

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## ‘Maintenance Art’ Puts Trash in Full View

A retrospective for the Department of Sanitation’s official artist-in-residence, plus a planned installation at Fresh Kills Landfill



ENLARGE

The artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, on the future site of the work, which has been under way since 1989 and slated to open in 2018 or 2019. *PHOTO: MANSURA KHANAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By

**ANDY BATTAGLIA**

Sept. 22, 2016 7:34 p.m. ET

As the official artist-in-residence of the New York City Department of Sanitation for nearly 40 years, Mierle Laderman Ukeles has found herself in some unusual scenarios: on trash trucks, in an incinerator, by the belly of a garbage barge.

Battaglia, Andy. “‘Maintenance Art’ Puts Trash in Full View.” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 22 2016.  
<http://www.wsj.com/articles/maintenance-art-puts-trash-in-full-view-1474587241>

But perhaps none has been more out of the ordinary than a trip last week to the former Fresh Kills Landfill, now a site of idyllic waterways, rolling grass and open skies.

“It’s a new kind of earth,” Ms. Ukeles said of the pastoral grounds on Staten Island that once comprised the largest garbage dump in the world. “It was degraded and would make people go ‘ewww,’ but now it’s going to be a safe, healthy park.”

Ms. Ukeles, whose survey of self-described “maintenance art” opened over the weekend at the Queens Museum, took time away from the show’s installation to visit a project that has occupied her for decades.

The project, “Landing,” calls for two sculpted mounds of dirt and grass, each about 100 feet long, plus a cantilevered platform that will extend out into open space above a scenic waterway. Little has been built, since navigating the layers of municipal approval has proved a laborious process.



A drainage structure at the former Fresh Kills Land Fill in Staten Island, which was once the largest garbage dump in the world and is being transformed into a park. *PHOTO: MANSURA KHANAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

When it is finished, visitors will have access to what the artist called the “ecological theater” of wildlife activity, as well as expansive views. From vantage points near the site, the naked eye can see industrial farms in New Jersey, the fast-developing Staten Island neighborhoods of Greenridge and Arden Heights and, in the distance, the lower Manhattan skyline.

Ms. Ukeles’s landfill project, under way since 1989 and slated to open in 2018 or 2019, is part of a larger proposal to rehabilitate the former landfill into Freshkills Park, with 2,200 acres of land making it nearly triple the size of Central Park.

It also draws on the work Ms. Ukeles has been doing since she became the sanitation department’s artist-in-residence. Her interests as an artist include issues of labor, waste and systems of maintenance that help make the modern world work, often with little attention or respect.

“*The art is the easy part. It’s just getting people to fund it and do it—that’s what takes 20 years.*”  
—Mierle Laderman Ukeles

For her piece “Touch Sanitation Performance,” Ms. Ukeles spent 11 months, starting in 1979, meeting and shaking the hands of every sanitation worker in the city, saying to each, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.” In other instances, she staged “work ballets” with choreography for groups of hauling machines and barges.

In 1983, for a piece called “Social Mirror,” she outfitted a garbage truck with a silver surface to reflect onlookers’ gazes back. Its message, Ms. Ukeles said: We are all implicated in the life of the trash we make.



ENLARGE

TRASH TALK: Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, center, in black, discusses ‘Landing,’ an installation planned for the new park at the former Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island. *PHOTO: MANSURA KHANAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

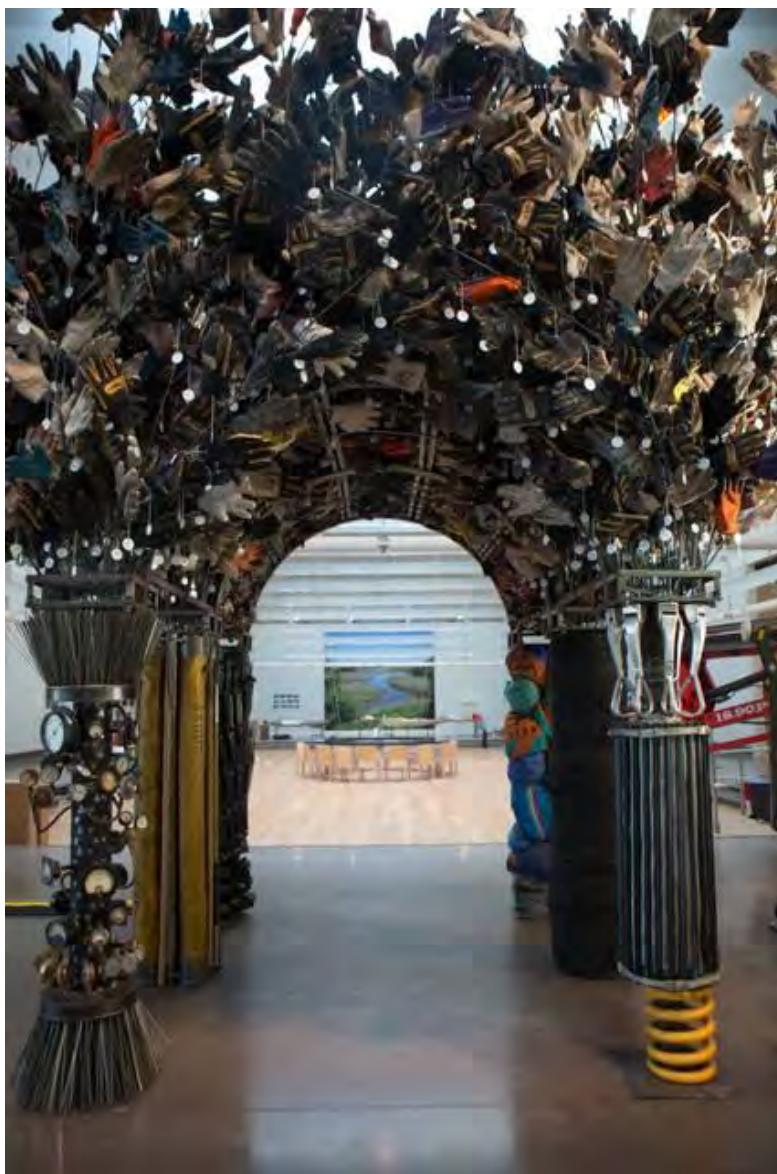
The Queens Museum show, on view into February 2017, includes photo and video documentation of such works, plus sculptures and installations related to art that has taken shape across a kind of active civic canvas.

