish.

MARY BETH EDELSON: This is Mary Beth Edelson on February 1, 2009. Very close to my birthday, February 6th. [Laughs.] What I would like to do with this interview is try to give a comprehensive overview of work that I've done. And also to talk about some of the issues that I've been thinking about. I just want to briefly go through—touch what I want to talk about so you'll know what's coming in this discussion. And that would include some of the dilemmas that artists have who have gained a reputation in a particular period but continue to grow and create work, and the sort of dilemma around that. And then I want to talk about collaboration in the feminist movement and how important that was and so it's been overlooked. Humor in my artwork and how important speaking is to me and to many other women who feel that that was part of our finding of voice. Other aspects I want to touch on are major one-woman exhibitions and how international the feminist movement was right from the very get-go in the seventies. Videotapes that are being made now to document some of that. And then get into my own artwork and the categories of my own work, which would include posters, which are collage works, the ones I'm best known for; story-gathering boxes, drawings, paintings, collage wall, installations, and photographic works, as well as performance, and books, both multiple and unique books. So I just wanted to mention that. That's my goal, to try to cover all those categories.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm moving this because that mike is picking up the motor of the computer. [Laughs.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, I know what it's picking—it's picking up this.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, good, if we turn that off— Oh, that's great. Thank you.

[They laugh.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: I didn't even think about, I'm so used to this sound.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. Okay. The motor of the computer's much more subtle.

MARY BETH EDELSON: The idea of speaking and using your voice became very important in the feminist movement in the seventies because women were not being heard. We were not being listened to or paid attention to. And focusing on our voice seemed to be one of our political tools. For me that was an important tool because I've always been a public speaker. Even as a child I had opportunities to speak in front of groups. And my mother and my father were both public speakers. So this was something that I grew up with, and it was a natural part of what a person does. I never had any fear of speaking in front of people [laughs] that a lot of people have. I heard Buckminster Fuller speak in the early seventies at the Corcoran [Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC]. And I was so inspired by that man. But it was not only what he was saying that inspired me; but it was the fact that he shared with us that he could speak for three days—that he could speak for three days! And I thought that was totally amazing [laughs]. And I thought to myself, if I could just speak well like that for one hour, I would really be happy. And so that became a goal of mine to do that. And then I finally got up to the point where I could do that for three hours. I still don't think I could make the three days [laughs]. But it made me very sensitive to the fact that there was another mountain to climb in relationship to speaking and structuring how you speak and what you say. And the revelations that you can share that you've had with the audience. And how you can communicate that. And Buckminster Fuller was so very good at that.

The other thing that I learned early on in relationship to speaking was that I have been an activist since I was a kid. And as soon as there was such a thing as the civil rights movement, I was part of that. but before that, it was called race relations, and I was part of that. And also speaking was part of how you communicated that. My interest in these political liberal ideas came from the church that I went to, and that was a Methodist church in the north.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The north of what?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Hmmm?

JUDITH RICHARDS: The north of what?

MARY BETH EDELSON: The United States [laughs]. In Indiana, which doesn't seem—not so far from Chicago [Illinois]. East Chicago, Indiana, is where I grew up. And that church was extremely liberal. And I was able through that church to go to various conferences that, when I look back on it, what was being said and done, it was fairly radical. But in particular it was focused on race relations and civil rights. And so I cut my teeth on that movement, where I found, even prior to that, where I found my real grounding, still again, was in the church situation. We had a summer camp that we would go to, a church summer camp, for two weeks. And at that camp you could—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This was at what age?

MARY BETH EDELSON: This was at age 12. You could pick the courses that you wanted to take. In the morning you should take a religious course, the afternoon was crafts and swimming and that sort of thing. And usually they had an Old Testament course that was taught by a rabbi. Protestant ministers don't know the Old Testament like the rabbis do. "Let's bring a rabbi in." So I always signed up for the Old Testament because the rabbis were so knowledgeable and so wonderful to listen to. This particular year the rabbi came and said, "I'm not going to talk about the Old Testament. I'm going to talk about building bridges." And he then began to deconstruct the prejudices people hold against each other, and asked us to speak freely about how we feel about black people, what it is we think they don't do right or, you know, how they hold themselves back and all of these kinds of things that people used to have in their heads. And to get that out and really talk about it. So we did that, we spoke freely. And he never spoke about being Jewish or connected that to, of course, the prejudice we all know. And this was right around World War II.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that would be late forties?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. The very last session he said to us, "I haven't talked to you about this, but I was in one of the concentration—Nazi concentration camps." And then he described standing and watching a boxcar burn with his wife inside of it. And this kind of thing literally seared to my heart. And everything that he said just in that small body—it just brought it all home on a whole other level. The next fall in my school, the whole issue of race

relations became very important because they were sending out memos telling us that certain things were being cut out because they had gotten restrictions about what could and could not be done. For example, the swimming classes were all going to be cut out because they didn't want those to be integrated. And they filled the gym up with concrete and put a floor over it. I mean the swimming pool was concrete, and they put a floor over it. That's how they solved that. Stopped the dance classes. And that sort of thing.

But one of the things that happened along with that is the male athletes called a strike for the whole student body, and there were 2,000 people in the school, to strike against—to not allow any black athletes on the teams. So that was a real test for me because everybody was—the athletes were heroes to everyone. And we had really good teams in my school. So that was a test, that was a real test for me. Everyone went out; there were only 12 of us who did not go out. And the kids who were outside were all yelling at us, "Come out and protest with us." And somewhere I found the courage not to do it. And, you know, when you're that age, you want to be part of the gang [laughs]. You want to be accepted by everybody. So I think that is really the moment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me understand. The people outside—what was the position of the people outside and the position inside?

MARY BETH EDELSON: The people outside wanted to deny black athletes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I see. They were in support of this administrative position.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Actually the administration didn't take that position. The white athletes took that position.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh! This came from the white athletes who said we don't want to play with the black athletes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: That's right. And P.S. because they're better than we are [laughs]. But, yes, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So there were 12 kids in addition to the black athletes inside.

MARY BETH EDELSON: There were no black people came to school that day.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh.

MARY BETH EDELSON: So it was 12 white people out of 2,000 who did not go out. You know when you're tested like that as a kid, it's a very hard thing for a kid to do. You're set for life. Nothing else is going to be as hard as that is. [Laughs] you just go on from there. So I just tell that little—this is kind of an aside I'm afraid I get off on. But I think that's kind of an interesting historical moment, and it certainly formed who I was—or who I became. The other thing that was germane to where I grew up is it was a steel mill town. It was a very rough labor town. It was a very rough, crime-ridden town. It was a place where immigrants came and could always get a job and get good pay in the steel mills. So you had these waves of immigrants. Sometimes we had to be off the streets because they didn't understand that—if women were on the street after a certain hour, they thought they were fair game. So we would have curfews, and we'd have to be in the house for two weeks until they got it across to this wave that had just come in, you know, that women are not fair game [laughs]. So it was a very different environment for a white WASP girl to grow up in in the Midwest.

I was sort of aware of that at the time, but not totally aware of how different I was. And I am so grateful now for having that background because it was so—it was a preparation for the world we live in now. If I'd grown up in some idyllic Midwestern town, it would not be the same, and I would not be the same person. I think those things really formed me. So I just mention that as my background.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How about if we go back to your family.

MARY BETH EDELSON: The family itself?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who your parents were, their background, when you were born, your siblings and all that.

MARY BETH EDELSON: My grandparents immigrated from Sweden in the 1890's and settled in East Chicago, and my grandfather worked in the steel mill and raised—he and his wife, Betsy—had four children.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What were your grandparents' names?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Johnson.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And their first names?

MARY BETH EDELSON: My grandmother's name was Betsy, and my grandfather's name was Albert, and they came from Slussen [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Could you spell that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: S-L-U-S-S-E-N. Which means a "boat slip." On the island of Orust, O-U-R-S-T [sic], in Sweden. And I've had the thrill of going back there with my son in recent years and re-hooking —after a hundred years of separation and no contact with relatives—hooking up with those relatives again. And hoping that I would find at least one. And we found that we were related to about a half of this island [laughs]. And greeted so warmly.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they came themselves, just the two of them, to East Chicago.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, they came separately, not together. But, you know, they were from the same general area in Sweden. I really don't remember the story of how they got together or when they knew each other. But the other brothers from my grandfather's family also came to that general Chicago area, except for one of them that went to Alaska and became an Alaskan explorer. You know they were typical immigrants that just really went out there and took enormous risks. So that's my grandparents. And my father— My grandparents, one of their main missions was to get education for their children.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How many children were there?

MARY BETH EDELSON: And they had four children, two boys and two girls. In Sweden at that time, you had to have money and own a certain amount of land in order to have a free education. And if you didn't have that, you didn't get an education. So that was one of the things they were fighting when they came here. So all but one of the four children went to college. My father became a doctor—a dentist, an oral surgeon, and a prominent citizen in East Chicago. Both my mother and father were very engaged in community activities of the city. My mother started Meals on Wheels in that area when that idea was new. She really spent her whole life being a volunteer and making a difference in the community. Her education was a one-room schoolhouse in southern Indiana. And she did not have the opportunity to go to college because her father—her mother died when she was nine, and her father died when she was 11.

So she then went from relative to relative who took care of her. And then finally the farm area of Indiana and went to the northern part where she stayed with another aunt. It seemed, as she traveled around, everybody died. She lived with her grandmother, and her grandmother died. She hooked up with her brother, her brother died. Finally she got to Aunt Cyn who was then in the northern part, and she lived to be 100, [laughs] so there was no problem, you know. So she had it tough. She was the most grounded, salt-of-the-earth human being I've ever met in my life. It was tough for her to be married to a man who was a doctor who had so much more education than she did. But she learned—she learned through her volunteer work the best way she could.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So those four children including your mother.

MARY BETH EDELSON: My father.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean your father. Okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Four children—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your grandparents had four children, including your father.

MARY BETH EDELSON: My grandparents had four children, and my father was included in that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm.

MARY BETH EDELSON: My mother was—her parents had two children, her and her brother. They were all dead by the time she was 20, including the grandmother.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you said your parents met in—they grew up in East Chicago.

MARY BETH EDELSON: My father grew up there. My mother grew up in southern Indiana in the farm country. Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Then after they got married, how many children did they have?

MARY BETH EDELSON: They had three children. And I was the first. Then my sister Jane and brother Alan. Jane has five children—five girls—and Alan adopted a girl, and he was a schoolteacher, and his wife was a schoolteacher as well. My sister did volunteer work like my mother did, but she was not—she was very busy with raising five kids [laughs]; that would describe her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you the only one who went to college of your siblings?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, my brother went to college; he taught school. My sister went for one year, dropped out, and got married, and started her family.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you began school, when did your interest in art develop? You know you talked about the church and the importance of that.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I became really interested in art by the time I was in fourth grade. And one of the reasons for that had to do with the fact that I was having a great deal of trouble learning to read. And in those days we didn't understand when a child wasn't learning to read what was going on. I had dyslexia. Almost everybody in my family has had a problem to one extent or another with dyslexia, including my own kids. And I was in—in those days they divided the classes into three sections: the top group, the middle group, and then there was that low group. And that low group usually had the immigrants who didn't speak English. But Mary Beth was also in that group [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's surprising how many artists I've spoken to this have this same story.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Same story.

JUDITH RICHARDS: About dyslexia.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And that's what pushed us into the visual. Because there we could be good, and there we could express ourselves and show we weren't the dummies that they were assuming we were. Because they didn't know how to deal with that then. And we knew —in my family many of the teachers went to the same church we went to. So they would have looked out carefully and helped me in a situation like that. And nobody could—they just couldn't teach me [laughs]. It's not that they didn't try. Eventually what you learn yourself is how to get around this kind of thing, how to use other tools. I still am a very slow reader, which is frustrating. But I get the information that I need, and I'm a decent writer. I've been amazed at how people I have met who have been dyslexic and how through the same processes of working very hard have overcome it and found other means to substitute for that. And how brilliant they become. Because you have to put out a very big effort [laughs] if the reading is slow.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. So around fourth grade you started to—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Around fourth grade I discovered that I was good at drawing and painting. I was getting positive attention through that. And I was getting negative attention in all these other subjects; because if you can't read, you can't do anything else.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Then I wanted to—by the time I got to be 11, 12, I wanted to take art lessons. I wanted to go into Chicago to the Art Institute [Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois] on Saturdays and take lessons. And I could do that by taking the South Shore train from East Chicago, an hour ride, by myself—you would never let a girl do that today—and go to the Art Institute. That put me into—not only that class—but being able to wander around

the museum. So I would take the class in the morning, and I would spend the afternoon wandering around the museum and looking at sometimes the same things over and over again. But I just loved to do it. And then I took the train back. I took as many art classes as I could. I was encouraged very much by the art teachers, of course. And would come in after school and work. My mother made a little studio for me in the basement, where we used to have a coal bin. And she cleaned that out and put something in there. And then an old set of my father's dental lights were put in there. So I had very good light in there. And I would go down there and work in my little studio. And I also discovered by early on that I liked to paint on the walls. So I began painting on the cinderblock walls of the basement that had been painted white; you know those were just solid painted. And as soon as I got a little older then, I—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Still in high school?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I would be junior high at that time and then, you know, I kept this studio. And then I continued taking the classes. This one teacher—we called her Johnnie, and she was a dramatics teacher—recognized the talent that I had. And she had me work on the flats, the stage design for almost all the productions. So that was wonderful for me because I then got to do just what I wanted to do in the basement with these larger productions. I learned how to project an image out into the audience from doing that. Because you can't do little wrist-like movements and expect anybody to see that for an audience. So I learned doing those flats, and I did—we probably had four productions a year. And I did a lot of those. So it was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you let out of academic classes to do that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs] Yes. Latin in particular I remember. Yes, I was.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that continued through high school?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, that continued through high school, yes, doing the stage flats. And I continued going to the Art Institute. And then I also was able to get a summer job there, and I could then take a class in the morning every day and work, do some work in the office, to pay for all of that. And just stayed there the whole summer.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember any particular works from the collection that were especially meaningful and interesting to you?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It was the [Henri] Matisses that always knocked my socks off. And one of the things I didn't pay attention to, the particular—I didn't even pretend—I didn't even pay attention to the name of the artist, let alone the names of the work. I could go back through a catalog of the Art Institute and pick works out and tell you which ones they were [laughs]. You know I know them by heart visually but not any other way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: That doesn't mean I couldn't remember that now. But, you know—And Matisse definitely influenced my early work. It was very clear.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It sounds like your parents—or at least your mother but maybe both—were supportive of this focus in those years.

MARY BETH EDELSON: They were very indifferent about it. They thought I should take piano lessons. And I kept saying, "I don't have any interest, nor am I talented in that direction." [Laughs] They bought me a piano anyway. Yes, it took some convincing. My father used to buy postcards of Leonardo da Vinci or something from the Renaissance and say, "Why don't you paint like this?" It's something I did on my own.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you—? So we get to around the early fifties— Well, I guess when you—that was around when you graduated high school.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm trying to think if you saw abstraction. I don't know how much of

it was in the—beyond Matisse—how much was in the Art Institute collection.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Abstract work?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or advanced.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Chicago is a very figurative-oriented place. And it was at that time. And a lot of the paintings were more figurative. And I think the artists that came out of Chicago school, not the Harry Hugh [sp] group that came later, but people like Leon Golub were strongly figurative people. So that's what I felt was strong there. And when I took the classes, even as a student, I was taking figure classes. So there would be a model to draw from.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And as you were finishing up high school, what were your ambitions at that point, beyond high school?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, to go to college. And I didn't even consider majoring in art because I felt I was already an artist. [Laughs] So there was no point in majoring in art. So I majored in philosophy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Even though you had these reading problems, you still got grades that were good enough to get into college?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. By that time I was overcoming it enough. Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how did you decide which college to go to?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, again, it had to do with the church. DePauw University [Greencastle, Indiana] is connected with the Methodist Church. It has a very high academic rating. It's in Indiana. It's a small liberal arts school. And that seemed to fit the bill. We didn't have a lot of schools coming to high schools and explaining their program and trying to proselytize for them to get the best students. That didn't happen in those days. So the dean of women took the women aside and talked to them about what colleges they might consider. And I think it was with her help that we focused in on this as being a good school. Now, they did not have a good art department. But I did get a good basic liberal arts education. I did end up majoring in art because everybody was saying this is ridiculous. You should be majoring in art. You spend all our time when you're not in classes on the art. So I finally realized, yes, I guess so. But I continued going in the summers to the Art Institute and getting art education from other places because I felt that what was offered at De Pauw was very limited at that time. It was a very small department. It ended up being the best choice because I got a good liberal arts education. Then I went on to do my master's degree at NYU [New York University, New York, New York].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you go straight from undergraduate to graduate school?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, I had a habit of getting married in those days. And I got—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about work in the summer, working during college, undergraduate. But go on.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, yes. Well, my senior year I got married.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the name of the man you married?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, number one was Dick Snider, Dr. Dick Snider—Richard Snider. He was a child psychologist.

JUDITH RICHARDS: S-N-Y-D-E-R?

MARY BETH EDELSON: S-N-I-D-E-R. And that lasted 18 months. No child. After that marriage ended, I wanted to go back to graduate school at that point. I was in Florida because he was —he was with ROTC when he was in college, which meant that he could, if he put in his service in the Air Force, then he would get to go to school, to graduate school, for free. So that was kind of his goal. But when the marriage ended, I just moved to New York City immediately and enrolled at NYU and then stayed in New York for—until I got married again. It's always gotten in my way, this was getting married thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have a place to say when you came to New York? That's a big move for someone to come to New York.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I did. One of the friends I had in college was moving to New York at the same time. And so the two of us, plus another roommate, got together, and we—none of knew what we were doing. But we rented a place, and we shared the rent.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where was that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: And that was on York Street in midtown.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where is York?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It's way over—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, York.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, it's way over—

JUDITH RICHARDS: East.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. And of course that was the wrong place for me to be. So I stayed there for about six months until I got to know other people. Obviously I needed to be downtown because I was going to NYU and downtown was the arts scene. So I found another roommate, after being in the city long enough, and moved down to Bank Street and then to Commerce Street with her. And taught at Montclair State College [Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey] when I graduated.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you got a master's degree at NYU?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: An M.F.A., was it, or M.A.?

