

## AMERICAN ART OF THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

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Anna Markowska  
University of Wrocław  
Polish Institute of World Art Studies  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8694-906X>

### Spirituality in American women's art: the Heresies collective, artistic re-enchantment practices, and new theological perspectives\*

"As women, we are aware that historically the connections between our lives, our arts and our ideas have been suppressed. Once these connections are clarified, they can function as a means to dissolve the alienation between artist and audience, and to understand the relationships between art and politics, work and workers. As a step toward a demystification of art, we reject the standard relationship of criticism to art within the present system, which has often become the relationship of advertiser to product. We will not advertise a new set of genius-products just because they are made by women. We are not committed to any particular style or aesthetic, nor to the competitive mentality that pervades the art world. Our view of feminism is one of process and change, and we feel that in the process of dialogue we can foster a change in the meaning of art". This manifesto was published by a New York-based collective of feminist artists in the fifth issue of the magazine *Heresies* in 1978. At that time, the women's collective Heresies, characterised as a feminist think tank by Corey Lovelace, had already been active in New York for two years<sup>1</sup>. The Great Goddess Collective was formed

concurrently. They both drew on a foundation of diverse feminist consciousness-raising (CR) initiatives in New York-based communities such as New York Radical Women (1967–69) and Redstockings (1969–ca.1975). Their activities had a significant impact on the art field, particularly through interacting with groups such as Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), Ad Hoc Committee of the Art Workers Coalition and WSABAL (Women, Students and Artists for Black Artists' Liberation). The West Coast counterpart to *Heresies* magazine, *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women* (1977–1980), can be seen as blending spirituality with radical, inclusive feminism, aiming for political and social transformation. While some New York artists associated with Conceptualism, such as Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper and Eleanor Antin, showed little interest in history and mythology, many artists involved with *Heresies* explored history in order to reclaim it for women's narratives. This historical exploration often focused on a period when the divine was envisioned as female.

The entire fifth issue of *Heresies* was dedicated to The Great Goddess, representing a shift towards a gynocentric world view in response to the prevailing androcentric perspective. This shift not only advocated for women's empowerment, but also

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<sup>1</sup> Lovelace (2016: 10).

occasionally veered into misandry.<sup>2</sup> *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe 7000–3500 BC. Myths, Legends and Cult Images* (1974) by Marija Gimbutas (1921–1994), an archaeologist and professor at the University of California, undoubtedly played a significant role in popularising this topic. Indeed, Gimbutas continued to explore goddesses in her later work. As summarised by Jennie Klein, a contemporary researcher on the spirituality of feminist artists, Gimbutas pointedly referred to a period when scientific inquiry was characterised by personality, audacity or even hutzpah rather than meticulous inference and a reluctance to generalise. While Gimbutas' 'archeomythology' lacked grounding in reality, the concept of a harmonious matriarchal society existing during the Neolithic era profoundly influenced the collective imagination. This was also due to the emergence of significant publications around that time. As Jennie Klein pointed out, a year earlier Mary Daly had published *Beyond God the Father*, and the magazine *WomanSpirit* had commenced publication. Shortly after Gimbutas' book, *When God Was a Woman* (1976) by Merlin Stone was also released<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, *The First Sex* (1971) by Elizabeth Gould Davis played a crucial role in popularising the concept of a harmonious and peaceful matriarchy. The theme of goddesses was subsequently revisited numerous times. Charlene Spretnak, a former editor of *Chrysalis*, continued her exploration of spirituality with her book *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece* (1978), followed by the anthology *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* (1981). These themes have also been addressed in subsequent books, including *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine* (1981) by Christine Downing, *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women* (1985) by J. S. Bolen, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess. 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (1999) by Starhawk, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (1993) by Cynthia Eller, and *A God Who Looks Like Me: Discovering a Woman-Affirming Spirituality* (1995) by Patricia Lynn Reilly. A more comprehensive exploration of this topic is provided by Barbara Ardinger and Patricia Monaghan, among others<sup>4</sup>. Over time, the transition into a goddess became a therapeutic myth