“There are many ways to look at this kind of art, but the basic idea is the art is social,” said Tom Finkelpearl, commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, which is administering the “Landing” project as part of its program Percent for Art. “She makes an interactive space, and the space—that’s the artwork.”

The design process for “Landing” is largely approved, after years of proposals presented to the sanitation department, the Department of Parks & Recreation and local Staten Island municipal bodies, among other agencies.

“The art is the easy part. It’s just getting people to fund it and do it—that’s what takes 20 years,” said Ms. Ukeles, underestimating by nearly a decade the time devoted so far.

Costs for construction, according to the sanitation department, are estimated at \$1.3 million, to be carried out while work on the larger Freshkills Park takes place in stages over years and decades to come. Ms. Ukeles will lead a public tour of the “Landing” site as part of the Queens Museum show on Nov. 20. The whole of the park is expected to be completed around 2036.



ENLARGE

‘Ceremonial Arch,’ made from hundreds of dirty work gloves and other materials is part of the career retrospective ‘Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art’ at the Queens Museum *PHOTO: MANSURA KHANAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Reminders of the location's past as a landfill remain, such as extraction wells that mine gas from decomposing trash. But they have been dwindling with time, since the site stopped accepting garbage in 2001. The towering mounds of waste were capped long ago with plastic membranes and topped with about 3 feet of different soils, to promote growth of grasses and trees that have taken over the landscape.

"See how they wiggle? They capture the light," Ms. Ukeles said of sun-streaked trees called quaking aspens that, like everything in her beloved sanctuary, excited her artistic mind and eye.

Now the waterways in view from the "Landing" spot are home to herons and, in certain months, migrations of baby eels.

"Look at the views," said Phillip Gleason, the sanitation department's assistant commissioner of waste-management engineering and a longtime ally of Ms. Ukeles and her art. As if seeing the bucolic idyll for the first time, he added, with a sense of wonder, "Where are we?"

# The New York Times

## An Artist Redefines Power. With Sanitation Equipment.

By HOLLAND COTTER SEPT. 15, 2016

Cotter, Holland. "An Artist Redefines Power. With Sanitation Equipment." *The New York Times*, September 15 2016.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/16/arts/design/an-artist-redefines-power-with-sanitation-equipment.html>



Images from Mierle Laderman Ukeles's "Touch Sanitation Performance" of 1979-80, the first of many projects she has made for, and with, New York's Department of Sanitation. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

Full and exemplary retrospectives of major but under-known American artists are rare. The Queens Museum has such a show in "[Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art](#)," which opens on Sunday.

Ms. Ukeles is probably most familiar for her nearly four-decade stint as official, though unsalaried, artist-in-residence with New York's Department of Sanitation. What the show gives us, though, is something less easily packaged: a conceptualist who has always

grounded far-looking ideas in here-and-now situations and things, and a social revolutionary who understands the power of service.

She was born in Denver in 1939, the child of a rabbi, and had art on her mind early on. **New York City, she knew, was where enterprising artists should go. That's where her** youthful heroes Jackson Pollock, Marcel Duchamp and Mark Rothko were, or had been. So in the early 1960s, she went and enrolled at Pratt Institute.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles's mirror-covered garbage truck, "The Social Mirror," will visit the Queens Museum on weekends during show. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

Problems arose. The work she was doing — painting and sculpture hybrids, bulging with rag-and-tinfoil-stuffed breastlike and phallic forms — were poorly received by the mostly male faculty. Too messy, they said. Too sexual. She should change direction, meaning clean up her act. She left.

She rented a studio and designed inflatable architecturally scaled rubber and vinyl versions of bulbous forms, envisioning them as sculptures that could be attached to buildings, occupied, then folded up and put away. Then in 1966, she married and two years later had a child. Problems again. Raising an infant and running a home was a

full-time job. No time for the studio. She was now a successful domestic worker and a failed artist.

And she was furious. So she sat down and started to write a clarifying, role-redefining letter-of-intent-to self. She titled it “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!” and it read, in part: “I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I ‘do’ art.”



Ms. Ukeles’s “Ceremonial Arch IV.” Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

“Up to now separately” was the pivotal phrase. From that time forward, she would continue her everyday life but, with a nod to Duchamp, redefine it as art. “My working will be the work,” as she put it. And so it has been, in often complex, increasingly monumental forms, for the past 45 years.

The Queens retrospective — her first comprehensive one, organized by Larissa Harris, a curator at the museum, and the art historian Patricia C. Phillips — revisits much of it, primarily through documents and photographs, along with a few large sculptures and installations. (Ms. Phillips’s extensive catalog essay is an invaluable addition: Facts, style, wisdom, they’re all there.)

The manifesto — four typewritten pages hanging alone on a wall — marks the chronological start of the show, which flows through galleries that wrap around the **museum's high**-ceilinged atrium. The initial examples of Maintenance Art were modest chamber pieces, at-home performances: dress the kids (by the early 1970s she had two); sort the socks (she arranged black ones into calligraphic characters); photograph everything; and (this came later) stamp the documentary results with an authenticating seal.



**“Maintain Your Destiny: Earth Exchange: Ransom Piece” by Ms. Ukeles, at the Queens Museum.** Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

Pretty soon she went public. In 1973, the always-ahead-of-everyone critic and historian Lucy Lippard asked her to create some work for a traveling all-woman group show of Conceptual Art. The first version of the piece, which was a performance, took place at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. It was a beauty.

There Ms. Ukeles (pronounced YOУ-kah-lees) basically did what she usually did at home: She cleaned and made sure the premises were secure. In a museum these are the tasks of maintenance workers and security guards, not artists. Unless an artist calls them art, which she did, and they flipped conventional hierarchies of value upside down, turning art into a kind of chore, and chores into a kind of ceremony.

After being shown the ropes by the Atheneum staff, she locked and unlocked galleries; polished display cases; and two days later returned, alone, to wash the museum's front step on her hands and knees. Photographs of the washing are now classic 1970s images. In them, feminism, institutional critique, sly humor and self-possessed humility unite. It's a wonderful image, heroic in a sneakers-and-jeans way, a power of example, a reminder that it's high time some of our filthy rich 21st century museums got a scrub-down.



**"Washing/Tracks/Maintenance Outside"** by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

On principle and by temperament, Ms. Ukeles is a team player, and she gradually expanded the size of her teams. In 1976, in a piece for the now-closed Lower Manhattan branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art, she recruited 300 office maintenance workers as collaborators. For five months, she took individual photos of them as they went through their eight-hour shifts. Then she asked each to label the images of their labor as "art" or "work."