MARY BETH EDELSON: M.A.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] In art?

MARY BETH EDELSON: In art.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Studio art.

MARY BETH EDELSON: In studio but also in higher education because I wanted to teach on the college level. I understood that unless I got some courses in higher education, I would never be hired at that time as a woman, unless I had gone out of my way to say, I have in addition to the master's degree, I have substantial credits in teaching in higher education situations.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was your experience in graduate school in terms of the teachers respecting you, approaching you, assuming that you would be an artist as a woman versus the male students in your class?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Actually that was not a problem because there were only about three or four of us that were there in the graduate school. Most of what they had was, it was actually—NYU, it was an odd situation. I didn't understand exactly what I was getting into. Most of the people were teachers who would come in and take courses that they needed to take to continue upgrading their level for teaching. So they would—this was like a commuter school for them. They weren't around. I mean they came in and took the class, and then they left. There were three or four of us that were actually graduate students who were there to be there full time. And so the faculty lavished attention to us, I have to say. I was clearly very serious, there all the time, in their face [laughs]. They were great! They were great. I know that so many women— And I experienced it later when I would teach. Sometimes I would be brought in because there were so many of these women students who were complaining about not getting the attention. So I would be the person they would bring in for a residency. Not to hire full time, mind you, but as a resident to try to make up for that lack of attention that they were getting. So I saw that over and over again in the seventies.

One of the ways that the schools got around hiring—actually hiring women teachers initially was to have us come and give a lecture or do a short residency, and then they could put our names on so it looked like we were part of the faculty. So they were able to come up with

their quota. And we realized we were being used that way. But at least it was some kind of a foot in the door. Almost every place that I'd go I would hear that complaint from the women, and I would spend as much time with them as I could. It was very, very demoralizing for them because the message was: "You aren't as good. What you have to say is not interesting." Yes. I really felt for them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So while you were registered, were you also engaged in activism, going back to the connection from the summer camp? Or was that before you—was that after you graduated?

MARY BETH EDELSON: During the time I was in graduate school, mostly I just worked in the studio.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you at a job to support yourself?

MARY BETH EDELSON: How did I make money? [Laughs] I didn't have any for one thing. I took little odd jobs here and there. But I wasn't working full time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: I did some teaching because if you were a full-time graduate student, you got some T.A. jobs. I got a little money that way. But, you know, lunch was going down and getting a bowl of soup and taking as many free crackers as you could. That was lunch. And that was sort of the way I—I got by just living on nothing. And of course I was sharing the apartment with other people, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So after you graduated—you graduated, and you stayed in New York.

MARY BETH EDELSON: When I graduated, I got married again.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I got married to a man who had just finished his law degree at NYU.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Doctors and lawyers.

[They laugh.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: It's all right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's his name?

MARY BETH EDELSON: His name was Jerry Strauss.

JUDITH RICHARDS: J-E-R-R-Y?

MARY BETH EDELSON: J, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Strauss with one S or two?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Two. And then I stayed married to him for five years. He was from Indiana, as it turned out. And I got taken back to Indiana [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were carried over his shoulder [laughs].

MARY BETH EDELSON: Dragged by my hair [laughs]. So I ended up being in Indianapolis for eight years. The first five years I was married to Jerry Strauss, and then that ended in divorce. I had a child, Lynn.

JUDITH RICHARDS: L-Y-N-N?

MARY BETH EDELSON: L-Y-N-N. Martha Lynn Strauss. I then married someone else. His name was Alfred H. Edelson. And I had a son with him named Nick Edelson.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why did you—? Oh, you changed your name each time you were married? Okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs] I had something—I'll never get over it—happen as a result

of all of this stuff. Once I was no longer married to Al Edelson and not under the protection of a man, which is what you had to be in those days, Jerry Strauss legally kidnapped my daughter from me, and I never got her back. He was a lawyer. There was a judge in Indianapolis who favored his law firm. And I was told—you know there was just no chance. He was going to get her, and he was going to keep her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You'd think that they would favor the mother for a daughter.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, this was at a point where all of this was changing because this was when the feminist movement was beginning to be felt.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What year was this?

MARY BETH EDELSON: This was the beginning—this was 1972. And they—the general feeling, as I perceived it, was that we were extremely threatening. We were all lesbians. We were all anti-feminine, all anti-family. We were all anti the values that America stood for. And therefore taking a child away from us and giving that child to a man who's a lawyer, a prominent citizen in Indianapolis, was a very logical thing for them to do. And that's the basic reason. Although they used other reasons. My lawyer told me that the judge seeing him in the bank afterwards, you know, just shrugged his shoulders and said, "You know a child will be better off with a lawyer than they would be with an artist."

JUDITH RICHARDS: How old was your daughter at that point?

MARY BETH EDELSON: She was nine. We were extremely close, and it was just terrible for her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you see her on a regular basis after that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Very seldom. He made the restrictions, and the judge upheld them on this: that I had to come to Indianapolis. I had to rent a motel room and see my daughter in the motel room, and they could come at any time and check on what I was doing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that was 'til she was 18 when she could make her own choices?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, no. She wasn't—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Until. That would be the restrictions 'til she was 18. That was nine years.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. She went to college, and they sent her to— First they were going to keep her in Indianapolis and have her go just to the—now what do they call them, the satellite schools?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Community college?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Like community college attached to Indiana University. I said, "If you do that, I'm going to do everything I can to take this child away from you. You get her a good education." So also some other things that happened, that they didn't want to take a chance at that point. As soon as she got out of school, out of college, she hightailed it back to New York and to me and lived here with me. And we've never—we had a good relationship through all of this, but it is a heartache because I didn't get to raise her during those years, and she missed being with me during those years. It was really an evil time, the way the government, the law was treating women and feminists. I wasn't the only one that this happened to. Phyllis Chesler wrote a book called *Mothers on Trial* [Seattle, Washington: Seal Press, 1987]. And I'm one of the case studies in that book. But it's just one case after another of women who had their children taken away from them, around this same kind of issue of trying to push women down at that point and being very aggressive about it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you were married to Alfred Edelson, and you had a son, Nick.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you stayed in Indianapolis still working as an artist.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: After the divorce.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. During all of this, I never stopped making art. I made art, and I exhibited art during all of this. I had a show at the— I hate to get off on this stuff about my daughter, I get so emotional about it. I have a hard time pulling myself back [inaudible]. We're talking about my art now. I did have a show at the Indianapolis Museum [Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana] and at the Hearn Gallery. And when I was married to Alfred Edelson, Al Edelson, who was really a good man, he opened a gallery because we didn't have any galleries there. And he was part of—he was really a big-time maker-shaker guy. He ran for Congress.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was his profession?

MARY BETH EDELSON: He was the CEO of a company, and it was Rytex; it was stationery that he produced. It was the kind of job, as a CEO, that he had time to do a lot of community and political work, which he did. He was very interested in politics. He was the man, the sort of kingmaker behind a number of politicians. He was the guy that would be like [David] Axelrod is now. He helped dress them, help write their speeches, help do— Because his training had been in advertising, so he understood advertising, how to promote, how to sell things. So he applied that to politics and to various candidates. He helped Birch Bayh get in, who was the son of Evan who is still in the Senate.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Evan [Bayh] is the son of Birch.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. And ran for Congress, as I said, himself. He didn't win. So he was deeply involved with that, and also he helped to create Eagle Creek Park, which is an enormous park in the Indianapolis area. And it's big enough for horseback riding and, you know, sports. He was primary behind, doing that, those endeavors. His company failed, partly because his brother died a few years before, and the brother took care of one aspect of the company while he ran off and did all of his—things he wanted to do. And when the brother wasn't there, [laughs] nobody was minding the shop. And so, yes. He moved in—we moved in—from Indianapolis to Washington, DC. And of course that put me closer to New York again. And I had a good gallery in Washington, the Henri Gallery, H-E-N-R-I. And Henri was just a wonderful character and gave me a number of shows and helped me build a reputation in Washington.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So what years did you live in Washington?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I moved to Washington in '69—well, it was right at the end of '69. And I stayed there 'til '75, which is the time when I came to New York.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you were in Indianapolis from—you said eight years.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So '61 to '69 approximately.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you built a reputation with your work.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I built a reputation there. And the most important thing that I did when I was there, however, was to help create the first National Conference for Women in the Visual Arts. And that was held at the Corcoran Gallery. And the office for that was in my home. And we spent six months working really hard—and by we I mean the steering committee that put it together. And that included Josephine Withers. And actually I can give you the names of all those people. Easier if you look at it and get the spellings. There are the names--

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay. Cynthia Bickley-Green, you, Barbara Frank. Enid—Sanford.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Sanford. Enid Sanford was married at that time to a very wealthy man, the Cafritz Family in Washington, DC.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Cafritz?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Cafritz. C-A-F-R-I-T-Z. They gave us some grant money to help produce the conference. And Josephine Withers is a prominent art historian. So we had a fairly good group working on it. And the conference was held in the auditorium of the

Corcoran Gallery for three days. And it was the first time that women on the East Coast and the West Coast had met each other. And if you flip through the program, you can see we got—we got almost everybody there. We had Alice Neel and Marcia Tucker.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was really an historic moment.

MARY BETH EDELSON: An historical moment. Very historic, yes. And after I did this, I was invited by the Smithsonian to do a conference for the Smithsonian, which was not as far-reaching as this one was. But it was more for the community of Washington, DC, and New York City. This was a national, truly national conference. As a result of this conference, many women began networking on a much greater level because the exchanges of names and addresses and phone numbers, you know, was constant during the conference, as well as the exchange of ideas and formulating what we were doing and formulating issues. An article was written by Cindy Nemser about this in *Art in America*. So it made a strong impression. And what it did to me personally is I got a chance to meet the women in New York City. So that made it possible for me—if I could find a way to move back to New York, I would be able to move back into a community of people that I knew. And so that began to be my goal.

Now, in Washington I exhibited quite a bit at the Corcoran and, as I've mentioned, Henri. And did a lot of lecturing. It was a good time for me. I did a major exhibition called "22 Others" in 1972 [sic] [1973, Henri Gallery, Washington, DC]. In part I had this enormous energy behind this exhibition because of the fact that my daughter had been taken away from me. And I was so distraught that the only thing that just kept me going was making art 12 hours a day so I just could keep it out of my mind by putting my mind totally on art.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where was that exhibition?

MARY BETH EDELSON: That exhibition was at the Henri Gallery. And what I did for that exhibition was ask 22 people—it was called "22 Others"—I asked 22 people to come to my studio and suggest an artwork they would like to see me produce. And the only stipulation I gave was that they should not suggest a painting. Because I had been a painter, and I wanted—I decided painting was a bad habit, and that I should stop this bad habit. [Laughs] And I wanted to get into other, more conceptual areas of art making. Of course the whole idea behind "22 Others" was a conceptual idea. So that was one of the reasons that I was able to focus so strongly on each one of these pieces, because it was a challenge to do what they asked me to do because I wasn't working in a medium that I was familiar with. So I had to learn quite a few new techniques and skills, as well as think through, well, what does this mean? And what are the implications?

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's almost going back to school and having 22 teachers giving you projects.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Giving you projects, exactly. Now the other thing that this is connected with is that I was also involved in Washington, DC, in the Jungian Seminar. Now this was not something I signed up for in a class. This was a group that was formed by a couple of professors that wanted to have a discussion around [Carl] Jung that involved people in different fields. You know like six or seven people who would come together regularly and speak about how Jung impacts in their field or how those issues might be stretched or utilized in their field. So I was the artist that they asked to join the group. And that was as a result of one of the exhibitions that they had seen—a painting exhibition—and they were able to interpret a great deal of Jungian symbolism in that that I was completely unaware of. It was in there; it was just the way I painted. So they found that fascinating. And so I became part of that group.

What interested me the most about Jung was his theory of the collective unconscious, which is extremely difficult to understand and to really get a hold of what this means. So I decided I would experiment with that in relationship to the "22 Others" exhibition, and try to take my conscious, the conscious of the other person, and come up with a third conscious. And that third conscious would be what I would make the artwork out of. Now this is not only extremely ambitious and way, way out there [laughs]. But it's probably impossible. Anyway, it worked in relationship to providing me with a great deal of creative energy. To that extent I was able to tap into the collective unconscious. Not with all of them, because some of the suggestions just didn't resonate with me. But with a good many of them. That exhibition then just opened up the doors for me. Because what I did after that was follow up on all of

those suggestions, the ones that I felt had truly had something to say to me but also were open-ended for other explorations.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Could you mention a couple of examples of those assignments or suggestions?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, yes. One of them came from Ed McGowan. And he said, "Think about organized religion, and think of the most negative aspect of organized religion." Now people would make these suggestions because they knew I was already interested, you know, in an area. So he said, "Then produce something that makes the philosophical social implications of the piece very obvious." So that was the suggestion. And these are the best kind of suggestions, where they didn't try to tell me paint this leaf and make it green—or something like that [laughs]. I only got one suggestion with that kind of literal—well, whatever. What I did for this particular suggestion about the negative aspects of organized religion was I began to think for me the most negative aspect is the way they cut women out of positions of authority and power. And so I ultimately decided to take the famous iconic image of the *Last Supper* [Leonardo da Vinci, 1495-98]and cut out all those male heads and put all women artists' heads in the piece [*Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper*, 1971]. And of course that is the work that I'm the best known for. And that poster—collage poster—has literally been reproduced around the world. And has recently been purchased by the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA, New York, New York], along with others—I ended up doing a series of five posters using that same kind of theme. And they purchased all five of them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what year did you make that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: The first one was in '72. I started working on it in '71 and then actually reprinted it in '72. And the other ones I did when I came to New York, and that was in '76. The first one was in '72. Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mentioned earlier that you wanted to talk about the importance of collaboration in the women's movement. But this was an extremely collaborative concept to begin with that you proposed for that exhibition.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I was interested in participation. I started being very interested in '72 in that. And one of the other pieces that came out of the "22 Others" exhibition was a suggestion that Walter Hopps gave me. And he said, again, he was relating to a religious— He wanted me to do something that was like the Greek, often they were Greek— There's a particular name for them, and it's not coming to me. Like these little altars that you open up that like have iconic images of Mary or Jesus or whatever. He wanted me to take that idea of being able to unfold this so you didn't see it all at once. But that it would gradually reveal itself to you. And to make something that was, you know, fairly profound out of that. And that's how I ended up with the story-gathering boxes. And those boxes initially had wooden tablets in them. The box itself is made—patterned—off of Egyptian Coptic box in which they put the organs of the pharaoh in those boxes and buried them with them. But the configuration and scale of the box is just the same as that configuration. So I put into the boxes these wooden tablets and then painted and drew on those. And the only way you could see them was by flipping through the tablet. So it would reveal to you what was in the box as you went along. But you could never see the whole thing at one time. And also I was assuming that the viewer would get something different out of it because he didn't see it all at once.

So that was the original idea for the story-gathering box. Which then very quickly— So that had a participatory element in it. But then it became even more participatory in that I took the wooden tablets ultimately from that production and put paper tablets in and stamped topics on the paper tablets, asking people to write on those subjects. For example, what did your mother teach you about men? What did your mother teach you about women? What did your father teach you about men? What did your father teach you about women? And you had four compartments in there with one related question in each compartment. And the visitor was invited to take a card out and write on the card on the subject, put it back in the box, and leave it there for other people to read. I've collected over 3,000 stories over the years—not just with the set of questions I gave just now. But I would have—each exhibition that I had, I would have a box and a topic relating to that exhibition that would be reflected on the cards and ask people to, in a sense, to be part of the exhibition.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think of that piece as a cumulative, that it's one big piece that's continually being, having pieces, parts added to it?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, yes. I mean it can't—it's shown as only one box at a time. Except I had a show [*Story Gathering* Boxes, 1978] at Franklin Furnace [New York, New York] when they had all of the boxes out. But I have many more boxes since—that was way back in the seventies—since that time. But I almost never have an exhibition without at least one of those boxes in them. And that did several things: They're shown on a table with a stool. The person can participate, add their ideas. But it also gives them a place to sit. And so often the gallery is saying, you know, Come, look, and get out. You know it can be a very cold atmosphere. You can't linger there. This changes that, this disrupts that moment. So that you can actually sit there. And if it's—and sometimes there's more than one stool. So people will congregate around those boxes, write their stories, and then continue to have a discussion.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there other artists working either in the U.S. or abroad who you knew of, whose work you knew of, who were also creating participatory pieces that you felt—I mean was this—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Nobody's asked me that question. Not off the top of my head. I mean this was sort of something about galleries that annoyed me, myself, when I would go, that there was no place to sit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And that the artist and the gallery situation seemed to be saying, We are the authorities, and you're just coming here to admire what we've done. And I just wanted to disrupt that. So that came from a very general genuine feeling on my part to change that attitude. There were many, many artists after I did that, that were influenced by that. Yes, many. And many variations on it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This might be a good point to change the disc.

[END OF CD 1.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Beth Edelson on February 1, 2009, disc two.