for many women, allowing them to approach life as a sacred incantation, as proposed by Lasara Firefox Allen, for example<sup>5</sup>. Kathryn Rountree's critical discussion of goddess worship addresses many of the concerns raised in the 1970s by feminist anthropologists such as Sally Binford and Sherry Ortner. They argued that the concept of the goddess reinforced stereotypes of women as nature-bound and essentialist, with no basis in archaeological evidence.<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway's critique further challenged traditional modes of thinking, highlighting the limitations of dichotomous thought and totalising theories that fail to transcend boundaries between humans, animals and machines. It may be encapsulated in her famous statement: "(...) I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess"<sup>7</sup>. Popular culture has demonstrated, however, that there is ample space for the emergence of cyborg goddesses. Furthermore, acknowledging the constraints of resurrecting goddesses within contemporary thought, Rountree emphasises that a goddess serves as "a political and psychological tool for women seeking liberation and empowerment, but she is a great deal more"<sup>8</sup>. Included in this 'much more' is the recognition that the Goddess movement emerged as a response to monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity, serving as a critical examination of the legacy of somatophobia and a quest to reclaim women's bodies. Thus, through Goddess rituals – DIY activities – women underwent a process of self-recreation, reclaiming agency and discovering their manifold potentialities. As Rountree elucidates, the Goddess embodies contradictions, allowing women to embody both lover and virgin, female and male, infant and crone, while activating both creative and destructive energies. Above all, the Goddess enables women to conceive of themselves independently of masculinity and transcending the notion of God. Importantly, all of this embodies political relevance, contrary to critiques by Marxist-oriented feminists who dismissed it as escapism and unproductive utopianism.

In this article I aim to reflect on the kind of feminine spirituality advocated by the seminal fifth issue of *Heresies*, which served as a reader for the religious quest of the second wave of feminism. I also

<sup>2</sup> Young, *Nathanson* (2010: 242).

<sup>3</sup> Klein (2009: 575–602).

<sup>4</sup> Ardinger (2000: 137–138); Monaghan (2010: 609–619).

<sup>5</sup> Allen (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Rountree (1999: 138–165).

<sup>7</sup> Haraway (1991: 181).

<sup>8</sup> Rountree (1999: 156).

aim to explore the appeal of this kind of spirituality in the context of the current post-secular turn. The Great Goddess issue is now available in open access. Furthermore, the online platform of The Feminist Institute (TFI Digital Archive) founded by Kathleen Landy in 2016 provides access to the materials of The Great Goddess Collective, as part of its archive<sup>9</sup>.

### Consciousness raising: inspired by dreams and innovative timekeeping

The introductory article in *Heresies*, "The Three Faces of Goddess Spirituality," by Merlin Stone, outlined the pivotal role of raising women's consciousness to empower them in areas where they had previously faced obstacles. Stone (1931–2011), the renowned author of *When God Was a Woman*, emphasised three key points. Firstly, she focused on the importance of revisiting the past when female deities were worshiped. Secondly, she underscored the growing importance in the 1970s of women's perspectives in matters of religion, intuition and theological contemplation. Thirdly, she drew attention to the hierarchical structure of religious institutions, their institutionalisation and the dominant position of male clergy. In the first instance, it became clear that the great monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity had marginalised women not only religiously, but also economically and socially. Her second point challenged the assumption that male theologians were the sole authorities on theological matters. Finally, the focus was directed upon the institutional and social dominance of men that resulted in the inferior status of women.

All three of these aspects, which intertwine spiritual concerns with political, social, and economic issues, specifically, the association of the "Father in Heaven" with the "father on earth," as Stone noted, elicited anger. This anger was also fuelled by the observation that male-oriented religions passively accepted racism, leading to the conclusion that traditional religious values were being wielded as tools of oppression. Merlin Stone further advocated for a change in the notation of time, suggesting that, rather than referencing Jesus, it should be linked to the growth of seeds sown in soil, associated with the divine power of females. Based on her approxi-

mation of this time to around 8000 BC (undoubtedly influenced by the findings of Gimbutas), she added the year of her article's publication, 1978, considering herself to be living in the year 9978. This time adjustment included a period when women were revered as beings endowed with supernatural power. Stone also referred to Betsy Damon's performance, "The 7000 Year Old Woman", publicly presented the streets of New York in 1977. Damon impersonated a sculpture of the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus, symbolising the Great Mother-Goddess, in her depiction. Using small bags of flour as breasts, she punctured them during the performance, releasing the flour in a magical ritual inspired by her own dream. This visionary approach paralleled the way in which second-wave feminism assimilated Jung's legacy. Discussions of personal and collective dreams were featured in *Heresies*, including those by Chellis Glendinning, later known as an eco-psychologist and the author of numerous books. One of her recent works, *In the Company of Rebels: A Generational Memoir of Bohemians, Deep Heads, and History Makers* (2019), offers a personal reflection on the activists of the 1960s and 1970s.

