

## UNKNOWN/UNTITLED

In 2012, one of the recent rash of apocalyptic disaster films, the governments of a dying world band together and secretly build arks to brave the tempestuous seas of Mayan Armageddon. The film asks, rather feebly, who/what deserves salvation? The original list is restricted to the rich, world leaders, and the *Mona Lisa*. Humanists argue this is wrong, that the bellies of the arks should open to the throngs of ordinary people squirming on the docks begging entry. Cut to SFMOMA, January 17, 12:50 p.m.: a camera crew is setting up in front of a photo that artist Anne Walsh has chosen to talk about. It's a black and white photo from SFMOMA's collection of anonymous photos, a rather blurry shot of a group of women running towards the camera, through a tree-studded grove. Even though I cannot see them very clearly, from their upswept hair, long skirts and high-necked blouses I place them sometime in the early 20th century. A crowd, mostly men wearing hats, looks on. In contrast to the men's dark suits, the whiteness of the women's blouses and skirts makes them appear to be bathed in light, glowing with youth and excitement. Evocative, yes, but still an unremarkable photo. I'm sure that most museum visitors can think of at least one photo in their own possession that has just as much right to be hanging on that wall. There must be a zillion comparable snapshots stuffed in boxes on closet shelves or thrown in the trash at a relative's demise. Through what accident—or miracle—did this particular picture manage to sneak into the ark of high culture?

Rather than analyzing *Untitled [Women Racing]*, Walsh read Eileen Myles' "Light Warrior," a brief memoir about Myles' childhood conviction that she has been chosen for greatness, like her hero Joan of Arc, whom she read about in a Junior Classics comic book.

*Myles: I see my existence as similar to that of a sundial's when I simply stand, and slowly the notion of movement is suggesting itself to my consciousness and action is also appropriate in the realm of the saint, the character who begins her life in the windows of a church, in the religious air of her own imagination until history lines up with her nature, and the path becomes clear—the storms of identity erupt and implode and gather again and one of life's soldiers realizes her whole basis for living has changed and now she is impelled forward in a new film.*

Every girl longs to be special, to step outside the anonymity of live-breed-die. Every girl knows that only the fabulous survive. I'm reminded of the orange rubber wedge that Anne Walsh made for Will Rogan and Jonn Herschend's *The Thing Quarterly*. Embossed on the wedge is the text of a fan letter Walsh wrote Billie Jean King:

*Sept 20, 1973*

*Dear Billie Jean King,*

*I hope you get this letter. I think you are really great.*

*My family and I watched you play on tv tonight. We saw you beat Bobby Riggs in 3 sets. WOW. You won! I am really, really excited.*

*I am not an aspiring tennis player. But you are my inspiration because you are so strong. You are so passionate about equality for girls and women. You won that match for me and for everyone who cares about women's lib. Thank you. You are so great.*