Some 700 of the photos are in the Queens show. It's not always easy to discern a logic behind the labeling, though sometimes it is. For one middle-age office cleaner, effort seemed to be the defining criterion. When she was vacuuming, that was work. When she

was dusting, that was art. It's possible that, by having to make the choice, she would view her job and life differently thereafter, as Ms. Ukeles was viewing her own life and work.

Ms. Ukeles's big break came later that year. Her Whitney piece was reviewed in *The Village Voice*. The writer quipped that maybe **Maintenance Art**, which consisted "of all the routine chores most people hate," might find some wider civic application, with the Department of Sanitation, say. Ms. Ukeles clipped the review and sent it to the department. Management called and said: Come talk to us. She did, and she's been their on-site artist more or less ever since.



A video installation, “Snow Workers Ballet,” from a series of “Work Ballets.” Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

Now she was working with a really big team, and this one was in crisis mode. New York was broke. (These were the “Ford to City: Drop Dead” days.) People were scared and angry, and garbage collectors, never much respected, were targets of abuse. Ms. Ukeles, who saw the clear value of their work, and the care they took, resolved to help. Her epic “Touch Sanitation Performance” of 1979-80 was the result.

For 11 months, she traveled the boroughs and personally introduced herself to all of the department's 8,500 workers on their beats. She greeted each with a handshake and the words "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." The show has videos of these meetings, some on view for the first time, and they're very moving. It's clear that for some of the men — almost all the workers were men — Ms. Ukeles's gesture came as a kind of secular benediction, and the energy flowed both ways. They took her as seriously, and generously, as she took them.

For the retrospective, the museum has marked out, in tiny lights on its famed Panorama of New York City, all the meet-and-greets Ms. Ukeles made for the piece. And this mapping of a highly personalized, and at some level deeply private, work of public art turns the city into a field of winking stars.

"Touch Sanitation" was the first of many projects Ms. Ukeles has made for, and with, the department, including a delightful series of "Work Ballets," choreographed for sanitation equipment. In 1983, for the First New York City Art Parade, she sent a mirror-covered garbage collection truck rumbling up Madison Avenue, with six mechanical sweepers pirouetting behind. The resplendent truck, called "The Social Mirror" and still preserved by the department, will visit the museum, under "sanmen" guard, on weekends during the show's run.

In recent years, Ms. Ukeles has focused on ecological projects, among them the transformation of a former sanitation landfill, Fresh Kills, on Staten Island, into park. The site, once one of the world's largest dumps, closed in 2001, reopened after the destruction of the World Trade Center, then closed again this year. Ms. Ukeles describes it as "a 50-year-old social sculpture we have all produced" from "undifferentiated, unnamed, no-value garbage," and a public asset that we can, with loving care, repair and preserve. Her proposals for the park are on view in the museum's atrium; she'll lead a tour of the site in November.

Care, repair and preservation are what Ms. Ukeles's art has been about right along. It's as if her early realization that self-empowerment comes not through fighting but through redefining the meaning of power had given her a usable awareness of vulnerability in the world. That awareness has taken her, in ways extremely rare in contemporary art, through potential barriers of class and gender; it has given her an enviable ease with spirituality (her Jewish faith is central to her life); and it has let her produce work that's as companionable as a shared meal and as serious as art can be.

"Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art" continues through Feb. 19 at Queens Museum, New York City, Building, Flushing Meadows Corona Park; 718-592-9700; [queensmuseum.org](http://queensmuseum.org).

A version of this article appears in print on September 16, 2016, on page C17 of the New York edition with the headline: Redefining Power With Everyday Labor.



## Best of 2016: Our Top 20 NYC Art Shows

This list barely scratches the surface of the city's artistic offerings this year, from overdue retrospectives to surprising sides of artists we know well.

Hyperallergic December 27, 2016

Staff. "Best of 2016: Our Top 20 NYC Art Shows." *Hyperallergic*, December 27, 2016.

<http://hyperallergic.com/347696/best-of-2016-our-top-20-nyc-art-shows/>



(photo of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "The Social Mirror," outside the Queens Museum by Jillian Steinhauer/Hyperallergic)

New York is no longer the center of the art world, its art scene is doomed, and artists are fleeing because the rent is too damn high. Writers can declare all sorts of doomsday scenarios, but the fact remains: New York is still an incredible place to see art. This list of 20 exhibitions (plus honorable mentions) barely scratches the surface of the city's artistic offerings this year, from overdue retrospectives to surprising sides of artists we know well. It provides a small comfort: 2016 may have been really shitty, but at least we saw some really good art.

## **2. Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art at the Queens Museum**



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Ceremonial Arch IV" (1988/1993/1994/2016), more than 5,000 gloves donated from 10 urban organizations, in steel cages and on steel rods, situated over six columns wrought from materials donated from local and federal agencies (photo by Jillian Steinhauer/Hyperallergic)

*September 18, 2016–February 19, 2017*

In 1969, Mierle Laderman Ukeles wrote a manifesto for something she called “maintenance art,” which is summed up perfectly by an often-quoted line: “The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?” That deeply insightful question has shaped the decades of work she’s developed since, from carrying out various maintenance tasks at museums to shaking the hand of every sanitation worker in NYC to envisioning the Fresh Kills landfill as a park. Ukeles’s brilliant reconception of both art and labor has gone underappreciated for too long; this eye-opening survey begins to rectify that. —  
*Jillian Steinhauer*

BLOUINARTINFO

# 25 Most Collectible Conceptual Artists: Mierle Laderman Ukeles

BY ART+AUCTION | SEPTEMBER 26, 2016

Staff. "25 Most Collectible Conceptual Artists: Mierle Laderman Ukeles." *BlouinArtInfo.com*, September 26 2016. <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1594239/25-most-collectible-conceptual-artists-mierle-laderman-ukeles>



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Touch Sanitation Performance: Sweep 7, Staten Island, 6:00 a.m. Roll Call," 1978-80 (performance), 2007 (photo)

(Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

*For its September 2016 issue, Art+Auction compiled a list of the 25 most collectible conceptual artists of the last 75 years. This week, ARTINFO will publish several installments from the list per day. Click [here](#) to read the introduction to the list. To see all the installments published so far, click [here](#).*

## Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Simultaneously addressing institutional critique and feminist perspectives in art, Ukeles is best known for her landmark performances dealing with what she has termed “**Maintenance Art.**” Throughout the 1970s she performed a series of actions at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, where she undertook maintenance work for the museum, such as washing the entryways and cleaning glass vitrines. Recontextualizing the museum in terms of labor **relations and exposing the institution’s reliance on** a largely invisible workforce, Ukeles also drew parallels between these tasks and the domestic duties often relegated to women. Her work can be seen through several lenses, but her **approach is ultimately “rooted in a deep human-ism,” says Marco Nocella of New York’s Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, who places her work in the vein of Joseph Beuys.** Because she was a pioneer in the realm of social practice, institutional **interest in Ukeles’s work is significant. She has exhibited widely, including at the Whitney Museum, Queens Museum, moca Los Angeles, Brooklyn Museum, and Haus der Kunst in Munich.** Discerning collectors and curators tend to acquire her work directly from the gallery rather than in the secondary market. Editioned works, largely in the form of photographic documentation, start at \$20,000, while her manifesto—the foundation for her early performances—is priced at \$175,000, and her sculptures reach beyond that. Ukeles is the official artist in residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation, an unsalaried position she has held since the 1970s.