### Reclaiming agency: motivations, altars, rituals

Carol P. Christ (1945–2021) examined in her article *Why Women Need a Goddess* the importance of discovering divinity within oneself, as it intertwines with self-acceptance, a sense of agency, and connection to the world. Such solace is unattainable within a system primarily centred on masculine ideals, and proves psychologically devastating for women. Images of goddesses across various cultures offer inspiring depictions of feminine strength and beauty, breaking the confines of impossibility. A year after the publication of the fifth issue of *Heresies*, Christ and Judith Plaskow published *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (1979). In this seminal work the authors underscored the significant political and psychological implications of the Goddess symbol within the feminist movement. They drew upon the insights of Clifford Geertz and Mary Daly. Quoting Geertz, they emphasised how religious symbols mould cultural ethos, shaping a society's fundamental values and fostering deeply ingrained attitudes and emotions, thereby

<sup>9</sup> The Great Goddess Collective website, <https://www.the-feministinstitute.org/people?id=120> (accessed: 11.3.2024).

perpetuating social and political structures aligned with the symbolic system. Religions centred on a male deity engender 'moods' and 'motivations' that foster women's psychological dependence on men and male authority, while implying that female power remains perpetually marginalised. Building on Daly's ideas, they critiqued how social structures are justified through the image of the God-Father, reinforcing male dominance in patriarchy. The authors highlighted four key aspects of Goddess symbolism: the affirmation of female power, the celebration of the female body's significance, the acknowledgment of female will, and the nurturing of bonds between women and their heritage<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, Christ and Plaskow's reader featured a text by Naomi R. Goldenberg (since 1977 a professor at the University of Ottawa), who, after critiquing Carl Gustav Jung's models of femininity for their inherent sexism and their tendency to reinforce gender stereotypes, advocated for the constructive role of fantasy activity in nurturing religiosity through visions and dreams<sup>11</sup>. This also occurred within artistic endeavours. Suffice it to mention once again the dream notations of both Chellis Glendinning and Betsy Damon. Damon's performance *The 7,000 Year Old Woman* was inspired by her dream vision.

Returning to *Heresies*, Toni Head admitted that she felt a remarkable sense of peace when she began praying to the Mother Goddess instead of to the male God. She even modified the hymn "Jesus Loves Me" to "Isis Loves Me", despite no longer practising religion at the time. This experience led her to believe that only a feminist, non-dogmatic and non-authoritarian religion could truly celebrate and sanctify femininity. Furthermore, she argued that the institutional structure of such a religion should facilitate effective political activism and provide economic benefits, such as the tax exemptions enjoyed by other religious organisations. At the time of writing her paper for *Heresies*, she was not only an activist with the National Organization for Women (NOW), but also spearheaded the establishment of The Mother Church Inc. in Florida. The church's name was subsequently changed to the Pagoda-Temple of Love, when Head transferred it to two lesbian couples from St. Augustine, Florida, Morgana MacVicar/

Rena Carney and Suzanne Chance/Kathleen Clementson. This institution subsequently obtained tax-exempt status as a Goddess church. It served not only as a hub for the Wicca movement, where participants could engage in ceremonies honouring the Goddess (led by Julie Eaton, who named herself Morgana MacVicar), but also as a guesthouse and cultural centre. Activities included women's belly dance workshops, nude swimming in the pool, fire circle rituals on the beach, Tarot readings, concerts, theatre performances and parapsychological workshops<sup>12</sup>. In *Contemporary Feminist Rituals*, Kay Turner explores the imagistic rebirth of modern women and their active participation in creating new images based on their own bodies. She emphasises that true empowerment arises from bodily engagement and concrete physical relationships, rather than from mere information. Women's rituals, she argues, provide a gentle way to transition out of patriarchal spaces, in which women were confined, and into a new phase of life in which they can assert their agency. Turner advocates for the creation of women's rituals that promote solidarity and positive visions, believing that these can eventually lead to legal changes and improve the psyche and well-being of women. Turner's involvement in a lesbian feminist performance group she founded underscores her commitment to exploring feminist themes through art and activism. At the time of writing for *Heresies*, she was conducting research-based performances of ancient rituals as part of her "Feminist Rituals as Reclamation and Revolution" series. Turner, who remains active as a cultural anthropologist, focuses on researching women's non-institutional spirituality. One of her interests is private domestic altars crafted by women, which she views as a form of 'femmage', a term coined by Miriam Schapiro. These altars, constructed from collage and assemblage techniques, symbolise care, concern, and domestic warmth. Turner emphasises that their additive form allows for continual change and for the establishment of new relationships, making them a performative form that transcends linear time and the boundaries imposed by death. Interestingly, in the same year, Denise Linn published a book on a similar topic, titled *Altars: Bringing Sacred Shrines into Your Everyday Life* (1999). In *Heresies*, Jere Van Syoc's article *My*

<sup>10</sup> Christ, Plaskow (1979: 273–287).