So you were talking about moving to New York—back to New York.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, that marriage ended, and I was in Washington, DC, at that time. And my goal, of course, was to get back to New York City. And having all these people that I met at the Conference of Women in the Visual Arts, that I could—and continued networking with—made it much easier. I mean I was able to hit the ground running, so to speak. And especially, I thought, the appropriate thing for me to do when I got to New York City was to apply at A.I.R. Gallery [New York, New York]. So I did that actually before I left DC. I was immediately accepted. So I was a member of it when I arrived in June of 1975 in New York, and I had an exhibition at A.I.R. the following September. So I just came and immediately got into what was going on within the feminist movement, as well as the art world. And A.I.R. was really the community center in SoHo at that time because there was no other space especially for women that you could come in, you could hang out, you could get information, you could come for lectures, you could come for panels. There were some nights that were open slide nights, and people would bring their slides. And whoever brought their slides, you know, they would share it with whoever else showed up.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did all the members participate in the running of it?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And contribute financially to the overhead?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Absolutely. You were not a member if you didn't do that. That we had to sit at the gallery, and we contributed. Nobody in those days had any money. And we didn't sell anything out of A.I.R. So this was not easy for the women to do. And we were all—we had part-time jobs. Some of us had families. We worked in our studios, prepared the exhibitions, run the gallery [laughs]. Run the feminist movement. It was a wonderful and

exhausting time. Not only when I came to New York did I get involved with A.I.R., but *Heresies* magazine very soon began to formulate that collective. That group was an extremely bright, interesting, together group of women. And Joan Braderman and one of the members of *Heresies* is now in the process of putting together a videotape [The Heretics, 2009]—a film actually because she's a filmmaker, a very good filmmaker—of the Heresies Collective. The original collective in talking to us about those days but also what we have done since then. Because almost to the woman everyone has become very successful in the Heresies Collective.

It was started by—or instigated by—Lucy Lippard. And that, of course, encouraged more of the women who were really very busy with other things to come in and be part of something that she was really standing behind. It was important in those days to have someone who protected you because women didn't have much protection. We didn't have—if we got ourselves out there on a limb, we could just as easily fall, unless there was someone who could back you up. And Lucy Lippard was that kind of person.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What kind of out-on-a-limb would you—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Hmmm?

JUDITH RICHARDS: For example, what kind of activity would put you on a limb?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, if you think about what the Guerrilla Girls did, for example, with those posters that they put on the streets that were very aggressive, they didn't let anybody know who they were. And that was part of the power you could then imagine, that there were all these powerful women behind them. If you didn't have that kind of situation, then if you did something that offended the art world in some way, they would like very much to punish you for that and make it clear to you that they didn't want you to behave this way and didn't want you to do this. And didn't want you to be so blunt about what your issues were.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: You can look at what happened to the women in the seventies, and you can see that we got punished because we did not—those of us who were very active, our careers did not really take off in ways that they would have and should have, and especially those of us who were the most outspoken.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you mean that you didn't gain gallery representation? By your careers not taking off, you certainly had exhibitions. But do you mean you weren't taken on by major galleries who would promote your work in a—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Very few of the women were taken on by major galleries, and those were mostly women who were not that active.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And that was, do you think, because of your actions or because they didn't think they could sell your work or that you weren't doing traditional work?

MARY BETH EDELSON: They said to— What I would hear all the time is that, "Mary Beth, you don't make work for the market. Your work isn't saleable." Well, that's just nonsense.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because you could think of male artists who were similarly—

MARY BETH EDELSON: I mean [laughs] you start comparing it to the male artists, what they were doing, yes, obviously. But even if you didn't do that, just on the face of it, it was a crazy thing to say. I could take them in my studio, and I'd say, "What about these photographs are not saleable? These are extremely saleable." I did have someone say to me one time, "But the problem is—"This was a woman who bought art for corporations; she was in my studio. She said, "The problem is it's from a woman's point of view, and they don't want that." I thought that was really interesting that she would just come right out and say it, and that she was aware of what she had to buy had to reflect a male point of view. So in just so many little subtle ways, that you didn't get invited to be— Well, let's take—there was a drawing show that we protested against at the Museum of Modern Art. Women do a lot of drawings. This was—oh, what was her name, curated this— Rose?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Bernice Rose?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Bernice Rose, I think it was. And there were no women in that exhibition. It was an outrage. There's a photograph in my book of Nancy Spero and myself.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Along with a bunch of other people. Protesting the Museum of Modern Art for that. But they knew who was protesting. I mean they knew who was making the trouble. And the museums in particular were very offended when we came and picketed them. And the general message went out that if you continue doing that, you would not succeed in getting into the museum. On the other hand, when we were not picketing, the percentage of women in the exhibitions dropped.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there women dealers who were in any way better at presenting women's work?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Not at that time. Not in the seventies. I would say no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Not until later.

MARY BETH EDELSON: There were women you would think would be really looking out for us, but they didn't. I mean even somebody like Howardena Pindell, who was at the Museum of Modern Art, and she was in A.I.R., I think she got the museum to buy one of Carla Coe's drawings. I don't know anything else that she did for any of the other ones. Then she became an artist herself, and I think the light bulb went on in her head [laughs]: This is not so easy. She was a little sorry after that. But, you know, I would say that the women who were in those positions were afraid that their boards would think they were favoring women. So they went out of their way not to do that, to be sure that they were representing the men, and they would not be interpreted in that way. That's what it seemed. You never knew for sure exactly what was going on behind those closed doors. But we were not getting exhibited. We were not getting purchased. We were not being able to build the kind of reputation you need to have your work go to auction and get a price at auction. So that changed then at a point when they began showing younger women; completely jumped over the seventies group of women and went into a younger generation of women. And I think now with this "WACK!" exhibition ["WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," traveling exhibition], it has come back finally to looking at the works that we did and seeing this fabulous, fabulous show that Connie did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Connie [Constance] Butler.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, Connie Butler. And you could see that the stereotypes that so many people had slathered all over the feminist movement were not true. And you could see that certain people that they felt dominated the artwork did not dominate it—did not, and were not the best artists. And there were all these other wonderful, wonderful women who were there who got some recognition, but nothing like the kind of recognition that they should've gotten. So I think that this "WACK!" show is opening things up. There has been a difference for me. The Museum of Modern Art buying five works for one thing. But I've had a spate of other shows that I normally wouldn't be invited into, have happened since then. But I've been working very hard on my own career in the meantime. In the nineties, building up from the nineties to 2000, I had a retrospective ["A Life Well Lived, A Survey of Mary Beth Edelson's Work"] in 2006 at the Malmö Konstmuseum in Sweden. And then most of that exhibition went to the Migros Museum ["It Is Time for Action (There Is No Option)", 2006, Zurich, Switzerland], where Heike Munder is the director there. And that was a very good showing. I had two huge rooms. It was a group show of five women. But the museum is so large, that it was like almost the same amount of space I had for the retrospective.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Going back to your showing at A.I.R.—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you want to take up from there and talk about the work that you were doing in—

MARY BETH EDELSON: In A.I.R.?

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the seventies. Or maybe you're up to 1975, so the second half of the seventies. And the work with women's movement.

MARY BETH EDELSON: The artwork that I was producing in the seventies fell in a number of categories. I've already mentioned the collage posters and the story-gathering boxes. I was also doing a great deal of photographic work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know what that little buzz is? Oh, it's your watch [laughs].

MARY BETH EDELSON: It's 12 [laughs]. The photographic work that I was doing—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Excuse me. Oh, it went off.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Fell in two categories. One category was to photograph my nude body in nature, and then I would paint or draw a collage on top of that. Now my reason for using my body in that way was to make a declaration of my own sexual independence. The poses I took were not coquettish, they were not necessarily flattering. You could not possibly confuse them with images that would create desire in men. Quite the opposite. So I say that to separate what I was doing with my body from what some of the other women who were doing these body performance works in the early seventies. I used—after I photographed myself—I zeroed in on three or four of the images that I used repeatedly to draw on top of. And what I was doing each time was projecting a different kind of identity onto the woman. Using the same pose but a different identity. And playing with how that changed even if the figure was the same—and how far I could push that.

I then after working with the nude body, I did a complete reversal and decided to cover my body. And I covered my body with transparent cloth, and it would cover from head to toe. And mostly what I was interested in when I did that, was taking these time-release photographs and have my body be a movement within the exhibition—I'm sorry, within the photograph. So that in some ways it had some filmic reference to it because I often did this series of photographs that would be three images that you would look at, and something different would happen in each of the images. They would transform from one situation to another situation. So something was happening between the first and the last image. And using the cloth over the body helped with that visual flow in a literal sense.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did this relate to film?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. I think they definitely did relate to like a film clip.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And these were black and white. I used a Hasselblad for all of this camera work. I set it up on a tripod, put it on time-release, and got in front of the camera myself. So I was able to set the time-release for different times. So I had the time to get myself into position and do what I wanted to do. The other thing I did for those covered bodyworks is I limited myself to taking one sheet, one roll of 120 film, which is just 12 shots. I didn't want to do what is so tempting if you're using 35 mm; you have 35 photographs. I didn't want a huge number of photographs. I wanted to focus myself on what I wanted. And I tried to get in most of them—most of the images related to some kind of trancelike or shamanic-like state during that time. So I was meditating and getting myself into some kind of state before I did them. So I didn't want it just to keep going on and on and on. I wanted to do what I knew I wanted to do in front of the camera and to communicate what was on my mind for that particular piece. Something else I wanted to say about that. It's gone out of my mind.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was going to ask you how you— At what point did you determine, at the beginning or as you were going along, the different realities you were putting on top of the photograph that you used? You used these images repeatedly, but drew on them and painted. Did you just predetermine what those variations would be? Or did they just come one after the next?

MARY BETH EDELSON: When I painted or drew or collaged on them, I did not predetermine. The photograph after the fact, after it was printed—and I would print maybe ten of those at a time—I would respond then to the idea that I had toward— And I wouldn't sit down and do ten at a time. I would sit down and do one. And then that one would ferment a bit, and I would get another notion about what I might want to do to the next. So those ten might be

around for six months before—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Those photograph were taken outdoors. And why did you decide outdoors rather than inside?

MARY BETH EDELSON: That's a good question. And I think that indoors the body becomes something totally different. It's confined when it's indoors. And it has the set—whatever the indoor setting is, it gives, it determines more than I wanted it to determine. Nature is a more neutral palette. The other thing I was thinking about at that time was the timelessness of nature. And that appealed to me with some of the images to be— to be in this free-floating past, present, future timeframe and not say this is about this moment and this time. This is not registering what's happening in this time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At that point in New York, artists and performers—dancers, musicians, choreographers—were closer than they are now. And your work was somewhat performative.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have relationships and even collaborations or just were you involved in terms of being friends with these artists in more performance—who were working in the area of performance in some way?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Not really. When I did the first body, naked body, works in '73, I was at Outer Banks, North Carolina. I was still living in Washington, DC. So all I would have would be what I might see in a magazine. There were no performance artists in DC, and there were no performance artists in A.I.R. So I wasn't in contact there. Where I would get contact with performance was in this building. And this building is 110 Mercer, and next door is 112 Mercer. And we in both buildings bought the building ourselves in the seventies when it was very cheap and really cruddy [laughs]. Nothing in it, no plumbing, no electricity, nothing. And fixed up these buildings over time. Now, there are several performance artists in these two buildings.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But when you were doing it, you were really—

MARY BETH EDELSON: When I originally did it and started this series in Washington, DC, I was completely isolated from any contact.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: At all.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it must have been quite a revelation later when you learned of the other artists who were working in somewhat similar ways. Like Ana Mendieta and—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Ana Mendieta!

JUDITH RICHARDS: —later.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I was a mentor to her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs] So she would not have influenced. She was a—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right, right. I know.

MARY BETH EDELSON: People get that a little confused sometimes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, I know by the dates you were talking about and other artists who saw those works. When did you show that series of photographs?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I showed them in—well, depending on which ones you're talking about—the ones I did in Washington, DC, I showed in Washington, DC. I also showed was in an exhibition at A.I.R. in 1973 before I moved to New York, and I showed some of them at that time. And some of them were reproduced—they were reproduced in magazines when I was still in Washington. I also put together and distributed it myself because I understood

that I couldn't wait for somebody else to do this stuff for me; I had to do it myself. So I put together this little book.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is a pamphlet called *Woman Rising*.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That you put out in 1975.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And that is from—

JUDITH RICHARDS: With one of your works on the cover.

MARY BETH EDELSON: This is work from '72 to '75. And has some of the photo performance pieces in the back if you keep going. I was pretty good about sending my flyers around to people and getting these— Now this is—what the women artists did in those days is they had to take it upon themselves to get their work out. So we would send slides, sheets of slides, around to each other all the time. And then incorporate each other's work in our own slideshows. You know that was the only way we were able to get out what we did. And then of course Lucy Lippard had many, many slides of all of ours. She had something like three to four slide sheets of mine that she used alternately in her lectures. And she was going around the country from the early seventies forward showing this work everywhere. That would have been the first time that Anna would've seen the work that I did. She had presented a lecture in Iowa [at the University of Iowa, Iowa City].

JUDITH RICHARDS: In Iowa.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. She was also influenced by Hans Breder, her teacher, who did a lot of work in that vein. Yes. The reason I was patting you on the leg is that so many people think that because she died in '83 [sic] [1985], don't realize how young she was then and how old I was at that time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: So that there would be no [laughs] from the chronological—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, as you clarified that you were in Washington, you were doing this on your own in the early seventies. Yes, it's very clear.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. So most of that kind of bodywork, that was all done before I came to New York City. Then I continued on with the covered bodywork when I got to New York. But I was dependent on being in a very beautiful setting in nature to do those pieces. So I always did them in the summer. We would go up to Maine in the summer, and I could always find—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where in Maine?

MARY BETH EDELSON: We went up to Port Clyde, Maine.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you spend many summers there?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] We built a place, bought a piece of land, and built a place with our bare hands.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's with—

MARY BETH EDELSON: That's with Bob Stackhouse and my kids. Yes, we built it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there other artists around there, or were you really—took a break from the art world in the summer?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, we got up to Maine— The reason we went up there to start with is the Corcoran Gallery wanted to have a summer program, and they sent some of the teachers up to produce that summer program. So went up there and liked that area. And then wanted to find a place that we could up there on our own. And land and everything was extremely cheap at that time. So we bought two acres of land that you could see water from the land. So it was really—it was a little bit too low, a little bit too wet [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs] You should compromise.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, you dig a lot of ditches, and water seeps into them. Yes. Those summers were very, very productive and in relationship to creating the black-and-white photograph pieces with the covered body.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: The other thing that I— The way I really spend most of my time is drawing. And before that time, as I indicated, I was a painter. And I stopped painting throughout the seventies. And then the beginning of the eighties I decided I should try it again. So I painted a little bit for that time, and then I abandoned it again, and then— It seems every decade, you know, I do another batch again, and then I stop doing it. My most recent batch came as a result of an idea that I had, and it really was a conceptual idea [*Portrait Behind the Desk* "*Performative Portraits,*" 2005]. And the most expedient way to do it was through painting. I observed that in film and television programs, you often saw a man sitting at a desk, an important man, with a portrait of another important man behind him. And that that men gave some authority, that portrait gave some authority to the man. But you never saw a woman sitting at a desk with a woman behind her doing the same thing. And what was interesting to me about that kind of observation is that there are so many layers that we've still not penetrated, analyzing what in our culture suggests this is appropriate for us as women and this is not appropriate. What things still need to be pointed out and broken through. So I decided to ask a hundred of my best friends [laughs]—

JUDITH RICHARDS: All women?

MARY BETH EDELSON: All feminine. If they had a portrait behind their desk, who would they put behind their desk? So I got responses from—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they could already have a portrait and tell you.

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, nobody had a portrait.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, I see.

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs] No, what it was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your pretend office, your pretend desk.

MARY BETH EDELSON: If you have a desk, and if you would have a portrait behind that desk, who would you want to have that portrait? So I collected a goodly number of names. And they also sometimes would tell me why they selected the person. But I had committed myself to paint those paintings. I didn't make any selection at all about what I was going to choose. It was all selected by other women. And I got [laughs] back to painting 30 of those portraits. It was so much fun! I really enjoyed it because there was something about having a clear assignment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the scale, and what was the kind of paint you used?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, the paintings were about 30 by 40. And then I have some that are larger that I actually have not painted yet, but I have them sketched out. And fortunately I had a residency at Yaddo [Saratoga Springs, New York]. To do those paintings, you really just need no telephones ringing, no emails to answer. You really need to concentrate on it. So what I set was—as my parameters for doing this—is since I hadn't painted for a long time, I could paint any way I wanted to. So I decided that I wanted to take the framework that this film group in Sweden that's called Dogme 95, the parameters they give themselves for making films, which is to do it absolutely straightforward, not be able to bring any gimmicks into it, not to use any— When they are filming, they allow one lamp and one extension cord, and they can't bring anything else to the site. They have to use what is there. And everything is just to be very, very straightforward. So I tried to apply that. And they had this list of vows that you had to take about what you could and couldn't do in the filmmaking. So I made a list of vows about what I was going to do and what I was not going to do when I was painting, and applied all this that they had formulated to painting. So the painting— The way I painted them was very straightforward—to look like them, not to have any reference to any other genres or any, you know, fancy techniques. Just to be really straightforward. So I had, as I've mentioned—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Using oil?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Acrylic?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Acrylic. But I used this particular kind of acrylic, Lascaux. It's made in France, and it has a different surface to it. And I really like what it does. It's got a—I don't know, it just works well. I seem to be able to manipulate it pretty well. And it's flatter in a lot of ways. I like flat. So I was not trying to make the image look like it was popping out of the frame [laughs]. It was more to make a frame—I mean make the image and to put a frame on it that was very important, a big, heavy, gold frame that had carving on it. I had to order to frames from China.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The person who suggested—one of your hundred people who suggested who should be behind them—they didn't supply you with the image.

