
The Politics
of
Women's
Spirituality

ESSAYS ON THE RISE OF
SPIRITUAL POWER WITHIN
THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Edited by Charlene Spretnak

CHANGING RITUALS BY ARTISTS

The unique and sometimes zany way in which some women think is given full reign in our art/rituals, where we have the opportunity to re-create the world in our image. Artists bring the creative process to ritual. This process adds to its contents, stimulates ritual's evolution, and helps to avoid repetitious stagnation. The following works are ever-changing and evolving ritual performances by visual artists.

Book of Gulls (twelve drawings and related text: silverpoint, ink, and typewriters; 1978, as yet unpublished). I went to the beach daily for twelve successive days to feed the seagulls, keeping a journal for the duration, noting my observations of the gulls' habits, their variations, and other related information. Each day I did at least one drawing of a gull. As the days progressed, I realized that while on the one hand the piece was about seagulls and their habitation of the Connecticut shore where I lived, it was still more about the archetypal act of nurturing. I became acutely aware of the mythic quality of birds in general, and as I performed the daily task of feeding, observing, and writing, I allowed my fantasies to play with the concept of bird as woman, bird as Goddess, bird as avenger, bird as spirit, and bird as symbol of transformation and transcendence. A very simple feeding activity, then, became a structure upon which to hang not only an elementary empirical investigation, but also a mythic identification, personified by my intuitive self as a vehicle of flight and passage . . .

— MARY FISH

Androgyny and Memory: The Queen of the World Passing into Alchemy (A melodrama intended to satirize patriarchal notions of "high art"; Temple of Olympian Zeus, Athens, Greece, 1978). Three women, wrapped in classical robes and wearing plastic cat masks, drape themselves around the base of one of the remaining columns. With heads abruptly turned away from the ruin and toward the crowd of curious tourists, the feline goddesses remain frozen to the stone. Suddenly, to the rhythm of their clicking tongues, the goddesses perform a quick tap dance and then return to the original tableau.

I use satire in an attempt to restructure experiences to become more suitable for the acceptance of goddess myths.

— JANE ELLEN GILMORE

Personal Maintenance/Preserved Flowers; April 1978. A performance in which I sat in a chair for several hours without moving. The chair was at

the end of a corridor facing a film image. The film was of me sitting on a toilet, legs spread apart with close-up shots from above of my hands as I pried long red fake fingernails off of each finger with a pair of scissors. The fingernails fell between my legs into the toilet. The film was projected above a bank of live flowers which I had picked and dipped in wax. The performance took place at the opening of a large group show. Because of my stillness, silence, and lack of activity, most viewers chose to see and refer to me as an object. Many indulged in comments and insults which were directed at me as a passive receiver. This would never have happened had I assumed an obviously aggressive demeanor. As I sat watching the film, being aware of the crowd, I focused on the audience as individuals, hoping my silence would contribute to their own self-awareness in the situation. I thought about the helpless discomfort of an unwillingly passive role and how that produces frustration, acts of self-destruction, and violence in women's lives. I concentrated on understanding vulnerability as a place from which knowledge and strength can grow. I concentrated on transforming the victim's position.

—ALYSON POU

Winter Solstice; 1977. yes. reverence to her. the chant on the winter solstice on the full moon on the beach in the snow in the full spirit of the great round. on the darkest night of the year in the dark of the snow which obscured the moon and in the company of nine cars of city state and federal police who forbade the fire on the order of a superior who had the authority to forbid. but the moon asserted herself in the huge white waves which contained us in their rhythm and glow and rocked the chanting into a trance of chanting really chanting. or maybe i myself was in a trance from the very beginning anyway carrying totems and images of people i loved in the pockets of my spacesuit chanting my own rites of passage for myself. and the fire asserted itself too in the form of a delayed due to extreme cold chemical reaction causing a spontaneous combustion in the sacrificial bowl. it was perfect. a surprise chance to see ourselves only eyes showing between ponchos and parkas. chanting in circles around the tiny fire in the wooden bowl under the white canopy which also appeared spontaneously. and more chanting. and altered chanting. and invocations and glorifications and in general much reverence to her. to her to us to each other. and then at a certain point which we all realized together the chanting was over. for this time and the chanters lined up and passed the unlit fire log by log hand over hand over beach over fence back into the truck. and hugged and kissed each other and me and separated in the dark in the snow back in cars and bus back into the other world.⁷