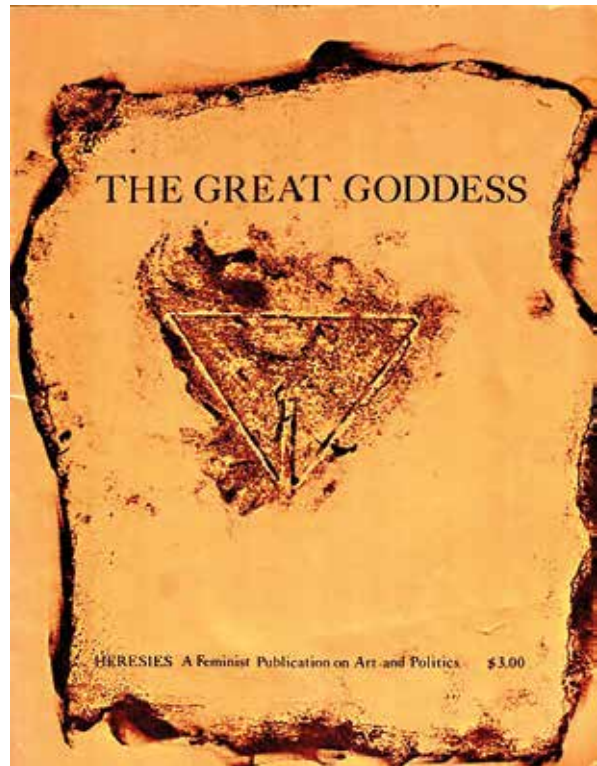
<sup>11</sup> Goldenberg (1979: 219–227).

<sup>12</sup> Norman (2024).

*Home* featured photographs of home altars that she had personally crafted. She depicted assemblages of various objects significant to her, arranged in the dining room, bathroom, living room, and on the porch, which also served as a dance hall. Among the tape recorder, speakers, and plants on the porch, she placed a metal canister containing the ashes of her grandmother Velma Lockett, who died in 1971. Syoc explained that she created this altar to honour her grandmother's energy, and dedicated it to "post-revolutionary women".

### Intensifying life and rejecting Christianity

In "Stonesprings" Lucy Lippard examined her reflections on caves and megaliths, a perspective that could be interpreted as paving the way for what later became known as "environment-dependent" art.<sup>13</sup> Her considerations can also be seen as preliminary insights leading to her later developed reflections in *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (1983), where she further explores the significance of religiosity as a social bond. In this book she emphasises the shared capacity of art, politics and religion to evoke emotional responses, intensify collective life, inspire individual growth, and foster communication among individuals. Lippard criticised modernist art and the sterile isolationism of museums for lacking these vital qualities, and made this diagnosis as an atheist, emphasising her allegiance to Marx's theory of the demystification of social structures. She expressed little interest in art as a substitute for religion, focusing instead on how art can serve a social purpose in an age dominated by dehumanising technology. She considered the integration of art into everyday life, envisioning its potential to enrich collective experience through ritual and practice. The importance of ritual as a means of forging connections between people is further emphasised by other feminists, with Starhawk describing it as a structured movement of energy that fosters community building and emotional sharing.<sup>14</sup> Lippard added that visions become bolder in such gatherings, expanding beyond what one could experience when dreaming alone. That is why she sought a form of power that



Ill. 1. The cover of *Heresies* magazine. Vol. 1, Iss. 5 (1978), *The Great Goddess*. Photograph from Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/heresies\\_05](https://archive.org/details/heresies_05) (accessed: 11.3.2024).

was not about control ('power-over'), but about collaboration ('power-with').

*Heresies* featured a substantial amount of content focusing on female artists. Gloria Feman Orenstein, in her essay *The Reemergence of the Archetype of the Great Goddess in Art by Contemporary Women*, extensively examined the artistic endeavours of numerous female creators. She highlighted the influence of Minoan art on Carolee Schneemann, as well as the ritualistic elements present in the performances of Ana Mendieta. Other artists discussed include Betsy Damon, Donna Byar, Donna Henes, Hannah Kay, Judy Chicago, Mary Beth Edelson, Miriam Sharon and Betye Saar. In Orenstein's perspective, all these artists participated in co-creating a modern myth within which women serve as the fundamental link connecting all life forms in the cosmos, acting as great catalysts and transformers of life's energies. Drawing on her surrealist interests, she suggests that through goddess worship, women bring forth a state of ecstatic consciousness. Orenstein's exploration of goddess worship later led her to embrace ecofeminism, a theme she examines in her work *The Reflowering of the Goddess* (1990). Here she explores concepts such as green magic,

<sup>13</sup> Heyd (1999: 457).