A retrospective of Laderman Ukeles's work, titled "Maintenance Art," is on view at the Queens Museum now through February 19, 2017.



Harakawa, Maya. "In Conversation: Mierle Laderman Ukeles with Maya Harakawa."

*The Brooklyn Rail*, October 4 2016.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2016/10/art/mierle-laderman-ukeles-with-maya-harakawa>

ART

OCTOBER 4TH, 2016

IN CONVERSATION

## MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES with Maya Harakawa

Mierle Laderman Ukeles (b. 1939) is a maintenance artist. Since 1969, the year she wrote *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!* later published in the pages of *Artforum*, she has devoted her practice to demystifying the invisible labor that undergirds society. "Maintenance is a drag," she wrote in the manifesto, "it takes all the fucking time (lit.) The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay." In 1978, Ukeles became the artist-in-residence at the New York City Sanitation Department, a position she continues to hold. Her monumental piece *Touch Sanitation* (1978 – 1980), for which she spent a year traveling around the city, shaking hands with every sanitation worker and thanking them for keeping the city alive, is a touchstone for socially engaged art. She is currently at work on a project for Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island, pursuing the first artwork to be permanently installed at what was once the largest landfill in the world.

On the occasion of the first solo survey exhibition of her work—*Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* currently on view at the Queens Museum—Ukeles sat down with Maya Harakawa to discuss her early training as an artist, motherhood, and making art with 10,000 people.



Portrait of Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Susan Egan.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles: I began studying for my MFA at Pratt. I studied everything, except ceramics.

Maya Harakawa (Rail): Why not?

Ukeles: Because there are too many rules. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's what I thought. You have to do everything a certain way. There shouldn't be rules in art school, you should try everything. I still believe that.

Rail: What was it like to be in art school in the early '60s?

Ukeles: It was already past Abstract Expressionism, so Pop Art, assemblage, and all sorts of fabulous stuff was going on. But there were many teachers that couldn't handle the change. And a lot of them couldn't handle women. I was in a sculpture class at Pratt and the teacher told me that women shouldn't be in sculpture.

Rail: Did he say why?

Ukeles: No, it was obvious.

Rail: What ideas or artists were you responding to at that point?

Ukeles: There were other artists there that I messed around with, like Ralph Ortiz (Raphael Montañez Ortiz); he tore up a bed, he was a destructivist. Ralph had this theory that we are innately violent but that, if violence is sublimated into art, then we can be peaceful. He had this bedspring that he cut and ripped and MoMA bought it! While we were in school. I was never a destructivist because I didn't believe the theory, but I was very interested in psychoanalysis. Freud, Jung, and Norman O. Brown. We flipped out over them. And Marcuse was important to me as well. That was the beginning of student movements organizing all over the place. The administration at Pratt was very fearful of that.

Rail: Did you have influential teachers at Pratt?

Ukeles: I didn't learn from a lot of my teachers because they just wanted their students to copy their work, to work like them. But my first teacher in graduate school was Robert Richenburg, who was just marvelous. He spoke about freedom. He said that the

artist has to be free and I just lapped that up. The most important experience that I had in graduate school was all-out freedom. That's really why I wanted to be an artist. In Richenburg's class, I started doing this wrapping, pouring, and stuffing, and he saw that that was my first original artwork. I didn't know what I was doing but I knew more than anyone else about it. That was *my* work. But the administration told Richenburg that he had to stop me from making them. He would exhibit them around the graduate studio and they told him to take them down. They said I was making pornography and that I was oversexed. I thought it was abstract! [Laughter.] I mean, they're pretty visceral, but I really did think they were abstract. He ignored the administration and he got fired. They didn't kick me out but they made me extremely unwelcome. After that whole incident, I came back for one semester, but I couldn't stand being there so I left.

Rail: How did that experience affect how you saw yourself as an artist?

Ukeles: I almost fell apart. But I knew I was onto something very important. The work had value because it was my work.

Rail: Your early work was object-based, but after you left Pratt your work became less and less material. So much so that your *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* has been subsumed under the rubric of conceptualism. Do you see a through line here, or was there a complete departure?

Ukeles: I'm glad you asked me that. After I left Pratt I moved back home to Colorado and I kept making work. I bought three hundred pounds of stuffed animals and rags and I started stuffing and stuffing. I kept making works that were bigger and bigger. I could work a whole day stuffing them until the form was as full as possible. I would stuff, and stuff a little bit more, and a little bit more, and then the whole thing would explode—literally explode: a hundred pounds of stuffing would be lying on the ground. I had to worry about cleaning up, but I didn't want to take care of *anything*. Basically the materiality became a burden: instead of a means of expression it became something I had to take care of.

Rail: Your relationship to materiality started to change.

Ukeles: This was during the Vietnam War, so materiality had a whole bad aspect to it. Using resources suddenly became suspect, because that's how we ended up in Southeast Asia. Everything became suspect, really: institutions, making things,

consumer objects; capitalism itself—**moving, moving, moving, using everybody's resources.**

After the stuffings, I started working on these large inflatable pieces. The idea was that I could blow them up, and then, when I wasn't showing them, I'd deflate them. Because if I could fold them up and put them in my jeans, I wouldn't have to take care of them. I was really serious about that. It was ridiculous. I spent four years trying to make them. Eventually, I contacted Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) for help because I wanted to make them electromagnetized so the forms would inflate and deflate. I wanted them to breathe, to expand and then contract. E.A.T. hooked me up with a physicist. I showed him all my plans and he told me that the project had to be underwater. Why? Because electromagnetism falls off radically after a few inches and I wanted these things to be *big*. So I said to him, “You know it's very hard to see art if it's underwater.” He looked at me like I was crazy and I thought: this isn't going to work.  
[Laughter.]