*Keep on fighting!*



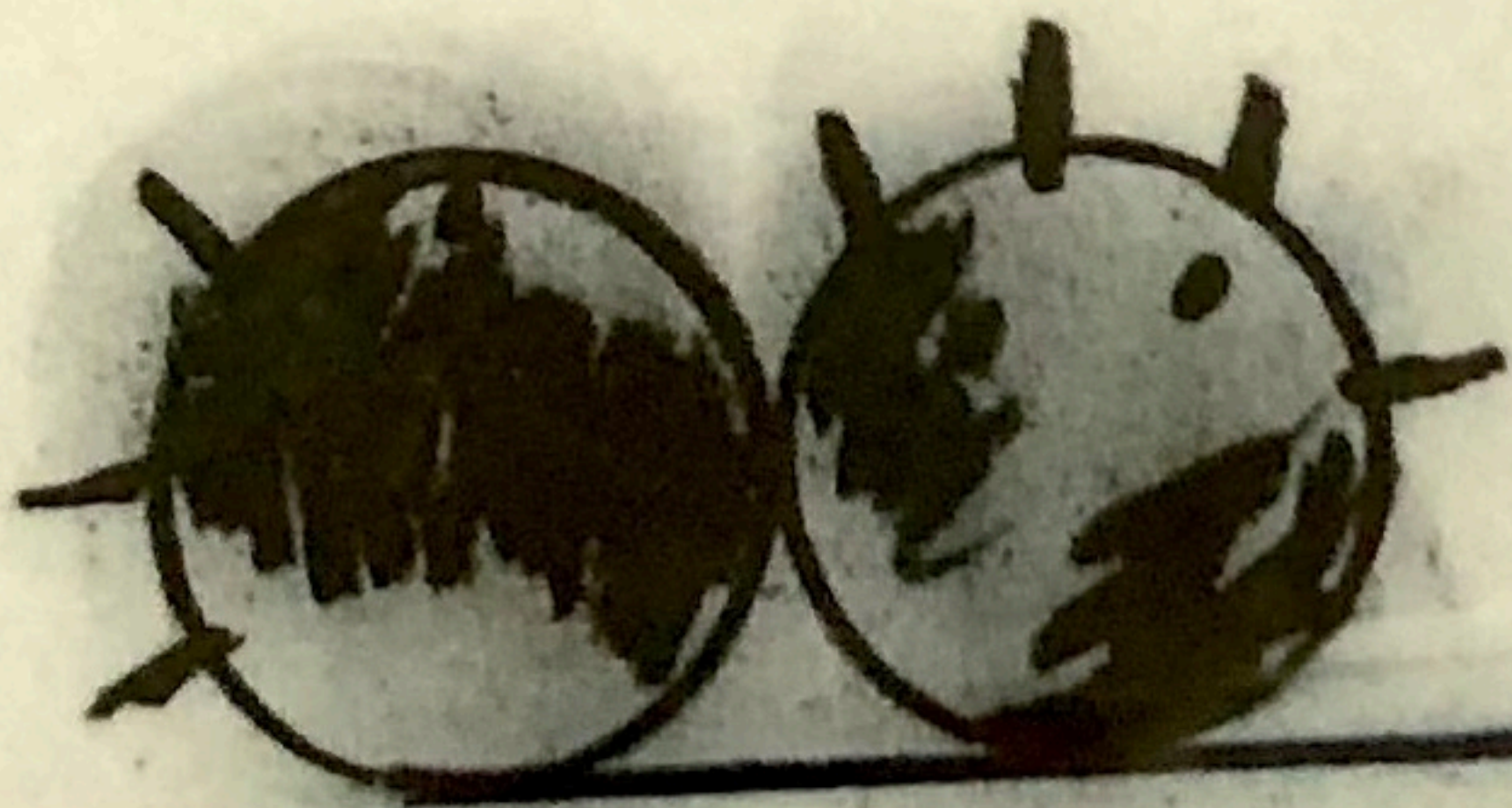
Walsh has morphed her girlhood ephemera into a weighty, gaudy monument that pulls all eyes toward it, a sort of time machine that reaches backwards, assuring young Anne that yes she is special, that yes, where others fail, she will survive.

After she finished reading from "Light Warrior," Walsh said her "unknown" was donated by a photographer—and that photographer probably got it from a dealer—so there are all these layers of mediation before a photo without provenance lands in a museum. She gestured towards another anonymous photo in the gallery and mused excitedly how that person would never have dreamed their wedding photo would end up in a museum. I looked around the room at the dozens of unknown/untitleds and felt a frisson of uncanniness, as if the photos had agency, awareness. What was it about these photos that willed them to survive against terrible odds? I missed it, but Kevin went to a lecture last week in which curator Raimundas Malasauskas speculated that in some fantastical way the artwork curates itself. I thought of going to Animal Control and rescuing Ted from kitty extermination. What halo, what little glow of blessing had Ted that the myriad cats who perished lacked? Myles: *I had thought I lived in a world of darkness and confusion and I was the single, glowing and true thing.* The museum creates order, hierarchy. Things are in it because they're more important than other things, right? People don't pay the \$15.00 admission fee for randomness. When we look at SFMOMA's room of snapshots we're accosted by mystery. Stripped of context, the photos are embedded with an inaccessible tenderness. People took them because they felt love or excitement.

After my mother died two years ago, all I brought back from Indiana were her blown glass clown collection and three boxes of photos. The photos are packed away in the basement, as it's still too painful for me to look at them, but I feel this primal responsibility to protect them. My mother saved them and with her passing, she passed the flaming brand onto me. I'm frightened that when I die the photos will be tossed

out—and I think—I need to make enough of a splash in life that some university archive will want my papers, want my mother. Then the photos will be safe in air-conditioned file boxes in acid-free folders, waiting patiently for an eager beaver grad student to unearth them, to plunge their mysteries. Myles: *I have waited all my life for permission. I feel it growing in my breast. A war is storming and it is behind me and I am moving my forces into light.*





DODIE BELLAMY

MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE OBJECT