MARY BETH EDELSON: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it was up to you to think about what age this person would be depicted at, what they would be wearing.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Everything, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Everything.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And often they didn't even know much about the person. I had to research who is this person? Find them. And if they were dead, there was no chance of my taking a photograph of them. So I had to rely on existing photographs. In some cases I have photographs that I had taken—like Louise Bourgeois, I've taken some good photographs of Louise. So I could use that photograph, and I think that turned out to be the best of the portraits. I also wanted the heavy frame on it because that relates back to the importance that the original idea was trying to endow portrait painting with. Yes. So that was fun to do. I showed that group then at Malmö Konstmuseum. Then I added not only that, but a performative element to it for the opening of the exhibition. The museum had a number of beautiful desks in their collection. So I used the desks, two of the desks—three of the desks—that they had in their collection, and put portraits behind those desks. So at the opening we invited people who wanted to sit at the desk, to select a portrait they'd like to be photographed with, and they were photographed with their portrait at the opening. And then we sent them a copy of the image. So people were lined up, of course, to do this. So it added a performative element to the piece, to have people participate in that manner.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You made 30 portraits?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you include who suggested it on the wall?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, let me show you—maybe I should get that. I have made a little book that sat with the exhibition that people could pick up. And that little booklet told about the person who selected it, why they selected them if they gave me a reason, and then it gave a little biography on the person that they selected. Because a number of the people were not known. I'd never heard of them, so that was the case with other people as well. What was difficult sometimes was to find a good image of people who were not that well known. And I also discovered if someone wanted me to paint their mother, that that didn't work out very well because they thought they had good pictures of their mother, but they didn't. And I couldn't use them. And also, it was hard for me to— When I was painting them, I was trying to get—I was trying to talk to them, have a dialog with: Who is this woman? What she did, why she did it, what her life was. I was talking to that painting. And the painting would kind of talk back to me and indicate who they were. And then that's what went in to painting it. And somehow I couldn't do that process with other people's mothers. There wasn't enough—they didn't have enough personal history? I'm not sure what it was. It just didn't work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: The only one that worked was Janet Henry gave me a picture of her mother, and I spent two days trying to get into it, and I couldn't get into it. And finally I noticed that the shape of her mother's eye was a little bit like Nefertiti. And that was my in. So I began thinking of this woman in those terms. So I painted her in a very Nefertiti-esque manner. And she wasn't part of the other—the rest of the exhibition. I gave her—it was so specific to Janet. Janet wanted a picture of her mother [laughs]. And she's a best friend of mine, so I gave it to her. Yes. So now what they do with that painting is they rotate it among their relatives. And one relative has it for one year, and another has it for another year. So it has a nice life.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you want to talk about your work, your feminist work in the seventies before we leave the seventies?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or other aspects of your artwork in the seventies. Or do you think we've covered what you want to cover?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I think pretty much. I could add— In A.I.R., I felt I contributed a good deal to that organization and the importance of that gallery to the community in particular. And along with Daria Dorsch, we started several programs. One was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Daria Dorosh?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Dorsch.

JUDITH RICHARDS: D-O-R-S-H?

MARY BETH EDELSON: D-O-R-S-C-H. [sic] Yes. We started the National Affiliate Group which invited women from around the country to submit slides and become part of our National Affiliate. And they would have a group show once a year. They would also be able to have their books at the gallery. So if someone came to New York and was interested in looking them up, they could go to the gallery and do that. So we started that program. That kind of outreach, inclusive outreach community program is the sort of thing I've always been interested in. Then we did another one that was called "One on One." And that consisted of having a bowl on the desk at the gallery. And you could put your name in there if you were interested in participating in this. Names were drawn, and the selection was that way. But we had each year from five to eight well-known art critics, art writers, who were paid and agreed to be part of the program. And they would give one person whose name was drawn a critique for an hour on their work. And they could show them slides, or they would go to their studio.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mmmm. [Affirmative.] Great.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And they would get an opportunity that they would not get otherwise to get a real professional critique from somebody who was in the field working at the time. So that was the "One on One" program. And it was very democratic because it was just pulled out of the drawer.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You wanted to talk about the international nature of [inaudible].

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes. That group—well, what happened immediately in the feminist movement, some of us who thought in terms of how broad this was and how it impacted in the United States and, you know, different areas of this country; but how it went into Canada, it went into Europe. I was particularly interested in collaborating with women in Europe and getting to know women in Europe. At A.I.R. these women would come to visit New York. They would go to A.I.R. I met two of them that way: Nil Yalter and Miriam Sharon.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Can you spell these?

MARY BETH EDELSON: N-I-L Y-A-L— No, that's not right. I can give you all these. I'm not very good at spelling.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. Miriam you said Sharon?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, Sharon. I'll give you the names of all—I'll show you the little book that I made of it. And through those two, we got together five different women from

four different countries. So it was Suzanne Lacy from the West Coast, me from the East Coast, Miriam Sharon from Israel. Nil Yalter lived in Paris, but she was born in Egypt, and she was raised in Turkey. And then the fifth person was Ulrike Rosenbach who is German. So there were five of us, and there are three different religions: We have Jew, Christian, and Muslim within that group. And we began corresponding. And we wanted to form an international group, an international collaborative group to support each other and to see if we could put together a project that we could do together. So we were brainstorming through our correspondence about what it is we might want to do. And it was very interesting correspondence because like, you know, Ulrike Rosenbach couldn't get past the fact that more of the letters were coming from Americans. She said: You Americans are so imperial. You now are trying to dominate this whole thing. So we had to go through all that kind of stuff. We say, Okay, you write then! [Laughs] You make suggestions. So it was really—it was a very give-and-take. So we finally worked out, worked things out together. Then we have a meeting in Paris. And at that meeting, we were—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What year was this about?

MARY BETH EDELSON: This was in '79. And this was after we had been corresponding for a little while. And we had by that time formulated a proposal that we wanted to give to the Beaubourg Museum [Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France]; we were very ambitious for ourselves. And this proposal was so far ahead of its time that it's just amazing. Of course they turned it down. But this was the proposal: We wanted to live in the Beaubourg for two weeks, the five of us. And we would come into the Beaubourg, and we would create and build our own habitat. We'd have an assigned area, and we would work within that assigned area and make something that we were going to live in, each of us. We were going to put paper on the floor and some kind of exhibition format for the walls so that we could pin up things on the wall. The paper on the floor was to record our movements between each of the habitats: What was the pattern of movement would be recorded, and you could see how that developed. We wanted to then produce during the time we were in there performances, a performance a day. And once we got it ready, we would just produce it because we were in there, you know, all of the time. And we might do some very spontaneous ones or we might do some things that we rehearsed. But it would be mostly in response to being there and living there. Then we gave ourselves a really difficult task, which was we were not going to bring any food in, and we would ask people who came to the museum to bring us food. If they didn't bring us food, we didn't have anything to eat. So we would be totally dependent on the audience and their largesse to bring us food. And we would be, of course, photographing and documenting, video documenting, all of this as we went along. I think this would have been just wonderful if we'd been allowed to do it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Does Rosalie Goldberg know about this proposal?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Does someone have it?

MARY BETH EDELSON: The book?

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, the proposal.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes. It's in this—I'll show you this.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, I was just asking if—so it exists.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It could be shared and displayed and actually reenacted if someone wanted to.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Absolutely. The book itself, which I put together about—I put this together for a conference that they were having in Vienna [Austria], International Feminist Performance Conference. It was in 2004 [sic] [2003] I think. I put this book together to have that be exhibited. And I still have tapes from our talks in Paris—unbelievable that they still could be heard. So you could put them—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it was part of that project in Vienna?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It was shown—the book was shown, and the tape was shown—not shown, but you could put on the audio ears and listen to it. And then the book that I made, I made only five of them. They're handmade books, and they reflected—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Five because it was each of the five that you had had—

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, because that's all the time I was going to put in there [inaudible]. It takes a long time to do it. Then I made Xerox copies that I sent to everybody. And put a spiral binding on it so they would have it as a book—for all the participants. So they'd have a copy of it. And my thought was to try to get the books themselves into the collections of various museums that are interested in performance and/or bookmaking. And so the book includes the correspondence between us, as well as the proposal to the Beaubourg.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Take it back to the Beaubourg today.

[They laugh.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. I mean the thing is I'm still physically able and, you know, running around like crazy. But not everybody in the group is in the same shape, whether they could do it today. And I've thought about this—because I really would love to do it—how it could be done. Would it be done by a group of younger women? If it were, I would want to participate with them. Would it be a mixture of, you know, some younger and then those of us who are still physically able would do it? You know something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The idea is why it's important, not so much exactly who's—

MARY BETH EDELSON: The idea is important. Or it could be something like you just completely let go of. And this is an idea that's out there. This is a performance; anybody can perform this. We invite you. This was not done at the time. So this is like free. But we could do that also in relationship to producing it and then putting it out there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. Absolutely.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I mean that— As far as I know, there were no other collaborations of that nature going on in the art world in which you had five different artists, from different countries and different religions, trying to work together. And you realize that we have an Israeli, and we have a Muslim; and Nil Yalter, the Muslim was very informed about what was going on in Palestine because she was volunteering to work with Muslim women in Paris who were completely cut off from any way to integrate into the culture. So she was working with those women all the time at that time. So she knew what was going on in Palestine. So they had some pretty heated discussions. And those discussions you could have today, and you would think they just— They'd just— Nothing is changed! [Laughs] Absolutely nothing has changed except that what Miriam was saying was very, very naïve for that time because she said, "We're getting along very, very well. There's really no problem." And Nil would say, "Oh, yes, there is!" [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You wanted to talk about humor in your work. Do you think that humor is something that has always been in your work? Or did you develop it at a certain point?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I wonder if we should leave that for the next discussion?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sure, sure.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Because that—to talk about humor gets into the trickster and how that manifests. It's a whole other kind of tack.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Alright. So continue on from where you were.

MARY BETH EDELSON: We were talking about how international it was. But it also—I've had contact with women in Scandinavia and in Britain. Well, now, almost anyplace I go in Europe, I have friends. I have a friends that are just dear, dear, dear to me that I miss [laughs]. They come and stay with me for a week or so in New York because I have ample space, and I love my friends to stay in my spare bedroom. And, you know, we keep up with each other.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmmm. Did you ever connect with artists from South America, Brazil particularly?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No. No, mostly just Europe. I mean I've known people from China and Japan, Korea, South America. No, no African people. India. But I haven't known them like I've known the European women. It's a whole different— The cultures are so similar—I mean it's so easy to have the dialog with the European women.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm.[Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And for that time, that was reaching pretty far out there to do that for that time. Living in this building, I'm involved with Asian [laughs] artists all the time. I'm the only one that's not Asian on this side of my building. So we had the top floor, Nam Jie Kaiku who's recently died. And Shigeko Kubota, a good friend. I just went to the opening of the Guggenheim Museum [New York, New York], "The Third Mind," [2009] with her because she's got work there. I'm sorry about that heat. That we can't turn off. Tazato is a dear friend, and she was in A.I.R. She has this wonderful gallery on Rirvington Street that she has run for so many years. And she's a fabulous artist herself. She did the drawings for Sol LeWitt and her own work, so under-recognized and under-appreciated. So she had not only being a woman but being from Japan. Speaks English well, but not—it's still difficult to be as fluent in the culture.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Obviously you, as soon as you got this loft, you created a studio here, and you've always lived and worked in the same place.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And I assume that that's because you want to live and work in the same place.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's something that's—

MARY BETH EDELSON: It's a waste of time if you don't. Yes. I don't want to spend time going in the evening, you know, to a studio, having to take a subway. And I think you get much more work done when you live and work in the same place. Now, if you're easily distracted from doing your work by television or by other things in the living space, then that's not a good situation for you. But that's not the case for me. I'm always trying to get into my studio. So there is no difference between the flow of the studio; everything goes into the living space. I have a hard time keeping it in one place because I'm always working on several projects at one time. So like the couch is set up for cutting my collages, which makes the couch a mess [laughs]. When I'm watching television late in the evening, I sit and I cut out collages when I'm doing that. There's not much separation between life and the work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] How long did you continue showing at A.I.R.? And did you—and what about an affiliation with a different gallery elsewhere?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It was almost ten years I was with A.I.R. And I felt when I left that I was using it to—

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

JUDITH RICHARDS: So go on, after ten years—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: After ten years I decided that I was—that the gallery had become a womb for me. I was too protected, and I needed to get out of the gallery. I knew it was going to be difficult to do because that was right in the eighties during the middle of the backlash. And, you know, people didn't want to hear anything about feminism, and they didn't want to look at artists' work. That was when it was really hard—more difficult, in the eighties, during the [Ronald] Reagan years. That was way more difficult than when we were trying to break in in the seventies. I found gallery that showed my work at least for a short period of time. But basically I was in group shows or I would create my own kinds of programs. I was doing a lot of lecturing around the country, showing around the country. I never had—and still to this day do not have—what you'd call a gallery that represents you in New York City. That actually takes you on and builds your career. I never have had that. All of this I've done by myself. I have people like Mimi [Miriam] Schapiro coming up to me and saying, "Mary Beth, how did you get that? You don't have a gallery! How did you get that retrospective?" And someone else will say, "How did you get in the Migros Museum?" That's a big deal to be in

there." You just get yourself out there. You can't afford to cocoon yourself if you don't have a gallery representing you. You have to be out there and having people know what you're doing. And then having studio visits.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have there been any—or were there at that point; I don't want to move too far; this is toward the present—but particular writers who were championing your work or especially helpful or supportive?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes. Lucy Lippard very much so. And the book that she wrote, whose title has just popped out of my mind, I was featured in that book. Donald Kuspit wrote about me a lot.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about Carter Ratcliff?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, not Carter.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Donald Kuspit.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Donald Kuspit and Jack Burnham, who is in Chicago. I mean those people were quite loyal to me. And, you know, wrote about me. I think I'm generally thought of as the real thing. And the real thing that has not really got her due yet. So when they have an opportunity to write about me, I think they take it. I'm very gratified by things that Holland Cotter has said about my work and about other women. Jerry Saltz. I never had any problem with writers [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: They've been all men except for Lucy.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Lucy. Yes. Well, that isn't all together true. Let's see, what other women? Well, their books. When you came in, there's that long table. I'm in all of those books. But I was thinking in terms of articles that have been written, you know, in periodicals that really are the thing that help build your career and the market.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's what I meant.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Immediately, those are the writers—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: —that fall in that category.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you left A.I.R., what was your—? Picking up back to the evolution of your work—did we talk about the work after the photographs?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, beginning in the eighties, I was trying to paint again, not very successfully—not successfully [laughs]. I mean they were embarrassingly bad.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In your judgment.

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs] And so I didn't continue on with that for very long. The thing that I should mention in relationship to all of these time periods, that I think is one of the most important art productions that I have produced, is collage work that I began at the same time I was doing the posters. The posters were produced—the collage posters—were produced before computer work. So I had to scale those down to fit the heads and manipulate them in various ways. And it was extremely difficult to get the scale to be right. And so each head I would have to get it printed maybe as many as ten times to get the right scale. So it was a tedious process of getting that done. When I was cutting out the posters—and they can, you know, variations on them—I would end up with these scraps of posters. And I began making separate collages with those scraps. And that was just pure play, doing that. It was kind of release from the tedium of trying to get the posters just right. And I did them, and I just kept them in a drawer. And maybe five years later I pulled them out, and I thought, Well! I think these are kind of interesting. I should back them with cloth so they can be preserved. Because they were irregularly, you know, just free-form shapes. And then I made another batch of them.

And this went on for 30 years. I would—every few years I'd make another batch of these. When I was putting my work together for the retrospective, I realized I had over 500 of these collages. And I had shown them at different times, just little groups of them. And they

worked very well, grouping them around some of the photographs because they had some of the same images. So they were echoed again on the wall in these irregular forms. Like what you see in the studio now. Then I began to put them in a large square, floor-to-ceiling square, with a big black feather boa around it as a frame. And then arrange the collages within that. And then I began to realize now I've got this fabulous big space to do my retrospective. Why don't I just release all of this and let it just go all over the wall? They're free form. Let the whole thing be free form. And that— And in having all that wonderful space to put it up.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In an installation you devised. You'd decide where they would go.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it's free form in terms of your decision-making.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not telling the curator they could do anything they want with it.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Actually, for some of the ones that had the boa, the black boa around them, if I wasn't going to be there, I would tell the curator to put them anywhere they wanted to. I'm not fussy about that if I'm not going to be there. Because it's interesting to me to see what someone else does with it. Anyway, it just turned out to be smashing for both the retrospective and Migros. It was really the star piece. And then I came back and installed it in the studio. And this is maybe half—less than half—of the production. And I'm continuing to make them. I love making them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do they function as a kind of diary?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, absolutely. They're a history of the feminist movement. They're a history of the story I told you about my daughter. I mean I look at them, and I see all of this —Every time I re-hang them, I'm responding to the architecture of the space. So they're going up in a very different way. And it may be that I'm mostly responding to the architecture. And then maybe off in another corner I'm responding to a little story that goes on here. But the rest of it is. Yes, the variations are endless you can do with this kind of installation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you give the whole body a title? Have you given it a title?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I'm just calling them *Wall Collage Installation*. And then the name of the place. So it would be *Wall Collage Installation, Malmö*, *Wall Collage Installation, Migros*. Yes. I haven't given them—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is each individual piece just dated?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Each individual piece—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you could create a strict chronology if you wished to, as the installation part.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. You could do that. Now each one has a title, it has a number, a catalog number. It has my name stamped on the back of it and a date.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I guess I'm going to ask one last question before— Why a name stamped? That's an interesting—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Hmmm?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why is your name stamped?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Why is my name stamped? Because I'm doing this on fabric on the back, and it's hard to handwrite the other information. It's just easier to stamp it. It looks more interesting stamped anyway [laughs]. And it's faster. I can have somebody else do it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you do about one—I mean you said you've done, is it 300, 500? No, 30 years you've--

MARY BETH EDELSON: Over 30 years. When I first started thinking about putting them on the wall, I'd done over 500 then. Now maybe I have 900 of them. And now I'm ready to do another batch.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you continue doing them now.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Absolutely. I love doing them. If you look up close to them, you'll see they're photographs of women who were active in the feminist movement. And they're grouped according to whether they're women in the A.I.R. Gallery, the women West Coast group, *Heresies* group. And then some women who, you know, weren't part of any of those groups but were out there anyway. Yes. I mean it is— I didn't get out and continue going on into painting, into things I like [laughs], rather than—

JUDITH RICHARDS: We can do that next time.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Right. But they definitely commemorate. They commemorate a movement. They commemorate a time and those particular women in that. And I think that that's an element that is repeated in my work, is to be commemorative.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, that's a good moment to—

[END OF CD 2.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Beth Edelson at 110 Mercer Street in SoHo in New York on February 16, 2009, for the Archives of America Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Okay. This is Mary Beth Edelson. And what I wanted to do is focus on the artwork itself to start out with, and talk about the collage posters, the wall paintings, story-gathering boxes, briefly the photographs. And it seems I almost never get around to talking about my paintings and my drawings. So I want to talk about that and the sculpture. I feel that installation and performance is probably too huge a subject to speak about in any depth. And we have other questions that Judith and I have thought people might be interested in [laughs]. So I want to start out with saying again a few things. I may be repeating myself from the first part, but I just wanted to set this up in a slightly different way.