The air art was about freedom. Free, free, free—no maintenance, no nothing. But they kept leaking. I was able to make one piece after four years of work, but when I took it outside the whole thing cracked. I wrote to these plastic companies and got free plastic, **but they neglected to tell me that the material wouldn't hold below a certain temperature.** So all of these air art symbols of freedom had terrible maintenance problems.

Rail: As you were working on these pieces, you had your first child.

Ukeles: Yes, I became a maintenance worker because I became mother. The thing about maintenance is that if you decide that something has value, then you want to maintain it. You have to do a series of tasks to keep it alive. I loved that baby; I fell madly in love **with that baby. But I didn't know anything about being a mother, about how to make sure that my child was healthy and robust. Whether it's a child, an institution, or a city, it's all the same:** if you want them to thrive, you have to do a lot of maintenance—a whole lot.

Rail: What is the difference between maintenance and labor?

Ukeles: That's a great question. Maintenance is always circular and repetitive. Labor could be like building a highway from the Atlantic to the Pacific: once it's built, it's done. There's labor in maintenance, but not all labor has to be repetitive.

Rail: How did motherhood affect you as an artist?

Ukeles: **I was a time of crisis for me. I mean, I wanted that baby. It wasn't that someone pushed me into having a baby. But all my heroes, the artists I was trying to be like—Jackson Pollock, Marcel Duchamp, Mark Rothko—didn't have to deal with the maintenance of motherhood. Here I was changing diapers, saying to myself, “Where are you, Jackson? Where are you, Marcel?” I felt like they abandoned me. They had nothing to say to me. They wouldn't be caught dead doing what I was doing as a mother. I felt like I was falling.**

Rail: Did you identify as a feminist by this time?

Ukeles: **Oh yes, but I wasn't active because I was busy. I had gone through hell from Pratt, hell, and here were these women speaking out. I needed them. I also faced a classic maternal conundrum after my children were born. I divided my life in half. My husband, Jack, was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania at that point, and we hired someone to take care of our daughter for half the week. So half the week I would be home with the baby and half the week I would be in my studio. But when I was in my studio, I kept thinking: is she really paying attention to the baby? And when I was with my baby I kept thinking: when am I going to do my work? It was like this hurricane, which never ceased, nor has it ceased for my daughters. They're still saying the same stuff.**

One day, it was October 1969, I had an epiphany. I said to myself: You're the boss of your freedom. You're not a copier of Marcel, who can't help you anymore. If you're the boss of your freedom then you have the right to name anything art. Marcel gave me that right. So that's how I turned my maintenance work into maintenance art. That was it. It was a way to keep my life together. I said to myself: I'm an artist. I need to be who I am, and this is who I am.

Rail: Was writing the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* a way of legitimating this decision to yourself?



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation*, 1979 – 80. Citywide performance with 8,500 Sanitation workers across all fifty-nine New York City Sanitation districts. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Photo: Marcia Bricker.

Ukeles: Yes, ma'am! And I did it in one shot.

Rail: Why was the manifesto form appealing to you?

Ukeles: It was provocative. I was saying, “Hey! It’s over, folks. We’re in a new time.” Of course, after I wrote it I started rethinking everything, *everything*. I had this very fancy education, I graduated from Barnard College, and I was so stupid. I felt like people would automatically listen to me because I was well educated. But after I became a mother, people would meet me and they would have nothing to ask me. Basically, I fell out of a certain class and moved into another. And when I looked around, I saw that most of the people in the world were also in that class, that they were workers too. I felt also that the feminist movement, which I was counting on to help me, wasn’t all that interested in women service workers.

Rail: There was a classist dimension to the politics.

Ukeles: Totally. One hundred percent.

Rail: But you still participated in feminist art activities. Lucy Lippard eventually became aware of your work and exhibited it.

Ukeles: The manifesto was published in *Artforum* in 1971. Jack Burnham included it in an article about the end of the avant-garde because I explicitly call out the limits of the avant-garde. After the article was published, Lucy Lippard calls me up on the telephone [and says], “Are you real? Or did Jack Burnham make you up for his article?” **Isn’t that great? She thought he concocted it. It turned out we lived a few blocks away** from each other, so we got together. She invited me to be in *c. 7,500*, a show of women conceptual artists that she curated in 1973. It started at CalArts, and eventually traveled all over the country.

Rail: Did that show feel like a legitimating moment for maintenance art?

Ukeles: Yes, definitely. But I got sort of jealous that my work was traveling around so much. I wanted to go too. I mean, I was still stuck in the house all day, and my work was traveling around. So I called up Lucy and I told her that I wanted to do some maintenance art activities, some performances. She gave me the names of the curators at the sites. I contacted them and they said sure. I went to several places and I did about fifteen performance works. For example, I performed these *Maintenance Art Tasks* at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1973. I washed the steps of the museum; I dusted the vitrine of a mummy and called it a painting; I locked the doors to the museum—all as maintenance artworks.

Rail: And you kept making maintenance art after that.

Ukeles: In 1976, I participated in a show at the downtown Whitney called *Art-World*. All of the art in the show was about real world systems: Gordon Matta-Clark did a piece about a new water tunnel in New York; Douglas Huebler was trying to photograph everyone in the whole world; Helen and Newton Harrison made a huge map work, stuff like that.

When I visited the site for the first time I was shocked to see this humongous office building. That was when the downtown Whitney was at 55 Water Street. It’s actually one of the largest office buildings in the world. Because of my interest in working with

maintenance in society, I had been looking for a skyscraper, because a skyscraper obviously needs a lot of maintenance, right? So when I saw the building, I flipped. Given the site, the abundance of maintenance workers, instead of making a work *in* the museum, I proposed a work with all the workers in the building. That was *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Everyday*. There were three hundred workers in that building, so I wrote to all three hundred of them inviting them to participate in a performance work with me. The premise was simple: I invited them to think of their regular maintenance work as maintenance art, to pick one hour everyday and in that hour, whatever they were doing, to think of it as art instead of work. The Duchampian freedom to rename something, to switch something, that's what I invited them to do. It wasn't about me projecting something onto them; that's exactly what I was trying to get away from.

Rail: What did you learn from working with the maintenance workers?

Ukeles: I heard a lot of stories. One time, a guy came up to me and told me, "I just washed the lobby floor, and someone spit on it." If anybody did that to me I would have had a fit. So asked, "What did you say?" And he said, "We're not allowed to say anything." There was this sort of Apollonian order, a law of absolute order that produced the idea that maintenance happens all by itself. It erased the human behind the work. The standard of the building was that the building was always clean, always perfect.