<sup>14</sup> Starhawk (1989: 326).





Ill. 2. Mary Beth Edelson, Heresies Collective at Joan Snyder's Farm for a weekend of planning and bonding. The photo includes, standing: Mary Miss, Joyce Kozloff, Arlene Ladden, Joan Snyder, Patsy Beckert, Elizabeth Hess, May Stevens, Harmony Hammond, Sally Webster, Susana Torre and, seated: Miriam Schapiro, Mary Beth Edelson, Lucy Lippard, Joan Braderman, Elizabeth Weatherford, Mary Pottenger, and Michelle Stuart (photo. Mary Beth Edelson). Copyright held by the Estate of Mary Beth Edelson; preserved through a partnership with The Feminist Institute. Photograph from *The Feminist Institute*, <https://www.thefeministinstitute.org/images?id=528> (accessed: 11.3.2024)

wilderness (seen as numinous) and shamanic journeys to sacred spaces.

Mary Beth Edelson (1933–2021) was particularly drawn to the ideas presented in Marija Gimbutas's book *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, 7000–3500 B.C.* This fascination led Edelson and her friend Anne Healy on an expedition to Yugoslavia in search of Neolithic caves where ceremonies were once held in honour of female deities. Edelson documented their journey in an article for *Heresies*, including memories and photographs. Their expedition, which Edelson referred to as a pilgrimage, went beyond mere tourism, however. Edelson devised and performed a ritual on-site, aimed at connecting with the ancient goddesses and their worshippers. The resulting photographs from these rituals capture the experience of unity and wonder. Significantly, Edelson also created a time-lapse photograph of one such ritual, titled *Grapceva Neolithic Cave Series: See for Yourself* (1977).

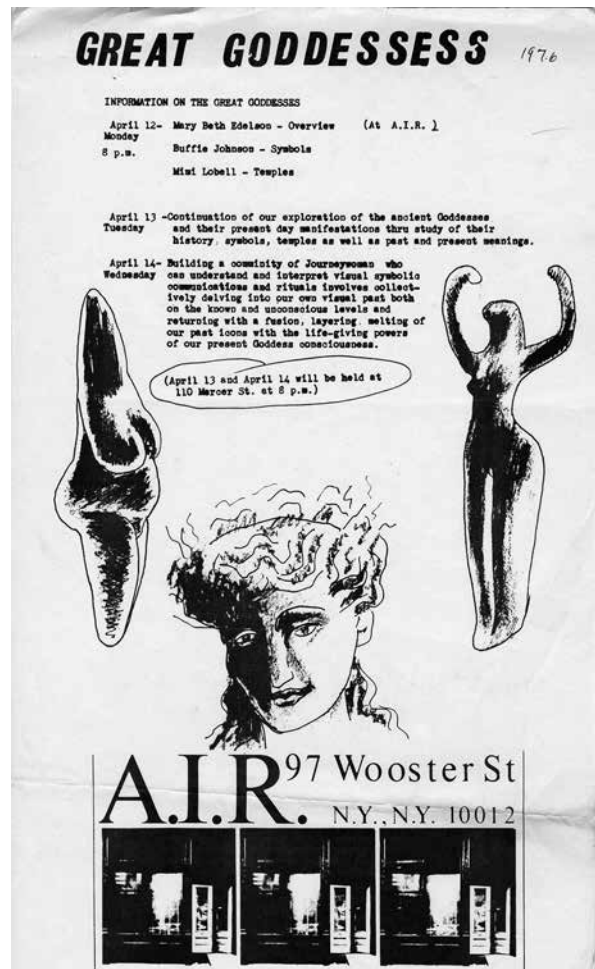
She illuminated the cave with candles, choosing natural light over electric illumination to underscore the distinctive rhythm of time and space within the caves. In the photograph, the artist stands against a backdrop of stalagmites and stalactites resembling grand temple pillars, evoking the aura of a priestess devoted to the Great Goddess. She identifies the female deity's presence within the towering stalagmite, embodying her essence. Edelson emphasised her connection to the ancient sanctuary, describing how she breathed the cave's air, which then flowed through her, becoming an integral part of her being. She described how the energy from the rituals permeated the cave, its rhythmic pulse resonating from the vault to her body, imparting a profound sense of being at the centre of the universe. It even felt as though the cave itself contracted and expanded in synchronicity with her inhalations and exhalations<sup>15</sup>. Upon returning

<sup>15</sup> Edelson (1978: 98).