But just to review that the poster collages that I did in the early seventies became the works that I was the best known for because they tied in so nicely, I guess one could say, or so completely with the feminist movement, and documented who was involved with that movement, and emphasized the collective aspect of it by making posters that honored A.I.R. Gallery, *Heresies* Collective, the East Coast Women's Building. And also a poster that was made from a Swedish painting. And who am I forgetting? Oh, *Happy Birthday, America*, which is a celebration of East and West Coast women. Those pieces were re-purposing the original artwork that I was working from. They were re-purposing Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* and Rembrandt's *Anatomy [Lesson] of Dr. Tulp* [1632]. And each of these paintings were re-positioned by taking the heads of women and putting them over the heads of men. They had a difference context and a different purpose. Now I mention that because that ties in with the collage wall, collage pieces, in which I took scraps from those posters and began to make small collages; that eventually, over a 30-year period, amounted to about 600 collages. And they were backed by muslin to give them some body, and they were all irregular-shaped.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now we did touch on that.

MARY BETH EDELSON: We did?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. I remember your talking about that backing.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was intriguing. And why you did that. And it formed a kind of diary.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. What I wanted to just add to that then is about this re-purposing notion. And that is that what I did was take something that had already been re-purposed and then re-purposed it yet again. And in doing that, I removed the frame, and the work

became very fluid and just became part of the wall and part of the architecture of whatever space it was displayed in. And I just wanted to emphasize that aspect of continuing to re-purpose because this is not a stagnant project. It keeps changing as the collages themselves change and evolve as time goes by. And I'm right now in the process of creating a new series of works that hopefully will push those collages into what I'm thinking about now and what other people are thinking about now. So I'm thinking about that because I'm working on it right now [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: And toward the end I wanted to ask you about what you're working on now.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. That's what I'm focusing on now. So I won't say anything more about— And you think I spoke about the story boxes? And maybe I can speak about your question about the participation element of that?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sure.

MARY BETH EDELSON: The participation element in my work, I think, is one of the most successful things that I've done. I've been very gratified by how willing the public is to participate. Now initially when I did this in the early seventies, people were quite shy about participation. You really had to encourage them. And the story-gathering boxes, I encouraged them to participate by having some stories already in the box that had been written, even if I had to write them myself. So they could get a general idea of what somebody—how somebody else may have responded. But as time went on, people became familiar not only with the context of what I was working in with the boxes, but also that the idea of participation was more widely understood. So now I have, you know, way over 3,000 stories that I've collected in those boxes over the years. And it's a book just waiting to be edited because the stories are so fascinating. And they range— You know they're everything, from meanness to love to desperation to sadness to, you know— It's quite a record of how people honestly respond, who are not writers thinking of a way to present something to the public. These are just gut responses from people. I do think they really need to be—they're looking for an editor [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you began doing those, and as you continued to include them as part of your work, how do you gauge the success of the presentation? Is it by how many people respond? How it's seen in the community as a work of art?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, how many people respond is definitely a part of it. But also people come up to me and tell me that they're really glad to be able to come to an art exhibit and participate in it, especially initially. Because there was no opportunity— This is something that I had never seen in the gallery situation. My impetus for this was that it annoyed me to walk into a very sterile-looking art space with no benches, nothing welcoming you, and the implied message, you know: Look and get out. And I wanted to slow that process down by having a place for people to sit. There were always one or two stools in front of the story boxes. And they'd sit there, and there was a pen, and they can write. And they can stay there as long as they want to. Often what would happen is a group of people would gather around the box. And those people would be either waiting their turn, or they might start a discussion. So there was something else happening in the gallery space where people were comfortable enough to not leave basically.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And when you first started those, were you thinking about that approach in terms of—I mean did you anticipate how it would be received? Were there other artists who you knew had tried maybe in different ways to make that a part of their work? Have you seen other artists since who you feel have been inspired by your creating this kind of participatory element in their work?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I was living in Washington, DC, when I did those, so that was in the early seventies. And I was unaware of any other artist that had done anything like that. You know my main reason for doing it was what I stated, is that I wanted some welcoming place in the gallery. That was my motivation for it. I think the story-gathering boxes have influenced a number of people. I've seen that format used really a lot since that time. And the boxes have been exhibited widely. People are aware of them. The very first time that I showed it in Washington, in spite of being in Washington, it was reviewed with a full-page picture in *Art in America* and discussed then. And that was, you know, in '72. So the idea of it, the concept behind it, the possibility of it became known at the time that I did it. People

responded initially—there were some very mean remarks in the first box, which surprised me. There were critiques of my work that were nasty.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Questioning whether this was a work of art?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Not just the box because when I showed the boxes, it was in the context of an exhibition. And the boxes would be parallel, in a sense, to what the theme was for the exhibition. Because the cards, the topics of the cards, would emphasize whatever the theme of the exhibition was and ask other people to participate in that. It wasn't feedback about my shows; it was asking them for the story of your life or your mother's story or you know that sort of thing. But it would line up with something else that was happening in the exhibition. I feel that when I put that out first, that was at a time when a lot of men were very angry at the feminist movement. And the comments that were mean were mostly of that nature. And example: One of the nastiest ones was directed toward the art dealer that was showing me, and she was one of a number of women who very bravely had put forth, had opened galleries and shown, you know, a mix of work. And what they said was that this was appropriate for a menopausal gallery. And they were directing that at the dealer herself. And, you know, that kind of angry—it's an angry response. It's trying to figure out how do we put these women down who look like they're going to rise?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: But that was the only time I had that kind of— Well, there was another [inaudible]. This was also—this was awful. This was in Oregon. The box went out during a time—I don't remember the full historical context with this—but they were having an absolute uprising against feminism in the communities there at that time. And in particular it had to do with domestic violence. And this box asked about specific responses to women in terms of the women's rights. And some of the responses were, you know, I don't even want to say. They were just so nasty.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: You know really, really sexual violence basically.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you think of this project as part of the exploration of text and the use of text and language by artists that was also coming up—or actually maybe not so much yet—but would come up in the eighties and late seventies? Because you were obviously using language, written language as part of your work.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, that was obviously part of it. And in order to select the topics, I spent—I had to spend a lot of time on what's going to be a topic people can respond to. And I learned early on that I couldn't get too intellectual about how it read because people wouldn't understand and they wouldn't respond. You would just have blank cards. So they had to be something as simple as what is the story of your life? Or what did your mother teach you about such-and-such? Those kinds of stories that everybody has. Then people respond to them. What I was focusing on more than the text was the sense of community that this engendered. And the sense of community that both through participation and also because people can read what other people in their community thought about these questions and know that they were unguarded responses. And so they would get—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But they were anonymous because you weren't asking them to sign them.

MARY BETH EDELSON: They were. Most of them were anonymous. Every once in a while somebody would want to sign it. But there was no requirement for that. So people could write anything they wanted. And so other people could see what people honestly were thinking in their community, maybe were worried about or concerned about. One more recent box that I had in New Harmony, Indiana, which was originally in 1816 was a utopian village, and it has some sense of that utopian spirit now. And I was interested in going there and experimenting with the question of what is utopian in our culture today that we don't recognize as such? And so boxes were put around in grocery stores, gas—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What year was this done?

MARY BETH EDELSON: This was done in 2006—2006 and 2007. And these boxes were put—and they weren't the wooden boxes. But they were another box of paper—cardboard boxes

—that were made by the students in the school. And they were distributed by the students in [inaudible].

JUDITH RICHARDS: College?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, they were high school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh!

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs] I was working with a college group of students in a workshop that helped to actualize other aspects of this project. But the high school students got involved in it, too. But one of the things that came up that people wrote about over and over again in the community was that they were disappointed that the community was so lacking in diversity. And for some of the old-timers, they thought nobody thought that was a problem. And for the people who had recently moved there— And they were the lifeblood of keeping that community going now because they were young people who had moved in and started businesses in this town that—there's only 900 people in the town that is always on the edge of not being a town. And they were able to create businesses because of the Internet. They would have a store, but they'd also have an Internet aspect of their business. So that kept them alive. And those were the people who were really concerned about the fact that they were an all-white community. So you don't know what you're going to get from these. You put it out there—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And have you done it in other countries?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And so it's not always English—the pieces are not always English.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And then do you have them translated so you can read them?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No. [Laughs] If they're done in Scandinavian—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The questions are in the local language.

MARY BETH EDELSON: The questions are in English. Much of the work that I've done overseas has been in Scandinavia, and they all speak English. And Germany, it depends if you're in East or West, you know, they have to speak English. Switzerland they speak— Most of the places that I go are large— Well, that's not true. I've worked in some really small communities, too. But they speak English almost everywhere. Sometimes they answer in another language; but usually if they do, it's extremely easy to translate. You get different -- One of the funniest ones, responses, that I ever got was from Malmö in Sweden at the Konstmuseum there. And one of the people— Let's see, what was the stamp, what was stamped on it? "What did your father teach you about women?" And the answer was "that a woman will marry a raincoat when she comes to the right age." [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You've got it in your book.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, it's in my book. And that was from Sweden. One of the first ones I did was in Iceland, really early on in the seventies.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you experienced a difference, a meaningful difference, in the response of people in the U.S. versus a foreign country as an American artist or just because of the culture of the place and how guarded or unguarded or enthusiastic they might be to participate? I mean is there—do you anticipate a difference when you take this project someplace else?

MARY BETH EDELSON: There thing about the art world is that there is a commonality within the art world. People in the art world are sophisticated about these ideas, people who come to museums, regardless of what country you're in—if you're in the West. I haven't done this outside of the West. There is a difference and there is a little more reluctance to participate, especially in Scandinavia. But there isn't much of a difference. I would say there's not much.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: Sometimes what they're writing, the attitude about men and women is on a different level. I mean you can see—you can think, well, that's something someone in the United States would probably not say. But one of the aspects I like to draw out, but it's really hard to draw out—you know I'm thinking now again of Scandinavia—and that is to get them to talk about difference. Because Scandinavians tend to think of themselves as being liberal and really being on the upper echelon of the right side of [laughs] progressive ideas. And when it comes to difference and how they treat the immigrants and that kind of thing, you know, it's really problematic. They don't face it, they don't acknowledge it. And that's the kind of question I like to draw out, but it's hard to get them to— What happens if you ask them a question that they don't want—they deny, and they don't want to deal with it—is they say, "Oh, that's an American question. We don't deal with that here. We've already solved that problem." [Laughs] And so it's just dismissed.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were going to talk about—I wanted to make sure we talked about the femme fatale in the work that you did, I don't know if chronologically you are there yet but these that are inspired by film and feminist film theory.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, sort of the middle of the eighties, I began to research how women are treated in film in relationship to the gun. You really have to hone it in if you want —

JUDITH RICHARDS: And this is where you used Gena Rowlands.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. But I did quite a bit of research before I did that. I found Ann Kaplan's writings to be especially useful. But a lot of feminist theoretical writers have written about women in film. What I wanted to do was not reflect what they had written in my artwork which a lot of times has, you know—an artist will just take the theoretical thing and visualize it. I wanted to put it in a different context than what was being written about. And also to have my artwork be an original research in that I did original research for myself on watching many, many films, starting, you know, from early films to present-day films with women with guns in their hands.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did this begin, this interest? What did it come, follow from?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It grew out of a couple of things. But I think I began to get interested in film in the middle of the eighties, and then I honed in on the gun part. But what really piqued it for me was the O.J. Simpson trial and getting into researching domestic violence. Where did this come from? Where did these attitudes— Not where did this come from, but, you know, what formulates these attitudes? And what happens when women try to defend themselves? So a woman who takes a gun is defending herself. She's no longer a victim; she's changed her status. So often I'd noticed that what was depicted when people talked about domestic violence was the victimization. And I didn't want to have anything to do with that. What I wanted to do was show the empowerment of women and emphasize what women can—how we can be our own agents or our own definers [laughs]—the lot. So that's what got me more and more into the gun, until I decided that I would actually produce this. It took me a while to figure out how I wanted to—what medium I wanted to use. Because one of the other things I should say about my work that's really basic to all of the production that I do, is that I don't work in one medium. And I stopped doing that in 1972. Before that I was a painter and drawer. I let the subject matter, the context, my intentions suggest what the medium should be.

So with this particular project, that was an important question for me to answer. And it took a while to work through what is that medium going to be? And I decided that what I wanted to do was retain the idea of the woman's femininity. I also wanted to make a statement about— Well, let me back up a little bit. So I decided what I wanted to do was use chiffon fabric, which is extremely feminine, is associated with lingerie and sexy dresses. And anyone who wanted to look ultra feminine would be wearing this kind of cloth. And I wanted to put on that extremely feminine cloth an extremely hard image, a tough image. And that would be the woman with the gun in her hand. And so most of the images that I found that were of interest to me to use came from the film noir period. And that was the period when the woman for the first time actually took a gun in her hand for her own project, for her own strategy. Before that when she had a gun in her hand, she was defending the homestead, she had a rifle, she's fighting off the Indians, she's protecting the kids. You know there's something that she's doing for somebody else. Or there was another cycle in which the woman would have a gun in her hand, and she'd have some skimpy costume on, and she

didn't know what to do with it. Or she was so dangerous because it might just go off and just might hit anything.

Then it went into the film noir, and I'm speaking really in these broad generalizations. But it does follow more or less the trajectory of the evolution of the woman with the gun in her hand. So during the film noir period, what you could see is the woman could take this gun in her hand, but she was going to get punished severely. She would get acid thrown in her face. Her children would get taken away .Something horrible would happen to her. The first film in which a woman took a gun, took action on herself—for herself—and did not get severely punished was *Gloria* [1980]; that was the first film. What happened in the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was John Cassavetes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. What happened in the end of the film, *Gloria* film, she had been a girlfriend of one of the mobsters, the one who would be likely to take her out, punish her for doing this. And she had to come to their council, in a sense, and present herself to the council, and they had to be able to tell her, Okay, just don't do it again [laughs]. But she was, you know, she walked away without getting punished for what she had done. And then, of course, we had *Thelma & Louise* [1991] and then just a bunch, you know, just many, many, many other films almost to the point of, you know, you couldn't make a film without a woman with a gun in her hand. So I followed that, you know, I followed that through and continued doing these prints of the women in the films.

JUDITH RICHARDS: These are ink on chiffon? When you say prints, is there a printmaking—is there silk-screening?

MARY BETH EDELSON: The first ones I did were silk-screened, and I realized very quickly I couldn't afford to do that because I had to make really huge screens, and there had to be a number of screens because you can't get one— I was dealing with works that were 10 to 14 feet high by the width of the fabric. And sometimes I put several panels of the fabric. So the largest one I did was 14 feet by 40 feet.

JUDITH RICHARDS: These are all unique pieces. You didn't make duplicates to sell or anything like that.

MARY BETH EDELSON: They're unique pieces. And then I invented another way, which I don't share, [laughs] of printing in which I did not need to use the silkscreen, and then I could afford to do it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And print it with ink or paint or—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It was a reproductive process that I invented, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And all along you're printing on one side of the chiffon, right?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. And it goes right through. It goes right through the fabric, so you see the figure on both sides. You know one is reversed and one is— And it looks the same on both sides because it goes right through.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And is thinking about walking around that piece of chiffon and its being in, defining a space, part of the reason why you want it to be that transparent?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. And also the other thing I wanted is that that fabric suggested a veil. And what I wanted to say was there's nothing mysterious going on around here. Just what you were saying. You can walk all around this, you can see the front, you can see the back, you can see through it. There's nothing else going on. So don't project some other [laughs] mystery on this. When they were installed, they were either installed along a huge bank of windows, which was very effective because the light would change them during the day; open the window, and they would blow into the gallery or museum space. Or they were installed to be a room divider in the exhibition space.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What period of time did you make those?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I started those—I think the first one I did was '89. And then those went— I stopped it—by the end of the nineties I'd stopped making them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So, for example, when you first installed them, what else was in the room?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Then it would have a story-gathering box. The story-gathering box would— What I was trying to do with these figures was just not present them. I wanted to—

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you say figures, the silkscreen on the chiffon is the image of the woman with the gun.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that's the figure you mean.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, that's the figure. I wanted to advance the script that Hollywood had projected on these women. And so I asked people to write in the story-gathering box an alternative script. So that in that case the box would relate directly to that piece. Now, that was not an easy thing for the public to do. So I didn't get a lot of responses. You really have to sit there and think about that for a long time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you assuming that they would know this film, *Gloria*?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, it wasn't just *Gloria*. It was—*Gloria* I used a number of individual strips, and then I printed—silk-screened Gloria onto bed sheets. And showed them on a real bed. So this piece in particular directly connected the idea of a woman with a gun with domestic violence because it was on the bed. So this woman was—this was not a bed you would be welcome in if you were going to do harm to this woman [laughs]. So, yes. And that was often exhibited with the other panels. But sometimes the panels were just by themselves, and there were other drawings and photographs and, you know, a variety of other work along with the panels. But because they were so big, they usually dominated the show. But they weren't all big; I shouldn't put it that way. Some of them were really small pieces that would just—you could just pin directly on the wall. That made that a much more intimate kind of experience. The other ones were just, you know, up over your head.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Were there other bodies—are there other bodies of work that have reflected on feminist film theory and film—is that the main area that you've explored this?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, yes. I didn't take it into any real women with guns in their hands. Although I did take a number of photographs of homeless women who were in the shelter at the Armory. You know there's a shelter there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's the Park Avenue Armory [New York, New York]?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. And I had the women come for an afternoon to the loft, and we had a nice time together. And then I photographed them with guns in their hands [laughs]. I used those on some drawings and some small pieces, but—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long ago was that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Hmmm. 'Ninety-four, '95, something like that. I didn't want to exploit these women. I think what I did with it was right. I used it very timidly.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you think at any point about making films or video works yourself?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I have made a couple of videos. But it's— One of the things I need to do is I need to make the performances that I have produced more comprehensive and more communicative to other people. Because I don't have them in formats—in other words, I need to make them video. I need to put together all of the stills and the small clips that I have and make, you know, a voiceover and talk about it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] As a method of documenting the work.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. As a method of documenting the work. But as far as creating artwork that's a video, I don't know if that— You know if I had five lives, I'd let one of them go off and do that [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. So when you—what came after that then? Or started during and

continued beyond that engagement with the woman and the gun.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I started to focus more on these collages and getting them out. Well, in the early 2000, I had a traveling exhibition of my work that way to seven different sites in the United States. And so I traveled around with that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And which institution originated that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: This originated in Pennsylvania by the Pennsylvania Consortium of Colleges. And it went to three venues in Pennsylvania, and then it went to Texas to two places and Tennessee, and then to two other places in Upstate New York. And I would lecture with that. I spent quite a bit of time because it was a retrospective.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is there a reason why you think it stayed in the east side, the eastern part of the country?