Rail: That's because maintenance work maintains social order. The labor that is done on a material level produces hierarchies between people: between the person who does the maintenance and the people who ignore it, or worse.

Ukeles: The people who do physical work, they are put in a different layer. You have to understand this about maintenance work: the workers, especially at night, they would be cleaning all these fancy offices and I would go with them so I could photograph them working. I didn't care about the bosses or anything in the office besides the workers, but the management got very nervous. They were afraid of what I might see. I'm sure I saw a lot of sensitive stuff, but I didn't care about any of it. But the thing was, these maintenance workers, *they saw these things all the time!* But you see, they didn't count, management wasn't afraid of what they saw every day because they were only there to clean. So I got this huge understanding of this social order, of a priority of order.

Rail: There's an issue of visibility in all of this: what work gets seen, what people get seen. It seems like your use of photography really brought that to the fore.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, September 16 – October 20, 1976. Performance with three hundred maintenance employees, day and night shifts over the course of six weeks at 55 Water Street, New York. Installation at Whitney Museum Downtown at 55 Water Street. 720 Polaroid photographs mounted on paper, printed labels, color-coded stickers, seven handwritten and typewritten texts, clipboard, and custom-made buttons, overall: 12 x 15 feet. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Ukeles: I used a Polaroid camera to take everyone's picture. There's a little white space at the bottom. I made these labels "maintenance art" and "maintenance work" and depending on what people said they were doing, I'd put the appropriate label on the Polaroid. There could be two people working together, doing the same task, and one might say that they were doing maintenance work and the other that they were doing maintenance art. Whatever they would say to me, I would accept it. The point was that they were the **decision makers**. That's what I felt the contribution of the art was, allowing these workers to take control of themselves. Even though they were trapped in this really constraining system of order, for that one hour they got to decide what they were doing.

Rail: What happened when you exhibited the work?

Ukeles: When the show opened I gridded off a wall in the gallery, and in the beginning all I had was a grid of pencil lines. That made me very nervous. There were all these other hotshot artists, and I had nothing! But little by little I would take these pictures, label them as either maintenance work or maintenance art, and start mounting them on the wall. And over the course of the exhibition I mounted seven hundred and twenty photographs of decisions. It ended up being a picture of the human side of work, a portrait of the building that showed that the work was human. The most wonderful thing was that the workers started coming to the museum to check up on me, making sure that I made good on what I said to them. The museum staff told me that the **workers never came into the museum because they felt like they didn't belong there.** And they were very critical readers of the work, which I loved. I remember one worker in particular, after seeing the photo I took **of him in the men's bathroom, he came up to me and he said, "You missed the most important thing. You didn't get me cleaning underneath the rim of the toilet. *That's* the work."** I loved that. He was really looking at the work and he wasn't afraid to tell me that I got it wrong. That's all an artist really wants, for people to really focus on the work and to respond to it.

Rail: How did people respond to the work?

Ukeles: David Bourdon wrote a review of the Whitney show in the *Village Voice*. He wrote: “Maintenance workers of the world unite! Now you can call your work performance art.” This was at the height of the fiscal crisis. People were getting laid off all over the place. The bankers wanted New York to declare bankruptcy, it was really dire. As a joke, Bourdon wrote, “Perhaps the sanitation department should call its work performance art and replace some of its budget with a grant from the NEA.”

I didn't know where my garbage went, I didn't know who the commissioner of the sanitation department was, but when I saw this review I got to thinking. I sent a Xerox to the commissioner and a day or so later I got a call from commissioner Anthony Vaccarello's assistant asking me if I'd like to make art with 10,000 people. When I did the piece at the Whitney, I really thought that an artist couldn't work with more than three hundred people. So this got me really excited. I said, “I'll be right over.”

Rail: What was the commissioner like? I find it so crazy that someone in his position would think that working with an artist was a good idea.

Ukeles: There was a feeling of desperation around the sanitation department. When I spoke to Vaccarello he said to me, “Get to know the sanitation workers, they’re terrific people.” And he asked one of his assistants to drive me all over the department. He could have said, “Go to this one garage and find out what’s going on in this garage.” That’s one way to think about a system, taking a sample. But he didn’t say that. I was lucky in the first moves were big and compassionate.

Rail: But the commissioner was soon replaced.

Ukeles: When Ed Koch became mayor he appointed Norman Steisel to be the new commissioner of Sanitation. Steisel felt very strongly that the workforce was completely misunderstood, that even though the department needed a lot of improvement, the blame was coming down on the workers and that was wrong. And with my passion for workers that I brought with me from the original notion of maintenance art, the whole feminist spiel, there was this meeting of minds. Steisel approved a set of proposals that I gave him and he gave me access. He sent out memos to his executive committee, *all* of them, every branch of the department. He told them, “There’s this artist working here. I’m approving these projects. Help her.”

Rail: Was *Touch Sanitation* the first project?



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation*, 1979 – 80. Citywide performance with 8,500 Sanitation workers across all fifty-nine New York City Sanitation districts. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Photo: Marcia Bricker.

Ukeles: I gave him proposals for three projects: *Touch Sanitation*, a work skills festival (which turned into the ballets), and artworks for landfills. I flipped over the landfills. That was the time of classical land art, like the earthworks movement. But I could never see those works because you had to travel so far to get to them, often in a private plane. It was sort of a private, macho thing. But I saw these open acres of land and I thought, “Oh my god! These could be sites for urban earthworks.”

When I came to the sanitation department in 1976, I had been doing this work about maintenance for a while, since 1969. But this was *big!* This was the biggest maintenance system I could ever hope to work with. And it was pure. Also it was all males at that point and I actually thought that was *really cool*. These are the housekeepers of the city, **and they're all men!** So as a feminist, with this all-male workforce, I felt it was the perfect opportunity to shatter so many preconceptions about labor, to just *blow* them up. I hit a limit of western culture that actually talks about democracy, but is really just about class.

Rail: Were you aware of the class of the workers? They must have been middle class.

Ukeles: They were middle-class people. Most people aren't aware of that. I liked that: they are middle-class and so am I. So many middle-class people feel invisible and that's what really pissed me off the most. I would say that most of the people that worked in sanitation came from high-skilled technical backgrounds, but that didn't guarantee them a steady job. They wanted to buy into the middle-class dream of America, a steady job, get a mortgage, get benefits, and that's why they went into sanitation. The thought was: if I get into a steady job, I'm set. That's why people were so hysterical. They didn't want to pick up garbage.