to the United States, Edelson continued her ritualistic performances. Her actions sparked criticism from various quarters, however. Critics found fault with Edelson's approach for several reasons. Some argued that, in her attempt to challenge patriarchal dominance, she merely inverted the power structure, relying on an essentialist portrayal of femininity. Furthermore, her portrayal of nature was seen as both essentialist and primitivist, drawing upon a simplistic understanding of natural forces<sup>16</sup>. Her journey to another continent underscored the class and racial privileges inherent in her identity as a white middle-class American woman, despite undertaking the trip without any financial subsidy. Jennie Klein, in highlighting the contentious nature of Edelson's endeavours, shed light on the challenges she encountered due to her artistic approach. While Edelson was a feminist activist and viewed the Goddess as a metaphor for radical change, her ritualistic art lacked connections to Marxism, psychoanalysis or post-structuralist theory, which led some critics to perceive it as naive. The crux of the issue lay in both the treatment of the body as a medium and the recognition of the immense power inherent in the female body. Klein emphasised that this perspective was viewed as a threat, not only to the traditions of the Judaic and Christian cultures, but also to those of the Enlightenment. Edelson's fascination with goddesses, such as Kali, involved entities that were not characterised by gentility. For instance, her 'canonisation' of Lorena Bobbitt as Saint Bobbitt was an expression of retaliation against the widespread mutilation of women<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, the solitude of the 'goddess' is evident in many surviving photographs of the performances, although some depict communal ceremonies characterised by a spirit of egalitarianism. However, both individual and collective performances seamlessly merge the political with the spiritual. Edelson underscored not only the significance of ritual but also the importance of travel for women's activism. The emancipatory potential of women's journeys – both tangible and imagined – was also highlighted by Mary Daly (1928–2010). She advocated for living on the margins of patriarchal institutions and challenging what is considered central and crucial to their logic. Her book *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy Toward Women's Liberation*,

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Edelson (1989: 34–38).

<sup>17</sup> O'Neill-Butler (2011).



III. 3. Great Goddess Collective, "Information on The Great Goddesses" event flyer, 1976. Copyright held by the Estate of Mary Beth Edelson; preserved through a partnership with The Feminist Institute. Photograph from *The Feminist Institute*, <https://www.thefeministinstitute.org/images?id=528> (accessed: 11.3.2024)

published in 1973, became something of a feminist bible, with Daly herself being regarded as a prophetess. In her subsequent work, *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Daly vehemently rejected Christianity, recognising its inherent violence against women and the environment. She identified the codename 'Trinity' for the first above-ground atomic bomb test in 1945 as evidence of the church system's malevolent influence<sup>18</sup>. The appreciation of numerous women for her inspiring intellectual contributions nevertheless remains unwavering<sup>19</sup>, even as some critique Daly's monolithic views for their insufficient acknowledg-

<sup>18</sup> Suchocki (1994: 60).

<sup>19</sup> Hunt (2010: 7–9); Plaskow (2012: 100–104); Barufaldi, Rycenga (2017).

ment of the violent acts perpetrated by men (both symbolic and historical) against other men<sup>20</sup>.

### The spiritual is political

The menstrual performance ritual of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, as described by the artist in *Mikva Dreams*, examines her regular visits to the mikveh and the site's connection to the cult of Shekhinah, emphasising themes of renewable eternal virginity, amorous passion, and creative motherhood. Mimi Lobell, in her discussion of ancient temples of the Great Goddess (including Çatal Höyük, Sabatinovka, Knossos and Tarxien), emphasises that these sites are not merely historical relics, but living archetypes embedded in our consciousness, serving as models for the eternal structures of our consciousness. As such they facilitate the removal of the patriarchal overlay from our psyches. Grace Shinell, in her article "Women's Primacy in the Coming Reformation," posited that parthenogenesis may be more attainable than commonly perceived, suggesting techniques such as various forms of masturbation and the elevation of the Kundalini energy into the womb during ovulation. This could even lead to the scientific validation of immaculate conception. In the coming reformation, therefore, women are being urged not to take an opposing path, but to adhere to it completely and embrace the whole. In *The Eternal Weaver* by Buffie Johnson and Tracy Boyd, crafts associated with archaeological finds and mythical figures were discussed, emphasising their role not only in weaving cloth, but also the web of life. Similarly, in *Opposing the Rape of Mother Earth*, Judith Todd explored the fusion of spiritual and political thought through an analysis of the customs of the ancient Native American society of the Anasazi (Ancestral Puebloans). She underscores the importance of understanding the Anasazi tradition and recognising the need for both spiritual awareness and political action, particularly in the context of preserving Hopi land from strip-mining and other forms of exploitation. Martha Alsup's *Finding the Goddess: Finding Myself* chronicles the significance of seemingly ordinary life events, suggesting that their true meaning can only be grasped by acknowledging the presence of a goddess within oneself.