MARY BETH EDELSON: We sent out letters, and it was, you know, who wanted it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was just one of those things, yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. It was mostly a Pennsylvania group that was going it. And it had a lot to do with who they knew and, you know, what they could pull in.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And also it doesn't start traveling way out to the West Coast because it's so expensive to travel. It's much cheaper if you can have—well, Texas was pretty far away. But the rest of it, from Pennsylvania to New York and Tennessee, you know, were kind of clustered together. So there are a lot of practical considerations when you put together a traveling show. So the other thing that I was during that time is I was producing this book, *The Art of Mary Beth Edelson* [2002].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And I wanted that book to be ready for this traveling exhibition. It took me four years to put together that book because I designed, wrote it, gathered everything, did everything myself. Wrote the—what took, of course, the most time was writing the grants to pay for it [laughs]. And I got enough money from Andy Warhol and Lee Krasner and NEA and a few other small grants to pay for it. And I had it printed in Sweden, and they did a beautiful job of printing it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

[END OF CD 3.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You have been involved in making artists' books.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Could you talk about that whole part of your work and when it began? And how they relate to other aspects of your work, particularly sculpture and film?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, the books I started when I was in Washington, DC. And I think they evolved in part because I spend the most time drawing—more time drawing than I do anything else. Drawing is the pillar of my work. Everything is a drawing before it becomes anything else, whether it's a working drawing for another piece or it's an end-product in and of itself. But I realized when I was doing that that I was using pads of paper and everything was left in the pad of paper. And it was really beginning to fall into looking like it wanted to be a book. And I found out about this person who made handmade books in Washington, DC. And so I had him make a couple of books for me. And I would take canvas and paint on the canvas. And he was able to use that for the cover. And then I would select all the papers that would go in there. Then I would get the book, and I would begin making—drawing. Have you ever seen one of them?

JUDITH RICHARDS: A few, but not many.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. [Inaudible].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, and when you made them, they were obviously unique.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Hmmm?

JUDITH RICHARDS: They were all unique.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes. They were all unique.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And they were a kind of a diary of all your thinking. Did you ever imagine selling them, or are they something you'd really probably want to keep.

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, no. I'd be happy to sell them. It's one of the most difficult markets is artist's books. There's a big market for it in Europe. But here, not so much. It's very hard to—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you could part with them.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Absolutely.

[They laugh.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: If I could part with and sell that whole series of my posters to the Museum of Modern Art, I can part with anything because that was really close to my heart.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, I have—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that was the beginning of making books. And how did it—how has it evolved?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I have made a lot of books. How they connect with the artwork, for example, I did one piece that was called *Sexual Fantasies*; this was when I was still in Washington, DC. And for that book, I actually collected sexual fantasies from artists and people in the art world. I asked them to submit—write up something. And those just got pasted in a book. So that was just a conceptual piece that had that in it. I mean there were other things that I put together, like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you collected, why from just people in the art world?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, because that was my world, those were the people I knew.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were they men and women?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Men and women. And when I did that, I also made the story-gathering box to go with that. So you had the book of other people's fantasies, and then you had the box, and you could write your fantasies in the box. But I also had—before I did the written tablets—paper tablets that other people could write on is what I meant to say—I had wooden tablets. And you flip through the boxes of wooden tablets. You couldn't participate except for the flipping through. And that was a wooden box that went with the sexual fantasies piece. And then there was a large drawing that hung on the wall behind those that related also to the sexual fantasy. And the book in the box was put on a table in front of the drawing, and there were the two stools so people could sit down and look at that. So that was really the forerunner of the paper tablets.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And would you refer to that entire thing as an installation?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So those books were part of it.

MARY BETH EDELSON: They were part of an installation that was about sexual fantasies.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And they later on, why would you decide to make a book?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, it just had to do with what I was thinking about and sometimes what I wanted to produce. Sometimes it was in service of something else.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Once you had made the book and you looked through it, was it part of the thinking process? I mean did you learn something that would cause you to continue in a particular direction? I mean look back, read this book, and go forward?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I have to separate them into different kinds of categories. The unique books that I had made, had a bookmaker make—and I supplied everything for that—those were more precious-like books. And each of those had their own really clear theme. And sometimes that theme had to do with a performance that I did or a place in which I was trying to relate what the land and landscape or the feeling, like pulling up the right word for that, the whole atmosphere, gestalt of the area in the book. And then there was another kind of book that I called script books, that were scripts for the performance pieces, in which I made small drawings about what I was going to do in the performances. And those were not precious books. They were—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Almost like a filmmaker would put together.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Exactly. They were storyboard-type books. Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what was so—can you mention one specific one for example and how it fit into an installation—or related to which performance?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, one of them I think was particularly successful that was for—Actually that's not right. It wasn't done before the performance; it was done after the performance. More likely things that were done before the performance were in the script books. Then I wanted to record something and make it more into an art object as a result of what I had learned or experienced from that. It allowed me to spend more time thinking about that and delving deeper into what I had done because, you know, I'm making—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are you thinking right now of a particular project?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I'm thinking of a project that I did in Iowa, and that was done in 1977 or '78. I'd have to look it up. Ana Mendieta was still a student out there at that time, and she had met me through Lucy Lippard, and wanted me to come out to Iowa and present—have an exhibition, present a performance, and do a workshop. And so I was out there doing that. It was a really wonderful experience. The weather was great, the students were very responsive. The performance went amazingly well. And the exhibition was not in a huge space, but it was a nice auxiliary to the performance. And when I got back, I had some beautiful photographs from that performance.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You knew that—was taking photographs part of the project for you?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Always.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you had arranged for someone—or you took the photographs?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I took most of the photographs. And there was one other person who took some of them. The problem with having someone else take them is they have the copyright. They want to charge you money for them. And if you're using them and sending them out, you really end up with spending a fortune. So I try to take the photographs myself. It's just—for me, I've never had enough money for that to be a practical solution, for me to hire somebody to do it. And I think that worked out better anyway.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you were saying when you came back—

MARY BETH EDELSON: I came back. And I was reflecting on it. And I wanted to—I felt it was a beautiful experience. And I wanted that beautiful experience to be put down in this book. So I recreated the script in watercolor in the book. And then also inserted photographs of the actual performance.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the title of that performance?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Of that performance—I'm going to get the book [laughs]. Well, I lied. It must be in the studio. You can just have a look at this one.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sure.

MARY BETH EDELSON: That'll give you [inaudible].

JUDITH RICHARDS: The artist is just getting a book from the studio.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Not here. I really wanted to show that to you [laughs]. This is going to take up your time. I'll just have one more look in here, and then I'll give up. Well, I don't see it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: This is another one.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wow! Do you want to talk about this one right here?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why don't you mention this date and the title.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I'm looking at this book that is called *Winged Rocks*, and it was done in 1978. And there's a rock that is—it goes right through the front cover and through a number of the pages. I was interested in the idea of winged rocks at that time because that's the way I was feeling. This was like a self-portrait. I felt like I was very earthbound, and I was about to rise. I was about to take wings, or I wanted to take wings. And it was really hard to do [laughs]. I produced a number of pieces that hung from the ceiling.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is when you were in New York—or still in Washington?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It's in New York.

JUDITH RICHARDS: New York.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, in New York. I produced these rocks and made wings of different kinds of fabric and paper and that sort of thing, and hung them from the ceiling. I made about maybe 20 of these.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This cover, this is a cover made out or rawhide or some kind of hide?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, no. This is a heavy, heavy felt. And then I impregnated that with henna. That's what you're looking at here. And then on this side is a kind of mixture that I made of clay with some glue and paint. There's some sparklies in there, so I probably put—no, maybe not. Because sometimes I would add mica to that. Mica's one of my favorite naturally sparkly things. But the book's cover—I mean everything is worked by hand.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So how would you—would you say that these books are also pieces of sculpture? How do they relate to sculpture? They're objects.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, they're objects, and they are sculptural, especially the ones with the clay covers are very sculptural. And some of the clay sculpture covers are speaking about vessels. So the subject inside is the painting of different-sized vessels, which relates to the sculptural idea. They're all over the place. I mean there are the script books. I don't discipline myself to repeat myself.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Before I go to any other questions I might have, do you want to go back to the narrative that you have in mind and your points of view.

MARY BETH EDELSON: The book sheds.

[They laugh.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Well, I wanted to talk about painting a little bit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mmmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: Painting has been very odd for me. I started out as a painter. And by that I mean when I was 12 years old I was painting, going to the Art Institute of Chicago and painting. Having my own little studio. [Phone ringing] I'm not going to answer it. I gave up painting in 1972 when I did this exhibition "22 Others." And I asked— Did I speak about this?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Right. Asked people to give me an idea. And the only stipulation was they should not suggest I do a painting. So at that point I gave up painting. And I think that after that, the idea of painting has been problematic for me. I love it, and I hate at the same time [laughs]. I love it, and I think of it as a bad habit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mentioned that—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —at one point you did some paintings, and you thought they were awful, and you stopped.

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, not at that point. I was doing good paintings when I gave up painting in '72. But I then decided in the early eighties to go back to it, and I did some perfectly awful paintings [laughs] in the early eighties.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why did you feel you should go back to it?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It wasn't that I should. I just wanted to paint again.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was it about painting that you—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Painting has a physicality and a satisfaction and a gooeyness that is just wonderful. And you just kind of want to do it because you're using a different part of your mind and your body and your sensibility when you paint. But that's true of all of these different disciplines. And I was just eager to do that again. So then I gave that up. But then I would do small paintings; they were drawings that I would turn into paintings. And I continued doing that over the years. And did I speak about the project, the portrait project, that I did more recently?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Okay. So that was when I took up painting again. But in between those times, when I wasn't in a mood to feel driven to do something, I did other kinds of paintings that are very—they're rather esoteric paintings, and they're difficult to put into a context. People look at them, and they can't figure out what they're looking at, or how to interpret what they see. And I would love to show those paintings because those paintings, I think, are important. And they vary from—one of them is 10 feet by 14 feet, and it's called *In Exile*. It's about the proposition that I was putting out with the painting, that women were in exile. And it was a commemoration of different kinds of heroic women through the ages on the painting. And it was meant to be a commemoration. And every once in a while I do paintings that are commemorations.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know what date you made that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: That was—that would be in '86, '87, '88, someplace around in there. Commemorative paintings is not a very popular genre. Mostly when I've seen it, I've seen it done in these African paintings that commemorate various individuals in Africa that have been heroic individuals. But it's a way of painting that's really, really out of style [laughs]—deeply out of style. But seemed appropriate for what I wanted to put out there, which was, again, honoring women, pointing out what I could through the painting. So that was one of the really large-scale ones. And the other large-scale one was 10 feet by, I think, 12 feet. And that one was painted in 1989, simultaneous to the wall coming down.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The Berlin Wall.

MARY BETH EDELSON: The Berlin Wall, and the immense changes that were happening then. And I wanted to commemorate that moment, too. Because I felt that was a bifurcation point in which everything that was going one way suddenly flipped and went the other way. So I had Nelson Mandela and [inaudible] on that painting. I had the leaders in Czechoslovakia. And I had the Tiananmen Square goddess that they pulled out into the square. And, you know, all of those people that incredible year that stood up against authority were in that painting. The thing that I did with both of these commemorative paintings is put frames around them that had to do with the image itself. In other words, they were not mass-produced frames. The one around the woman was made of cloth and cut into various shapes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was the painting stretched, or was it—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Not stretched.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No. Okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Neither of them were stretched.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. So the frame is— Its canvas is sewn onto the canvas.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, It's sewn onto the canvas, and it's hung with grommets on the wall.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And that's the same for the 1989 painting. What did I call that? *Freedom Painting*, I think was the name. And that one I put wide boards all around it. And then I painted the dates of all of these particular events all around the exhibition—all around the painting. So those dates related to what you were looking at in the painting. Another one that I did— I did the whole series of paintings for Dolan Maxwell Gallery [New York, New York] that was called "Universal Pictures," and I produced about 12 paintings for that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was Dolan—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Dolan Maxwell.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was in SoHo, right?

MARY BETH EDELSON: In SoHo, yes. I showed one of the large paintings that I just described, the 1989 one. And then these other paintings, which ranged from—they're harder to talk about. They're not so—they're more on the visual side where you have to look at them. I'm not going to even attempt to describe them. They're more in the tradition of painting than these other commemorative paintings, except that they are just more eccentric than what other people paint. And then the last category that I want to mention in the painting is a series—well, the painting that I like the best out of this series is 40 by 40 inches, and it's called *Kiss My Rabbit*. And it's a female figure in the middle with a trickster rabbit-like head kissing a rabbit that's jumping up to kiss her. And the background is a tunnel-like subway thing, and then there's a serpentine figure over on the side. So it's odd. It's odd, surreal kind of subject.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And why that subject? What's behind that painting?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, well, my interest in the trickster—I haven't, I guess, spoken about that. Almost everything from early days threaded along is the idea of this trickster muse that allows me to take risks, that dares me to take risks, that encourages me to play and get into my creative spirit. Letting, you know, other things sort of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did this trickster come into being?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I would say in my family we played a lot of practical jokes on each other [laughs]. And this kind of playfulness—there was a great deal of playfulness about doing that. And there were tricks. And I grew up with a great deal of that. And some of the tricks were really quite extraordinary [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not in a mean way, but in just an amazing kind of way, surprising?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Surprising. Well, one that my grandfather played on my grandmother is the audacious of all of them. He was on a boat in the Great Lakes. There was a great storm that came up and capsized the boats. And there was a big headline in the Chicago *Tribune* that said: "All but one lost." And so everyone thought that everybody was lost on the thing, and they'd made a mistake. And it was really only one that was lost, and all the rest of them were okay. And my grandfather saw this as an opportunity to play a practical joke. And so he stayed away for three days, came back to mourning and the black wreath on the door and the whole thing. "Hi, Betsy! I'm home!" [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: That is mean!

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs] It's mean. But in the context of my family, it's not that mean because if you passed up an opportunity like that, you would be thought of as—you would lose stature in the family [laughs]—or status in the family. And that was the most extreme on that anybody ever—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did your grandmother ever get back at him for that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, you bet. Oh, you bet. She said, "You're never going on another ship again. Forget it. No boats. It's me or—no boats."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. Right.

MARY BETH EDELSON: So he got a job in the steel mill and made boats in the basement [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: So the trickster was part of your life. And then when you became an artist—or when you became more professional because you said you were always an artist—that stayed with you.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. That stayed with me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And it served you in what way? And still does, I guess.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, absolutely. Even more so. I mean I have to keep it in check sometimes now because it encourages me to do things that are a little too wild [laughs]. At my age one doesn't do them. Well, or doesn't admit it anyway. I would not have framed it that way when I was younger.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Framed the paintings?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, no. Framed the idea of the trickster.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Ah! Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: I just thought of it as this impish spirit. But as I got more into it, I realized the complexity of the trickster and researched it more and understood all the transformative characteristics of the trickster. The trickster can change into male or female. The trickster is both the holy fool and, you know, is— The trickster can go through everything, can be anything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was this somehow empowering?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Very empowering, yes. Yes. It took the good little girl out of me [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you feel it should be a secret, or it should be very well known to other artists?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, when I started using it in the art as, you know, self-consciously, then I was writing about this. And I did one exhibition that was completely about the trickster when I was still in A.I.R., which was the late eighties. I made up a whole history of the trickster. It was called "The Archaeology of the Trickster," and made clay objects and drawings of everything that made up this history.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So do you think this is like an alter ego that other artists have created?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I don't think it's that strong. I mean by alter ego I'm not sure—I'm not sure what that means. I think of an alter ego as being something present all the time to the person.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And this is not something present to me all the time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In a way it's a kind of a myth?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It's a muse, I think, a muse that I can call upon.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think of it as residing in a particular place?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Just in your mind?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. No, it's just there when I want to call I up.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And it's neither male nor female, the trickster.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Good. I'm glad we talk about this.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I've done a lot of drawings of the trickster in a lot of the books.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I've seen them. But I didn't realize [inaudible].

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, that's what they are. It's basically this, this shape that I use over and over again like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, yes!

MARY BETH EDELSON: All different [inaudible].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Maybe I should change discs now. Well, let me go on a few more minutes. Is there something else you want to—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, we've been through the painting sort of like. Drawings and paintings are the hardest for me to talk about because they don't fit into that kind of conceptual slot like some of the other things do, and they're much easier to talk about. We've covered quite a bit. Have you got all your questions?