Rail: They wanted security.

Ukeles: That was the trade-off. They wanted security and it was caving in on them.

So that was the first proposal and Norman Steisel really agreed with me. He felt that it was worth taking a risk. I think he felt that if it didn't work out they could say thank you and just move on. We started with *Touch Sanitation*. The department provided me with a driver and a guide for a whole year. Thank god they did, otherwise I'd still be wandering around Queens looking for the sanitation workers! I piggybacked on their genius: they know where everybody is. I mean, think about that! They know where you are because they have to, or else they can't find your garbage, right? And they know if you're doing okay or if you're not doing okay, because they see your garbage, and you can learn a lot about someone from the contents of their garbage. So I piggybacked on their brilliant operations system and built an itinerary of ten sweeps around the city, over the course of which I went to every single sanitation facility and met all of the workers.

Rail: And you completed this project over the course of a year?

Ukeles: I thought it would take three months. It took eleven. The reason that *Touch Sanitation* was first was that I felt like I needed to develop some credibility. I didn't know anything about sanitation, so what right did I have to open my mouth? That's why I needed to face everyone in the whole system: it felt like a much better way to introduce myself.

Rail: You set up a logical system with a set of defining parameters, set the system into action, and let it run its course. There's a level of absurdity that's undermined by the

fact that you actually achieved the seemingly unachievable task that you set for yourself. What happened after you finished *Touch Sanitation*?

Ukeles: From the beginning my plan was to have a *Touch Sanitation* show. It took four years to get it together because I wanted to have the show at a transfer station and in my gallery, Ronald Feldman Gallery in Soho, at the same time. The whole thing just about did me in! It was a bad idea to do them simultaneously, but it was logical because I felt that both perspectives were necessary to really do the art justice. The two sites required two different ways of seeing.

Rail: Your work with the sanitation department continues to this day. What changes have you seen in your forty years working there?

Ukeles: The commissioner of sanitation happens to be a woman right now, and the deputy of sustainability is a woman, too. Their big project is zero waste to landfills by 2030 and they both talk about circular economies. Circular economies means there's no out; you move material throughout the city but it's always in a flow system. That's what I've been talking about since 1969! As a mother, I was involved in maintenance practices that were circular, repetitive, necessary, and as a feminist I learned from that work and turned it into art. I learned these lessons of circularity because of how pissed off I was, working in my kitchen or changing diapers, and now they're becoming city policy.

#### **CONTRIBUTOR**

#### **Maya Harakawa**

MAYA HARAKAWA is a Ph.D. student in art history at the Graduate Center, CUNY, and the social media manager of the *Brooklyn Rail*.

Ryan, Bartholomew. "Manifesto for Maintenance: A Conversation With Mierle Laderman Ukeles." ArtInAmerica.com, March 30, 2009, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2009-03-20/draft-mierle-interview/>

## Manifesto for Maintenance: A Conversation With Mierle Laderman Ukeles

by [Bartholomew Ryan](#) 03/20/09

Forty years ago the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles sat down and wrote the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!* It promoted 'maintenance' ("sustain the change; protect progress") as an important value in contrast to the excitement of avant-garde and industrial 'development'. One of the early lines in the manifesto reads, "The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning." In 1973, as part of *c.7500* Lucy Lippard's all-female traveling exhibition of conceptual artists, Ukeles performed four actions at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford Connecticut that were early important works of Institutional Critique. In 1977, Ukeles became the artist in residence at New York City's Department of Sanitation, a position she has held since. In recent years, Ukeles has been collaboratively developing plans for a park on the site of Staten Island's recently closed Fresh Kills Landfill. Here she chats about the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* with Bartholomew Ryan, whose work as an independent curator and critic has been informed recently by the history of the manifesto form

**BR:** Mierle, I'd like to chat about your manifesto. When did you write it?

**MLU:** In October 1969, in a cold fury, I sat down and I wrote the manifesto naming Maintenance Art. It arrived in one package though it was not the result of one simple idea as many people think, but of layers of causes which led up to this encapsulation. Art is often an encapsulation of a whole flow of things that end up in one formal thing, and the formal thing here was the manifesto document.

**BR:** What kind of work had you been doing?



**MLU:** I had a very privileged education, I majored in international relations; then I went to the Pratt Institute, and got kicked out for making what they said was pornographic art, which I thought was abstract art. They were

cheesecloth wrappings; I called them 'bindings', sort of energy pods, where I stuffed them up to the point of bursting with rags. When they had hernias? That was a failure. I wanted them to be to the point of explosion, totally bursting with energy. I thought that they were like images of energy captured, only the Dean and the Chairman at Pratt thought they were pornographic, and told the teacher that I was 'oversexed', and he had to stop me from doing them. I mean they looked more like organs than ...

**BR:** Than sexual organs ...

**MLU:** I think they looked more like digestive organs [laughing] I thought they were abstract. I didn't know what the hell these people were talking about. I was shocked, and my teacher Robert Richenberg was very supportive. And that is when they got hysterical, he ended up getting fired, I thought the whole school would march out because of academic freedom/ That lasted about fifteen minutes, then everybody wanted to keep their jobs, and keep their whatever, and the whole thing died away. Another experience, earlier, when I was a senior at Barnard, the President used to rant at us, "You can do anything, you can be anything!" And I believed her. I was this sap for freedom talk. This was the Sixties, the time of the civil rights movement; this is what was in the air, the notion that the world could be reinvented so that people were free, that it belonged to everybody. I mean, I didn't make this stuff up.

**BR:** In 1968 you had your first baby?

**MLU:** Right. Yes. And when people would meet me pushing my baby carriage, they didn't have any questions to ask me. They didn't say "How is it, to create life? How can you describe this amazing thing?" There really weren't questions. It was like I was mute, there was no language. This is 1968, there was no valuing of 'maintenance' in Western Culture. The trajectory was: make something new, always move forward. Capitalism is like that. The people who were taking care and keeping the wheels of society turning were mute, and I didn't like it! I felt when I was watching Richard Serra do these very simple things like throwing the lead, or Judd building things -- the language of Process Art and Minimalism, which I felt very in tune with -- I felt like "what are they doing?" They are lifting industrial processes and forgetting about the whole culture that they come out of. So Serra was this steel worker without the work, without the workers. And Judd was this carpenter without workers. They didn't have workers, they didn't have people, they had objects -- or they had results. And I felt that they were falling into the same trap as the rest of this damn culture, which couldn't see the whole structures or cultures of workers that made the kind of work that invented these processes and refined them.