Carolee Thea, an artist, critic and curator who was previously associated with prominent figures such as Robert Morris, Robert Barry and Leo Steinberg at Hunter College, New York, gained recognition during her time as a student at Columbia University for her research on African art. In "Masks, Power, and Sisterhood in an African Society" she explores the customs of the Sande (bundu) community, where women undergo ritual clitoridectomy yet enjoy unquestioned social prestige and actively participate in communal rituals. Drawing parallels between the African and American communities, Thea raises thought-provoking questions about the preservation of sacred traditions and the pursuit of various forms of equality and freedom. She challenges readers to consider what ideals – political, economic, sexual or spiritual – they should prioritise in their pursuit of empowerment and societal transformation, including the notion of spiritual sisterhood. Rosemary J. Dudley, in "She Who Bleeds, Yet Does Not Die", examines the incongruity between Hindu beliefs surrounding goddesses and the modern, restrictive laws imposed on Hindu women. Deborah Haynes, in "Body Imperatives", discusses the imperative nature of bodily experiences such as menstruation, abortion and pregnancy, emphasising their participatory importance over cerebral engagement. She highlights how lessons derived from bodily experiences can deeply impact the soul, with the body intersecting with the spirit at the spine. This intersection can be further explored through practices like yoga or sex. Daniela Gioseffi, a poet and graduate of the Catholic University of America (CUA), explores the concept of belly dance in *Birth Dance or Belly Dance*. She underscores that despite its modern vulgarisation in strip clubs, belly dance was originally a fertility dance performed by women to invoke their magical abilities. Gioseffi emphasises the sublime eroticism of life in all its visceral glory that belly dance once represented.

Photographs from various eras and cultures were utilised as illustrations, ranging from the classical Greek relief *The Birth of Aphrodite* from the Throne of Ludovisi to representations of the Japanese goddess Kwannon, the Hindu goddess Yashī, and the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. The works reproduced featured artists such as Frances Alenikoff, Nancy Azara, Louise Bourgeois, Muriel Castanis, Janet Culbertson, Audrey Flack, Deborah

<sup>20</sup> Kraemer (1979: 354–356).



Freedman, Anne Healy, Gila Yenil Hirsch, Joan Jonas, Hannah Kay, Carey Marvin, Linda Peer, Friederike Pezold, Àngels Ribé, Mei Mei Sanford, Carolee Scheemann, Jonnye Smith, Jere Von Syoc, Alida Walsh, Susanne Wenger and Hannah Wilke. *Heresies* also showcased a diverse array of poems, without favouring any specific form of expression. Alongside Sappho's poems, the publication featured works by Alla Bozarth Campbell, Holly Cara, Martha Courtot, Linda Ann Hoag, Hilda Morley, P.M. Pederson, Janet R. Price, Monica Raymond, Barbara Starrett, Judith Treewoman and Kay Turner, as well as a contributor identified only by the initials A. M., and another using the pseudonym Jaci.

The revised history, in which goddesses were revered, has emerged as an abundant wellspring for reclaiming narratives that empower women. Efforts were made to capitalise on this by organising gatherings. A Great Goddess Open Meeting consequently took place on September 13, 1978, at 8 p.m. at Franklin Furnace Archive, serving as one among numerous 'goddess' gatherings. Moreover, contributions were invited for future issues of *Heresies*.

## Conclusion

Mary Beth Edelson's exclamation "Your 5,000 years are up!" directed at men was described by Lucy Lippard as equally serious and humorous<sup>21</sup>. Lippard's amused tone indirectly suggests a reluctance to employ heavy-handed tactics against the ideology of goddesses. Drawing on Griselda Pollock's terminology, one might view the feminists embodying goddesses as making interventions in art history rather than being solely focused on feminist art history. Their primary objective may have been life itself. Spiritual transformations were intended to precipitate tangible social changes, and ancient artworks were seen as empowering women in their pursuit of these changes. It can therefore be inferred that matriarchal art embodies the capacity to generate and reshape life – an enchantment with mythological underpinnings that operates within rituals or processes blurring the boundaries between artist and viewer, art and non-art. Consequently it serves as a liberating, ecstatic energy of social counter-practice and "can be neither criticised and interpreted

from outside nor sold as a commodity on the art market and later archived as a dusty object to be placed in the museum of art history"<sup>22</sup>.