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'll ask you a few things, and then maybe you'll remember other things. Just touch on the business of art for a moment. And then we'll go back to real art.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mentioned in the last session that other artists would be amazed at how much you've accomplished without having representation or permanent representation.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What have your experiences been in the art world with galleries both here and abroad and singular shows and representation or lack thereof? Do you want to speak about the business side of being an artist?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Sure. Well, the first business is you have to figure how you're going to have enough money to live on. And my strategy for that has been to use real estate, and I've been fortunate enough to have this loft, which is large, and I rent out the front part of the loft. And the rent that I get from that is my steady income. The other alternative that a lot of artists use is teaching. And I've done a lot of teaching over the years, too. But when I came to New York, they were not hiring in '75; that was during that nearly going bankruptcy period for the city. I decided to focus on doing artist's residencies around the country and lectures. So that's what I did, and I continued doing that and made money from that as well as from the rental. And that I think if you talk to other—whenever I talk to young people, I say: Figure out some way to get some steady income. Because if you don't, that's going to take you down. And being a woman who knows that women don't, especially in the early days when I started, don't earn as much money as men do. More difficult to be hired and that whole thing. I realized early on—I had to figure this out for myself: Nobody was going to take care of me. So that, I felt, you know, was very clear and important for me to do.

I'm pretty good at organizing myself and organizing my work. When I came to New York—When I was in Washington, DC, I was with the commercial gallery Henri, and she sold works for me from time to time. And for that time she was really a good dealer, and I'm very happy that I was with her at that time. When I came to New York, I immediately joined A.I.R. because one of the reasons I wanted to come to New York is I wanted to be part of the

feminist movement. And I had done what I could do in Washington, DC, which was to organize a conference for women in the visual arts that I produced in '71 and '72 with a steering committee of other women. In some sense I felt after I'd done that, that people were willing to run me out of town [laughs]. And I was eager to get out of town. I was seen as —anything political or over the top that anyone did for any reason was probably me. And usually that wasn't true, but I got blamed for everything [laughs]. Which actually—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Notorious.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, notorious. It actually didn't bother me except I realized that it was getting in my way of doing things that I wanted to do. I wanted to move to New York. I couldn't figure out how I could afford to do that. I had purchased a house for very little money in Washington, DC, just as the rents—not the rents, the housing market—was starting to go up. I caught a wave of it going up, and the value of the place I bought doubled in three years. So as soon as I realized that was going on, I put it on the market, and I moved to New York. And while I was still in Washington, I came up to New York and looked at different lofts, you know, trying to find a place that seemed right for me. What was your question?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, no. Being represented by art dealers versus not, and then—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Okay.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —the business of art.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I started getting off on real estate.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, no.

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's part of your survival technique.

MARY BETH EDELSON: So when I first came to New York, I was immediately, even before I left Washington, I was taken into A.I.R. Gallery. So I had a show—I arrived in June, I had a one-person show in September at A.I.R. because they had an open slot, and I went right into that open slot. So I hit the ground running. Being in A.I.R., a nonprofit feminist gallery, meant you had to organize things for yourself. You had to figure out how you could promote your work within the gallery, but also out into the community. So I did that for almost ten years. And then I felt like I was treading water. I didn't need to stay there. Not need. I felt if I continued to stay there, I was becoming too comfortable in the womb-likeness and security of having a show every other year. And so I decided it was really time for me to get out, which was very painful to do. But I resigned and gave everybody a hug and went off. I did not find a gallery. I had a really hard time finding any real opportunities for myself in New York.

So I began to turn to the rest of the country to see where in the Midwest—which where I'm from, Indiana—to start out with, to see what— And I got a lot of invitations in Ohio and did a number of projects there and in Iowa. And that was the hookup that I was talking about. And that is the way I got through that kind of period. You know just trying— And I did a number of visiting artist gigs. I tried when I went to a university to negotiate producing something while I was there. If they had a good ceramic department, I'm going to make covers for my books. If they had a good bronze-casting department, I was going to make bronze sculptures. So I would negotiate that as part of the contract of coming there and staying there. And often there was an exhibition related to that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm going to change tapes now.

[END OF CD 4.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Beth Edelson on February 16, 2009, disc two. We were talking about survival in the art world. And I think you were talking about the seventies and eighties. And then did anything change in the nineties or since then —either here or abroad?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well— Did I talk about the international group? I think I did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I had contacts in Europe and did some showing in Europe at that time. So I began to be known in Europe. I was written up in *Flash Art [Magazine]* and various European magazines. And I never—I tried to keep that contact going. Then I realized at the end of the nineties that it was time for me to organize this traveling show. Now wait a minute. Let me back up a little bit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you had a show in '97 in Grenoble ["Vraiment Feminisme et Art," Magasin ,Centre National D'Art Contemporain de Grenoble, France].

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A major exhibition.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, yes. But I'm talking about before that time. By that time I was beginning to get a lot of invitations. I organized two traveling exhibitions actually of my work. And this was a result of not getting shows. I would organize this, send out this proposal to various galleries, and do it that way. So the first one I think went to five different venues. And a lot of my paintings were in that one. So that was one—that was another way to get the work out. But I was, in doing those traveling shows, I was really getting my work out around the country.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: Which I think is an important thing. It's important for an artist to get the work out beyond New York City. And I've been successful at that. But I have not been successful in getting a gallery that really can do me some good in New York City.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, getting a gallery doesn't necessarily mean they're going to do you good.

MARY BETH EDELSON: That's true. And it's not that I don't have galleries that are interested in showing me. I just can't figure out what they can do for me that I can't do better for myself.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And why should I split commissions with them if they are not going to do a better job for me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So if you a bit of an ambivalent feelings about gallery representation? Even if someone wanted to represent you, you're not sure that you would be benneficial.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, it depends upon who it would be. I'm not ambivalent about small galleries that can't do anything for me. I'm not interested in them, period. There's no point to it. You're just—what you do sell, you're sharing the profit with somebody who hasn't earned it. But, yes. So I mean that was one of my survival mechanisms. If nothing was happening, I organized it for myself and I made it happen. Now with Europe, I was invited to do a lecture at the Danish Royal Academy, and that sort of was the first—that started off a series of invitations in Europe. And I've shown fairly extensively in Europe. What I find happens in Europe is if you do a good job, you go there and you do a good job— And I work my butt off when I go to these places; I come and I interact with everybody. I do lectures. I do a full whatever people want. What I feel they need and want from me. I'm willing to do it. Some artists, especially in Europe, won't do that. They come, and they sit in the café and drink coffee or beer or whatever. So they're really amazed when Americans come, and they're so open and willing to be in another way. And if you do a good job, you get invited to another situation. If you do a good job there, you get invited to another situation.

Now that is not what I found in the United States. In the United States I found for women, you do a good job, Wow! You do a smack-bang-up job, and you don't get any other invitations. So you have to start all over again and create another situation for yourself. And you just keep doing: starting up, starting up, starting up in the United States. I do like very much showing in Europe. The respect the artist more. They assume you need certain things. You need money, you need housing, you need transportation, you need a certain amount of press and introduction to the community. Some places are getting better in the United States with that kind of thing. I was in Pittsburgh for the Andy Warhol show ["The End," Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania], and spoke to people that were working at the

Mattress Factory [The Mattress Factory Art Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania], and they were so happy with that staff and the situation there. They were getting a fee, and they were getting housing, and they were producing some unique piece for them, and the staff was just wonderful to work with. Now that's what you look for as an artist. That's the most satisfying kind of situation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Connected to questions of the art world, would you want to comment on how it impacted your career to live with another artist?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It was frustrating sometimes because I could see the dramatic difference between the lack of effort that he put out and the enormous effort that I put out. And yet he would be quite rewarded for his lack of effort. And someone could respond by saying, Oh, well, maybe he was a better artist or something like that. But when we were in Washington, DC, we were at the same gallery. We were pretty much on the same plane. And then, well, I definitely didn't get the opportunities. And that was difficult to deal with, given that I could see clearly it was not because of the quality of my work or anything else. It was just simply that he was male.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mmmm. [Affirmative.] Did you have other friends who were also in the same situation that you experienced.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, there was one situation that was reversed. You could certainly say that Mimi Schapiro and Paul Brach, Paul Brach often complained that that was his situation. But Mimi was a real dynamo. My mate was not a real dynamo.

[They laugh.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And also because she was really so much—Mimi was so associated with the beginnings of the feminist movement—that she had a historical context that Paul didn't have. And I had that historical context that my mate didn't have. But then—[laughs] The difference is there now, but it wasn't at the time I was living with him. And I did feel that I often was up against a situation, especially when I was in Washington, DC, in which they didn't want to give me more than they gave him. They wanted to make sure he had a little more before I got anything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmmm.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. That happened often enough for me to not think I was being paranoid [laughs] or something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes. You started talking about the experience of working abroad and exhibiting abroad in terms of what you got and the respect and the relationship. How would — Would you say that the audience response to your work was different as well? Thinking about this exhibition at Magasin in Grenoble 1997; that was a major show. And I wanted to ask you about that and the importance of it to you.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I didn't go there for the opening.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you involved in the installation?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Uh-uh. [Negative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: No.

MARY BETH EDELSON: They did a gorgeous job of installing the work, though. I have, you know, a photograph of it. Yes. I mean if you don't go, you don't really have a—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you choose not to go, or they didn't have the budget to invite you?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I wasn't invited. If they don't invite you, you don't go.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Unless there's some other reason. If you have another show maybe someplace else right afterwards. Generally speaking, they have to pay for it. I mean it's too expensive.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Maybe that's not a good exhibition to use as an example of the response —

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, the show at—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —of both the audience and the critical response in a European venue versus an American one.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, when I had this show at Malmö Konstmuseum, I think I got something like 40 reviews. Of course it's a small country. It's a smaller venue. You're a big fish in a small pond. But there were like full-page huge reviews from all around the country. So that was nice. And the Migros Museum in Zurich, that was a fabulous, fabulous experience because Heike Munder is the director there and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know how to spell that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. H-E-I-K-E. And the last name is M-U-N-D-E-R. She's somebody that I've known for a long time. Actually her very first curated show was me and another woman that she knew, and it was kind of a collaborative between all of us. Then when she got into this position of being in a really big museum, anyway, she didn't invite any of us from that time. But then she had this exhibition in 2006 in which that was very appropriate to invite for that. And there were six artists. And it was—what was it? It was kind of an odd name. Oh! "It's Time to Speak Out" or something like that. Oh, "It's Time for Action." But it implied it's always time for action, the way it was presented. Other women that were in there: Annie Sprinkle and Yoko Ono and some other European women that I met for the first time. And I had such a good time with them. I'm so terrible at recalling names. Fannie Vancusi—that isn't right. I'd have to look up that name. And I became good friends with some of them. And you know, we've kept in touch. I mean that's the kind of wonderful experience: You go there, it's a great museum. It's a great installation. You're meeting new people. You're being treated well. And you get to know the staff and the director and, you know, everything. It's just— And I had someone install the wall collages for me that was the best installer I have ever run into. I wanted to take him home with me [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's great.

MARY BETH EDELSON: So that was a fabulous experience. And I got another fabulous experience, coincidentally also in Zurich, with Heike—not Heike Munder—with Frederikke Hansen at the Shedhalle [Zurich, Switzerland]. And again, the staff was wonderful. The people, it was like five artists—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think you spell Hansen H-A-N-S-E-N?

MARY BETH EDELSON: S-E-N. Yes. The artists that were invited were terrific artists, and, you know, I made friendships, and still keep in touch with the people. The weather is good. Weather being good is always important. And the venue was right on a lake. A very nice café [laughs]. See, you have these really wonderful memories when everything works that way. I can't say—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What year was that show, or approximately?

MARY BETH EDELSON: That was in 2004.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the name of the museum?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It's S-H-E-D-H-A-L-L-E.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Shedhalle, yes. Fabulous experiences. But those happened to me in Europe.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: I can't say I've had that kind of experience in the United States because you don't get taken care of as well. A lot of it is if you go somewhere that is not home, you need a certain amount of hospitality. You're not in your familiar surrounding, and you need to do a lot of work while you're there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: So you need a support system around you.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So that period of time, that was later in the sixties, I was wondering, going back just a little bit from there, did 9/11 impact your work? I mean obviously it impacted bellow Houston [street, New York] and then would have impacted your being in your studio for a period of time.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I don't think so. It covered everything with dust. My whole patio— I collected some of the dust knowing— Well, we all know what kind of particles are in that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, it was just a hard time for everybody. But I loved the way New Yorkers were so friendly and supportive of each other during that time. Walked down the street, total strangers asking you how you're doing. If everything's all right. I took a lot of photographs that day. I walked around the city for three days. I felt I was in a movie. It didn't feel like it was real. And I felt I just had to walk around and photograph and get in line at the hospitals to see if I could do anything. Go over, you know, just be out there for that period of time. But once I got back in the studio—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long were you out?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I was out walking around for three days.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long were you—was there a period of time when you couldn't live here?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, I could live here the whole time. I didn't have to leave.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: We were okay in SoHo. We got heavily dusted. But, no, we were all right. Actually when 9/11 happened, they told everybody to go out of that area and stop when they got to SoHo. And then they put barricades—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. Above Canal. I mean you couldn't go below Canal.

MARY BETH EDELSON: They put them at Houston at that point. And they didn't want you to go beyond Houston. But between Canal and Houston is really where they were trying to get everybody corralled because they felt they were out of harm's way. And of course nobody's phones were working, except for the pay homes. There were these long lines. And then there were these circles of people around cars, and the cars would have their radios tuned up, and there were circles of people trying to get information about it. And the people in some of the stores putting TV's and audio stuff so people could gather around and watch. Because those people were trapped in SoHo for a while.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I mean what it impacted on was just the daily life and the trauma that everybody went through.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: I can't say that it affected the art.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Going to a somewhat different subject, you traveled to install your exhibitions. Has traveling, any other kind of traveling, been an important influence in your work?

MARY BETH EDELSON: That's the only kind of traveling I do.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. So going out into nature or visiting a particular part of the world—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Forget it! [Laughs] No, my vacations are, you know, going to these venues. I love doing it. It's really much more fun than going out by yourself. It's really in the

middle of a community of people who are interested in what you're doing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. Uh-huh. I wanted to ask you about being included in the exhibition, the "WACK!"exhibition that Connie Butler put together. How was that experience? And did you—were you surprised in any way, looking back at your work historically, seeing it in the context of that exhibition? How did it impact you, that experience?

MARY BETH EDELSON: It was just fabulous! Connie Butler is a saint [laughs]. She did such a good job curating. You know some people were disappointed that they were left out. But she had 118 people in there. I mean— There were a few people, I felt, from Eastern European countries that she was, that were really—some of them now as good. And I assume that was because she had less information about some of those areas and didn't have—wasn't able to pick what might have been better. But maybe there wasn't anything better. I think she did a fabulous job. I went to every single opening. If they'd had two more, I would've got to those, too. I was a complete junkie for that exhibition. And did a little performance at the last—with the panel on the last.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was at PS 1 [MoMa, New York, New York] was the last?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, Vancouver [British Columbia, Canada] was the last one. It was the kind of performance I like to do now, or what I call incidental performances. And sometimes they're spontaneous. I just think of something, and I get up and I do it right then and there. And it's just short and hopefully of the moment and appropriate to the moment. That's where I see doing performances. Sometimes talking people that are right around me into doing it. Just a couple of weeks ago for the opening of the "Third Mind" at the Guggenheim, my friend Shigeko Kubota, who's on the top floor of our building, was in this exhibition, and she wanted me to come with her and to the dinner afterwards. And we were sitting—the two of us were sitting, and somebody else joined us. We were sitting there in this kind of very Asian-inspired exhibition. And on the edge of—I don't know really what it was we were sitting on—it was like stairs.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You're not on the ground in the Guggenheim?

MARY BETH EDELSON: We're inside on one of the ramps.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The dinner?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, no, not the dinner.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: This is just before the dinner. And we're sitting on this thing that made us sit sort of forward. We just were sitting, you know, just to rest on anything we could find, and looked down. And I thought we look like three monkeys sitting there: No See—[Laughs] See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. And so we did a photographic performance: We just sat there that way for a while. And then I had someone photograph it. People gathered so quickly when we were sitting there doing that because they really wanted to see something live. So that was kind of interesting. At the performance—these things, you have to see them—I had a T-shirt on underneath my usual hoodie I wear, and I said I was going to do a body performance work, the kind of body performance work you do when you're older. So I got up—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This was at the Guggenheim?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This was in Vancouver.

MARY BETH EDELSON: This was in Vancouver. And I'm on a panel, and I stand up, and I do this.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did they know you were going to do something?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: It wouldn't have made any difference. I would've stood up and done it anyway [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Inaudible].

MARY BETH EDELSON: I told the moderator before the panel started. She didn't have any big advance because I didn't decide to do it until that morning. Because it just suddenly hit me what I could do because I wanted to make fun of this whole aging body thing. So I still up, and I went through as if I was going to do a striptease. It was done very quickly. Slowly unzipping and I had a T-shirt on underneath it that had two huge eyes on my breasts. I opened up like this, and there you had these two big eyes.

[They laugh.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: It was just a laugh.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: So that's a trickstery kind of thing, too.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. Definitely.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. And so is the three sitting out. They're trickstery.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. I wanted to ask you now— So let's talk about the present and recent past, the most recent work you have done and are doing now.

MARY BETH EDELSON: The most recent work I've been doing is dealing with the renovation in this building [laughs]. That has been awesome. And it's taken up a lot of my time. But the work I'm doing in the studio—there are two things I'm doing: I'm working on my archives; and almost every woman that's in the general generation that I'm in, when you speak to her, you ask her what she's doing, she's working on her archives. So that is really a big job.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did "WACK!" prompt you to do that? Were you in any way—

MARY BETH EDELSON: No. No, it wasn't "WACK!" that prompted it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did someone speak to you and say, you know, you really should?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No. Not really. What happened was there was a program at the Hebrew College [sic].

JUDITH RICHARDS: On West Fourth Street.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hebrew Union College [New York, New York].