—DONNA HENES

Invitation to a Burning; 1980. For the Spring Equinox 1980, I presented a participatory ritual *Invitation to a Burning* at the Los Angeles Woman's Building. I made a "body" out of clay, muslin, pigment, and wax and stuffed it with dead vegetation. It represented our winter of oppression, our old bound selves. In a candlelight ceremony we burned the body, and women leaped over the flames together. Afterward we filled the clay husk with earth and planted seeds sacred to women: barley, flax, and poppies. These seeds sprouted and flourished while the piece was on display—they created a new "body" representing women's new-growing spirit. Seeds from the performance were sent to the international women's gathering in Copenhagen in 1980. Women planted "Liberty Gardens" to celebrate womanspirit rising everywhere.

— FAITH WILDING

Performance: Diction Dictionary (South American creation myths featuring women as the creative force, the genetrix; 1980). The performance begins with sweeping the space and evocation of the celestial housewife who brought the world into being and women's everyday maintenance activities. Using a globe as a kick ball, curves for rivers, stones, and seeds I built a symbolic landscape. At the end I wrapped myself in strips of paper evoking the productivity of the writer (the way some of Sappho's poems were found as the wrappings of a mummy).

— ANN-SARGENT WOOSTER

Feminist Rosary; 1980. Although I am not a Catholic, I have always been fascinated by the rosary and decided that we needed a feminist version of it. I got an ordinary Catholic rosary and had the crucifix replaced with a Mary medallion. Then, from a standard instruction booklet, I learned the rosary's underlying structure so that I could isolate out the patriarchal content and construct a new cycle of prayers of "songs" honoring the Great Goddess (which I adapted from Wicca rituals in books by Z. Budapest, Starhawk, and Margot Adler). On the "stem" I say various blessings and invocations to prepare for entering the magic circle. The circle itself is conveniently segmented by four single beads on which I invoke the powers of the cardinal directions and the solstices and equinoxes. Between these, while silently chanting a repetitive incantation to cast and maintain the magic circle, I meditate on the meaning of the great Pagan festivals at the cross-quarter points: Samhain, Candlemas, Beltane, and Lammas. Thus, the Feminist Rosary has become a powerful personal code of the traditions, time/space cycles, and sources of strength that lie hidden in our deepest spiritual heritage.

— MIMI LOBELL

Interior Scroll; Performance, 1975. Interior scroll is an event for the body as a source of wisdom — vulvic space as “interior knowledge.” Poised naked I slowly draw out from my vagina a narrow, five-foot-long scroll and read the text printed there.

The image is about the power and possession of naming. The physical movement has to do with the passage of interior thought to external signification. The scroll makes reference to an uncoiling serpent; I associate Her with ticker tape, rainbow, torah in the ark, chalice, choir loft, plumb line, bell tower, umbilicus, and tongue.

— CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN

NOTES

[Part of this article appeared in different form in an interview with Mary Beth Edelson by Alyson Pou, *Atlanta Art Papers*, vol. 4, no. 4, July/Aug. 1980.]

1. *Your 5,000 Years Are Up!* by Mary Beth Edelson. Notes from the unpublished manuscript, 1973.
2. Lucy R. Lippard, *Seven Cycles: Public Rituals* by Mary Beth Edelson, Introduction, p. 6., 1980.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
4. Mary Beth Edelson, *Intermedia*, edited by Hans Breder and Stephen C. Foster, University of Iowa, 1979.
5. Rebecca Ballenger, *Artery*, William Paterson College. “Participants Speak” by Rebecca Ballenger and Carey Caccavo, Fall 1980.
6. Carey Caccavo, *Artery*, William Paterson College. “Participants Speak” by Rebecca Ballenger and Carey Caccavo, Fall 1980.
7. Donna Henes, “Winter Solstice,” *The Great Goddess*, no. 5, *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, Sept. 1978.