Today we observe the evolution of the goddess movement into various ideologies and movements such as ecofeminism, ecosexuality, environmental activism and biophilic ethics, among others<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, it has fostered a reexamination of Christianity, providing space for alternative interpretations and understandings<sup>24</sup>. However, it is evident that its contributions extend beyond the realm of feminine empowerment. It has also shed light on the misuse of masculine power, prompting significant reflections on the construction of masculinity, as noted by Carol P. Christ following Daniel Cohen<sup>25</sup>. Christ also highlighted the emergence of a new discipline – thealogy (derived from 'thea', meaning goddess), providing a fresh lens through which to comprehend history, culture, and our interconnectedness with them<sup>26</sup>.

In referencing re-enchantment art practices, we inevitably draw upon a concept revitalised by Silvia Federici in *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, contrasting with Max Weber's term 'disenchantment of the world', coined in 1917 amid the atrocities of the First World War. Weber associated the concept with the vanishing of religious and sacred elements from society. Conversely, Federici advocates in her book for "the discovery of reasons and logics other than those of capitalist development", asserting that re-enchantment serves as a cornerstone for numerous anti-system movements and the formulation of strategies to resist exploitation<sup>27</sup>.

Surprisingly, spiritual exploration was also present within Conceptualism, although it was not featured in *Heresies*. In *Food for the Spirit* (1971), Adrian Piper subjected herself to isolation and fasting while examining Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. It was a period during which she experienced a profound sense of "anxiety that she was disappearing into a state of Kantian self-transcendence"<sup>28</sup>. She documented this intellectual process with photographs of her naked black female body. But during

<sup>21</sup> (Lippard 1983: 69).

<sup>22</sup> (Göttner-Abendroth 1991: 50).

<sup>23</sup> (Giancola 2021); (Sprinkle, Stephens 2021).

<sup>24</sup> (Beavis 2015).

<sup>25</sup> (Christ 1998: 179).

<sup>26</sup> (Christ 1998: XIV).

<sup>27</sup> Federici (2019: 188).

<sup>28</sup> Wark (2001: 46).

the second wave of feminism, the black woman's body was no longer on the agenda. Piper sought to explore the mundane and corporeal nature of the body by infusing it with a spirituality tinged with irony. Carolee Schneemann approached this differently, but also began with the body, as her *Interior Scroll* photographs, which were presented in "Heresies", demonstrate. Piper's work challenges us to recognise that contemporary global feminism seeks to embrace 'common differences' rather than mere similarities<sup>29</sup>. Above all, contemporary feminist artists emphasise differences. As noted by curator Maura Reilly in the catalogue for the exhibition "Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art", which premiered at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007, her aim, along with co-curator Linda Nochlin, was to explore shared distinctions. In addition, they aimed to address issues such as racism, sexism, religious and identity differences, and Euro-American centrism within contemporary feminist art. Reilly highlighted that the reluctance to focus on differences during the second wave of feminism stemmed from fears of fracturing the movement's unity and communal bonds. It has since become evident, however, that solidarity and embracing the fluidity of identity pose no threat to alliances<sup>30</sup>.

The danger of essentialism, which often leads to the marginalisation of many women, is evident in the discussions surrounding the contemporary goddess movement, which is currently gaining momentum in Poland under the clear leadership of the Kraków-based artist Iwona Demko. Consequently, examining the representation of the goddess in 1970s art, particularly from the perspective of a contemporary Polish art historian, not only encounters a distinct contextual landscape, but also raises similar concerns. Despite numerous differences, however, both the Polish and the American goddess movements share a common thread: the political quest to obtain women's rights, emancipation, and equal treatment and opportunity. One of the most prominent figures in the Polish art scene is Our Moist Lady (Wilgotna Pani). In 2014 Iwona Demko created the sculpture of Our Moist Lady, ingeniously fusing the imagery of a vulva from ancient cultures with the iconic mantle of the Virgin Mary. Our Moist Lady became known through feminist pilgrimages, where she was revered as

a portable shrine, akin to a feretron, a portable painting used in church processions. It was nevertheless her public display at the Drama Theatre in Warsaw on August 31, 2022, coinciding with Monika Strzępka assuming the directorship, that thrust her into the media spotlight. Her presence sparked political controversy, contributing to the questioning of Strzępka's directorship at the theatre. It can thus be posited that Our Moist Lady symbolises strategy rather than mere biological determinism, emerging as a guardian of women's aspirations, and advocating for relational analysis. It appears that treating the goddess relationally and contextually might offer a clue – she then becomes an ephemeral intervention capable of altering a specific predicament within a given situation.

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<sup>29</sup> Talpade Mohanty (2003: 244).

<sup>30</sup> Reilly (2010: 156–173).

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