MARY BETH EDELSON: Right. About archiving, and women were talking about going to that and, you know, seeing— Because I didn't have a framework or schedule of what I should be doing. But I knew I should do something. And that was extremely informative. And then I bought some books after that, and I began to try to organize doing that. I had already started digitizing all the slides that I had, which is about 2,000 slides. And then what I had to do, because— When I talk about having drawings, I mean I have these drawings in bulk. I have 3,000 10-by-12 drawings—3,000 of them! All on Jute Tag paper. And I needed to document those. I have all those—the photographs that I've done, and variations from the nude photographs that I did, I made reproductions of the same image and then drew on that same one so I had all the variations of that. I needed to record that, record the addition numbers of all of those things, the dates, the whereabouts of the work. I needed to do the same thing with larger drawings. I have 300 drawings that are 40-by-30 on BFK paper.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You have these in flat files here? Or portfolios?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Some are in flats. I can show you this. Yes. I have them—I'm just organized. I have them on metal shelves in plastic envelopes that I have made on the sewing machine that are customized to the size of the drawings. And they're organized so that groups of drawings about various things are in one packet and another on these metal

shelves. But they're protected because of the plastic envelope. And I haven't quite finished doing all of that. And there's another of 300 that don't fall into those set sizes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where are you in this process, beginning, middle—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I'm toward the end. I'm toward the end of it. And I've photographed everything. I've put it into the computer and made hard copies of it so in case the computer dies. A friend of mine who's staying with me this week told me I should get that file program and put everything in the file program. So I think once I've got all this in the format I'm using now, then I'll take it and dump it in that. Because right now I don't have the photograph with the information next to it. So I need to do that through that file program.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's a huge undertaking.

MARY BETH EDELSON: It's a huge undertaking.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Artists not only talk about that but estate planning.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. No, that's what this is. It's estate planning. I talked to my son about being, you know, taking this. My son is a lawyer, so [laughs] he's the logical one, and he seems to be willing to take this over. But that also is a reason why I would want a gallery, a good gallery; is if I die, what's he going to do with all this work?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And if and when I die [laughs], it would be good if there's a dealer that's in on this if this whole thing falls on his back and it's too much.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you thought about forming a foundation, as some artists do, for tax purposes?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I haven't actually because it seemed to me at that lecture that that —it didn't suit what I want to do with the work. You know there's a lot of limitations if you— I mean what I would like to do is to have my children profit from any sales from that. There are foundations that will take the whole body of work, but you don't make a profit off of what they do with it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was thinking of something to avoid estate taxes on the value of the work.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Right. I haven't dealt with that. You know I'll have to figure that out.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So besides dealing with your loft and the building and archiving—

MARY BETH EDELSON: I'm also working on these collages. I'm working on a new series of collages now. And you can see when you walk through the studio that my—there are all these collage bits all over the place. What I do is I have images that I cut out and then put them together. I usually do all the cutting out in the evening when I'm tired and watching television. And I sit there and cut out.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What are you cutting them from?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I'm cutting them mostly from colored Xeroxes. I get images that I want, and I manipulate those images. And then I make—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Colored Xeroxes from images of—?

MARY BETH EDELSON: From Staples. That Staples prints.

JUDITH RICHARDS: From what source material?

MARY BETH EDELSON: From finding images and manipulating those images. Or drawings—

JUDITH RICHARDS: From magazines or the Internet?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, not the Internet. I would never use the Internet. Magazines or— But changing them away from the— I'm working with snakes right now [laughs]. I'm doing

this Medea image with me smiling, laughing, in the middle of it with all these snakes. It's another kind of tricksterу-looking—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sounds like it.

MARY BETH EDELSON: —yes, looking thing. So I'm working on that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's a drawing.

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, that's a collage. Yes. I have made a great many new collages, and they're waiting to be backed. After I make them—I always make a big pile of them because it takes—to back them is another—it takes a long time to set up the mechanisms for doing that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You make the color collages. I mean you make the color Xeroxes or Staples does. Then you cut the images. Then you position them on always a particular size now that you're working on?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I cut them up in different configurations and paste them together. And sometimes I have another image made, another color image made of that. And sometimes I just use that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And so you're pasting them onto a board, a piece of paper?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, no. I'm just pasting them onto themselves.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Onto each other. So then the backing is—

MARY BETH EDELSON: The backing I do all at one time. I accumulate a huge amount of the collages.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And these are free form. Because they're pieces attached to each other, we're not taking about a rectangular shape.

MARY BETH EDELSON: That's right. They're free form. So then I cut out muslin fabric in the various free form, not to be tightly the same size, but to roughly the same size. I put glue on that. I stick it in the hot press, press it down, take it out. And then I have to cut into individually around all of the edges. It's very, very time-consuming, labor-intensive, each one of these little pieces. Amazingly so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you thought at all about using the computer and the cut-and-paste functions that you could use?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, I don't want that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No. Okay.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I don't want the computer look. I want the hand look.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. The computer look, I have used that for— When I was doing the portraits of women and I was using photographs that other people took, I had to manipulate those photographs. And I did that in the computer. But that's the only time that I would use it. And I don't want my work to look computer-generated.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So the images you're working on right now are these—a figure with snakes. Is the image of you?

MARY BETH EDELSON: In the center of it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the center with snakes surrounding.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. It's my face, and I'm laughing, head thrown back and laughing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And there are all these snakes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And where did the idea of using snakes come from?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, I've been working with snakes since I was nine years old. I find them very interesting. And I love the forms, the waviness and the form and the ways you can manipulate them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And all the references they come with, too.

MARY BETH EDELSON: All the references. I mean they're in many, many paintings and many, many drawings.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You wanted to talk about the position of an artist, for you, of having a very well-known body of earlier work and yet continuing on. We all know from Merritt Oppenheim and everyone the burden that that can be. But I know you wanted to talk about that.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. It's problematic not only for me but for a number of other women from the seventies, whose maybe one or two pieces became very well known. And then people are unaware that we continued making other works. And when people ask us—curators ask us—for work for an exhibition, it's invariably the pieces that everybody already knows. So if you try to steer them into a new piece, they're not interested. I mean they don't even look at it. It's not that they look at it and they say, No, I don't think that's as good. They don't even want to hear about it. So I have been trying, the last year and a half, inspired by "WACK!" in part, to have more people come to my studio and make studio visits, and show them what I'm doing. And also show them some of the seventies work at the same time because they want to see that. So they see a range of work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is something that you hadn't been doing before? Or you feel like you have more success at doing it now because of that show?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I think I have more success at doing it, and I don't think I was aggressive enough before about doing it because I didn't see the opportunity to do it. And also you can bring the subject up with somebody you sort of feel out whether they're going to be receptive or not. And you don't invite them if it looks like they're taking to steps back instead of forward [laughs]. So, you know, I just felt, you know, people were more receptive about it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how has that been going, and what have you learned about from that process in terms of this issue, how to deal with this issue?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I like very much to have people who are serious people come for studio visits. I like it a lot. I enjoy it. I appreciate the fact that they're willing to come and put their time in. And several exhibitions have come as a result of these recent studio visits. But they have picked work from the seventies. Another part of it is, you know, nobody has any money now.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And so they can look at those seventies works, and they can see they're all framed up and ready to go. And that may impact, in part, on their decision.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes. Of course this isn't—this is really a very broad problem. Have you ever talked to other artists about dealing with this?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, absolutely. Carolee Schneemann and I have had this conversation over and over again. You know it drives us crazy. And nobody has got a solution for how to get out of it. My feeling is that presenting— If I had an exhibition in New York City at a major gallery, that I could present some of the seventies work along with some of the new work. And that would be a good way to sort of slide into people seeing especially the wall collages, because they are so much a continuation of the posters.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] There is—and not just feminist and of course not just you—there is at this moment in the art world a great interest in looking back at the sixties and seventies. It just so happens that was—the seventies was the time when you made these works. So that's happening at the same moment—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —that this is going on.

MARY BETH EDELSON: So it makes it even more so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It makes it even more so. You have this show right now—or I don't know if it just closed—at Alexander Grey where you have those photographs ["Works on Paper from the 1970," Alexander Gray Gallery, New York, New York, 2009].

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And of course that's a show of all drawings from the seventies.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, as I understand it, the galleries now are showing a lot of drawings, and they're showing a lot of seventies work. And I think it has to do with the whole marketing thing. It's easier to look back and know, okay, those people have survived from the seventies. There is a value there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: And if they're drawings, the drawings are not as expensive. So they're easier to sell now.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But I think that all that is predicated on the fact that you've continued to work.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And continued to do work that's of interest. Otherwise I don't think that—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, I think that's true.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, I know that's true because I know some of the women who were disappointed that they did not get into "WACK!" who just did work for four or five years in the seventies, and then they quit. And that's not nearly as interesting unless they did something really extraordinary.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you, when you look back—and probably this is the subject of many panels from the "WACK!" exhibition—do you see a change in the way women artists are approaching the subject of feminism? Do you think the art world has changed?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I was really gratified when they had panels. They had almost a panel every weekend at P.S. 1. And there were so many young people that were there that were just—both men and women—really interested to hear what the mothers of feminism had to say. And, you know, I've gone through it several times when, you know, the audience, the young audience, is lukewarm about it. But I think that has changed for the better.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you're speaking to younger women artists, do you think that their experience is different now than it was? I mean has there been substantial, from your perception, substantial difference for women in the art world?

MARY BETH EDELSON: That's hard to really answer because without doing a survey and talking to a lot of women— Obviously certain women have been plucked out and are doing well. But the women, of course, I would tend to meet are the ones who are out there and who are engaged. But I don't know, you know, what some of the other women, what's happening with them? I don't know. But the ones that came to those panels, they wanted to get together, they wanted to organize, they wanted to do things together. And whenever I hear people in an audience want to do that, I ask them—I stand up and say, "At the end of this panel, I want to meet all of you in this corner over here." And they come over there, and

I say, "Now, I want you to exchange cards and make a date for when you're going to get together. This is the way you do it." Because otherwise they won't do it. They'll all stand up and say we wish we had somebody to work with. But they won't, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So there's real need for a sense of community, but much harder to create it.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, much harder to create it. And some of these practical things like, you know, ask everybody to get in the corner [laughs], doesn't occur to them, you know. But you have somebody who's one of the originals stand up and tell you to do that, you're going to do it [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are there other topics that you wanted to cover from your notes that you have?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I think we've done a pretty good job. Well, I guess one thing is the subject of humor.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. We touched on it a little with the trickster, I guess.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, the trickster is a humorous character. But I have found that humor is a really good political tool, because you can get people to go along with things that you're doing much better if you give them a laugh. Some things that might sound too strained or too radical for some people, if they're laughing about it, they're accepting it a little bit more. It's making some headway. I've used humor in my work. Again, I go back to even when I was a kid, I did paintings that had humor in them. But humor to me—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it's a combination of being effective and having—being almost an intuitive part of your creativity.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. It's a practical tool, and it comes naturally to me to do it. It's not anything I have to push. And I would say that as I was beginning to understand how effective the tool was, I encouraged that more in myself, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right now with the snakes, is there an element of humor in that, those collages?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, I would say there is because I'm laughing so hard [laughs]. And you look at it, and it's—well, you have to look at it for a while and decide how you want to interpret it because it's not what you usually juxtaposition. Usually have a scowling face coming out, the Gorgon kind of thing coming out. I'm not sure that I will continue to have my face on all of my—it's very easy for me to paste over that and put another face on it. But right now that's—this particular face is the one that I am interested in. The other thing I wanted to say about humor is that it's outside of the realm of the patriarchy. And therefore you can present—you can present things in a different way. It's possible to break a mold by using humor, and break a mold that's a patriarchal mold because of the natural attraction of humor. And then it has the quality of disrupting existing standards. So it's very, very powerful. And almost no one has the courage, if we've given them a laugh and they're in a group, for them to attack you at that point. You don't attack the person who's just made you laugh.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you— Are there other artists from the past who you think have used that tactic that you know of?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I think it's a tactic that women have used for a long time. Our laughter, I think, is fearful to men. They don't want to be laughed at. And that's always a power that women have in mixed company, is the women can laugh at the men. And there's nothing—well, not nothing—but it's what they fear. Especially if other men are in the room and other men see them being laughed at. So I think it's a kind of unconscious power that we have, that we can use, you know, when we want to use it. That's, of course, when you're laughing at somebody. That's not the way I use humor. I use it to get a laugh rather than— But the possibility of using it as a weapon against somebody is also there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmmm.

MARY BETH EDELSON: And it's not used— Well, I don't know if that's true or not. I started to say that I think it has a different effect of women, if you make fun of women. I can't think of ever watching, observing that happening. Can you think of it, where a woman has been made fun of in public or in small groups with humor?

JUDITH RICHARDS: In a work of art or just in—

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, no, just generally.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, I'm sure they've existed.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Must exist.

JUDITH RICHARDS: On television in sitcoms.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, yes, yes. Yes. That's different. I'm talking about in our actual culture. In sitcoms and in humor on television, that's a whole different thing because that's a setup, and you know it's coming. But I'm talking about in polite society, and you're out talking. That's where being laughed at is very fearful for men.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. I'm not sure I can think of any.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes. I mean that was just off the top of my head, whether it's ever used in the same way with women, and I couldn't think of anything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have there been any critics who you feel have been especially understanding of your work and supportive, and you feel that their writing about your work has been important to you?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, a lot. Donald Kuspit was very supportive. And—so mad at myself when I can't think of their names [laughs]. What's his name? You know it's another guy from Chicago. What is his name? Very well-known critic from— Oh, I can't think of it. He wrote an article early on about me that was printed in *Arts Magazine*. I almost had it. No, it went out. And I think Holland Cotter has done a really good job with women in general, as Jerry Saltz also has.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Those are all men.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Those are all men. Those are all men. Lucy Lippard has been an enormous supporter and, you know, early on one of the first. I could give you a list.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, that's okay. I know from your bibliography.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you—do you feel you learned something about your work reading these critics?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Absolutely! Absolutely! Oh, Jan Avgikos wrote an article for one of my catalogs. She was extremely insightful in what she said. I learned a lot from— I learn from people just to the exhibition and giving me an honest response. I love feedback. Yes. You really learn a lot from other people.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When the "WACK!" show was at P.S. 1, did you find yourself going back and listening to what other people were saying?

MARY BETH EDELSON: Oh, [inaudible]! No. [Laughs] I got really, really positive responses from the posters. And a lot of people came up and said those images were the ones that stuck with them the most from the exhibition. But that might be because they're the most familiar with them. But, yes. And really good— It was reproduced and spoken about in the reviews. Yes. I mean there was this article that came out called "Girls Gone Wild." It was in one of these little neighborhood newspapers around the Museum of Contemporary Art [MOCA, Los Angeles, California], and they did a cover page and a three-page article during the "WACK!" show.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you did the poster of the *Last Supper*, was there a lot of—did you get a lot of negative feedback from people who weren't, whose faces you didn't put in that? Was that difficult to figure out who—

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, because it wasn't important when it first came out. Nobody cared. They didn't care that they weren't in it. This person from Washington, DC, making this artwork? Who cared? [Laughs] No, I didn't get any negative feedback. The thing that has changed about that poster over the years is that people got the humor of it right away. But what they didn't get was the underlying message that was challenging organized religion for the way they cut women out of positions of power. They didn't get that. It took 25 years for them to get that, and then they began censoring that poster. And that poster was censored one time after another.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Many other artists who have used the same theme have also been censored. This is a real hot-button issue, the Last Supper.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Yes, yes. It's crazy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You could do a whole exhibition on artists interpreting the Last Supper.

MARY BETH EDELSON: [Laughs] That would be interesting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think after you finish your archiving project—and this is my last question—after you finish the archiving project which you're almost done, and you've been having people in the studio, if you could create your own exhibition, when you think about it, to really present the whole breadth of your work, would you include all of— I don't know how to ask this question. How would you represent all these different areas of your work? Would they be—would you set it up chronologically? Or would you set it up thematically? What would be the best way to understand your work?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I think you could do it every which way. There'd be so many possibilities. It could be done chronologically; that would be interesting. I've never actually done it, you know, done that. Usually the exhibitions are hung according to what's going to look best next to what. And maybe speak to—you have a reference to the thing that's close to it. But not strictly going through and being able to see the chronology of it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think that would be interesting for you to see that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: I think that would be very interesting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: To see how your work has evolved or been circular or things of—

MARY BETH EDELSON: Something else that I think would be very interesting—I don't know if I mentioned this in the first time we spoke—but I think it would be extremely interesting to do a chronological show like the Matisse- [Pablo] Picasso show[Matisse Picasso, MoMA, 2003]. Did you see that one? I loved that show because it revealed the true workings of artists. We talk to each other. We're influenced by each other. There's a dialog going on. And you could see that in their work. This needs to be applied to the feminist movement in the seventies. These exhibitions do not reflect the chronology. They do not reflect the dialog. And they don't reflect how extraordinarily collaborative and collective that effort was. And that we didn't have stars except for people who insisted [laughs] that they were the stars. We really were working together. And that would be so interesting, to reveal that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And "WACK!" didn't do that?

MARY BETH EDELSON: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because of its focus on individual contributions.

MARY BETH EDELSON: No, it didn't do that. Yes. "WACK!" was wonderful. It was the best first exhibition possible. But this is something to follow up and say— Because people are confused about who did what and when—and how much cross-fertilization there happened between groups. I mean let's say even within something like A.I.R. where you're exhibiting together, the cross-fertilization between the women and A.I.R. and then *Heresies* magazine. Even if we weren't exhibiting together, we were dialoging, we were seeing each other's work. And so there was a lot of influence there. And then on the West Coast, with

Womanhouse and that, they were practically living in that building together all the time. And the feedback between each other and the performances produced and work that was produced by three or four people, and nobody said I did this, you know, this was something that came out of Womanhouse. And those aspects of it are so at odds with the way the art world is.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So your ideal retrospective would not just focus on your work. Or it could be focused on your work. But also to interject works by other artists.

MARY BETH EDELSON: Well, no, I'm talking about two different exhibitions.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh.

MARY BETH EDELSON: I would love to see my work done just that way. And I would love to see another exhibition that emphasizes the chronology and the dialog and how that whole thing unfolded.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY BETH EDELSON: It would be very interesting [laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, thank you very much. Shall we say it's done? Okay. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]