They were skimming off the top. Meanwhile, I had spent four years, from 1963 to 1967, trying to make these inflatables that would be huge, and could float in the water and in the air. I just wanted to be able to make these big, inflatable environments stuffed with air that I could fold up and put in my pocket when I was done. I did

not want to have to take care of anything. But, there were all sorts of problems, and these things that were supposed to be symbols of freedom, they cracked. My bio then was 'move forward into the unknown' just like Harold Rosenberg had told me to. -- you know, like the Abstract Expressionists. You move forward, and take the whole culture with you. Actually, I still have that feeling.

**BR:** That's OK. [laughter]

**MLU:** Anyway, they cracked, they melted -- it was just a disaster. I spent four years on this stuff. The elements of the world, like gravity, came crashing in, so you had to take care of things, and I was trying to avoid taking care. So, I sat down and I said, "If I am the artist, and if I am the boss of my art, then I name Maintenance Art." And really, it was like a survival strategy, because I felt like "how do I keep going?" I am this maintenance worker, I am this artist -- I mean this is early feminism, very rigid, I literally was divided in two. Half of my week I was the mother, and the other half the artist. But, I thought to myself, "this is ridiculous, I am the one." It is the artist, not art history and not the critics and not anybody -- it is the artist that invents what is art, and that is why it is important to write a manifesto. It wasn't just, "How am I feeling today?" It was saying, "OK folks, we have hit a certain point here, and from now on art has changed. Why? Because I say so."

**BR:** Where were you when you wrote it?

**MLU:** We were living in Philadelphia for a year. I was sitting in a room on a chair where the seat had almost collapsed so you could just sit on the frame because I didn't fix it! [laughter].

**BR:** The manifesto opened a lot of doors, including an important exhibition, *c. 7,500*, curated by Lucy Lippard. In 1977 you joined the Department of Sanitation as an Artist In Residence, and you have been there since. Your past and present work is in conversation with many contexts in contemporary art. For instance, I find your having been at the DOS for this long rigorous, conceptually speaking -- this ongoing dedication through what I imagine are a myriad of logistical concerns.

**MLU:** You know, I saw On Kawara's show recently [at David Zwirner Gallery], and I think that he is dealing with maintenance more than most. That is what maintenance is, trying to listen to the hum of living. A feeling of being alive, breath to breath. The same way that the sanitation department sends out 1,600 trucks every day, it is like this repetitive thing that as much as you chafe at the boredom of the repetition is as important as the other parts. And I know that that has to be a part of culture. Because if isn't, then you don't have a culture that welcomes in everybody. And, I mean *everybody*.

# The New York Times

## Arts & Leisure

Section 2

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 19, 2002

ART / ARCHITECTURE

# The Department of Sanitation's Artist in Residence

By JEFFREY KASTNER

MIERLE LADERMAN UKELLES greets a visitor to her office in lower Manhattan with a big smile, offering a seat at a worktable where she has set out mementos of her more than 30-year-long artistic career. Among the stacks is a yellowed brochure from 1979 boldly announcing "Public Art With Public Workers in Public Spaces for the Whole Public" and featuring a picture of two hands clasped in greeting in front of a dinged truck door bearing the legend "City of New York Department of Sanitation."

The image, with its gesture of equality and solidarity, provides a fitting introduction to the life's work of what a critic once admiringly called the art world's "pre-eminent garbage girl." Despite many public commissions and exhibitions both in the United States and abroad, the volatile and often funny Ms. Ukeles (her name is pronounced MER-yl LAY-der-man YOU-kah-lees) remains best known for her singular role as the New York City Department of Sanitation's first and only "artist-in-residence." She assumed this unsalaried position in the early 1980's, but she actually earned it while doing the project outlined in the brochure — a conceptual piece called "Touch Sanitation," for which she spent 11 months crisscrossing the city day and night to shake hands with every one of its 8,500 sanitation workers, telling each, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive."

"It was really a work about the city," Ms. Ukeles, now 62, says of the project, which was itself preceded by a year spent informally with the city's "sammen," learning how they worked. "It's a portrait of a living structure. I'd been listening to what sanitation workers were saying, and it was the same

thing other maintenance workers had been telling me. They'd say, 'People think I'm part of the garbage.' People were in pain — it's terrible to feel you're invisible. And I thought, 'I am home, man, I am home.'"

This empathy with maintenance workers had deep roots in Ms. Ukeles's personal history. The child of a prominent rabbi and a culturally involved mother, she came to New York from Denver to attend college. Graduating from Barnard College in 1961 with a degree in history and international relations, she already suspected her future lay in art, not in diplomacy. After studying painting and sculpture at Pratt Institute, she briefly tried teaching and in 1966 married Jack Ukeles, an urbanist and city planner.

After the wedding, Ms. Ukeles continued to pursue art. But when she became pregnant, things got complicated. "I remember when my pregnancy began to show," she says, recalling the era's social attitudes. "I came into my sculpture class and the instructor said, 'Well, I guess you can't be an artist now.' And I thought, 'What are you talking about?' I wanted to be a mother; it was a great blessing. But I was in a panic that it meant I couldn't be an artist."

The strain only increased after the birth of her daughter, Yael, the first of three children, in 1968. "I tried to be an artist half

**Mierle Ukeles's art, from 8,500 handshakes to a street sweeper ballet, is about power and who has to clean up the mess.**

the time and a mommy the other half," she says. "But I was in my studio thinking about my kid, and in the playground thinking about my work." By fall 1969, Ms. Ukeles was out of patience with her double life. She longed for an artist's freedom, but she also had a house to clean, dinner to make and diapers to change, competing identities that seemed irreconcilable. And then she had an epiphany that changed her life: "I said, 'This is stupid. If I'm the artist, I get to say what's art. And I pick this.'"

Ms. Ukeles announced her choice by writing "Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969," a vivid theoretical document linking feminism, social activism, ecology and an institutional critique to aspects of performance and process art.

"I am an artist," she wrote. "I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order.) I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now separately) I do Art. Now, I will simply do these everyday things and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art."

She also took the opportunity to pose a broader social question, one that, given later developments, seems remarkably prescient: "After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"

She sent the text to a few institutions and individuals, while also proposing an exhibition for which she would move into a museum and carry out "service activities" like cleaning and cooking. While no one offered a show, a writer asked to reprint some of the manifesto in Artforum magazine. For accompanying images, Ms. Ukeles's husband photographed her doing housework — dusting, mopping, cooking, rinsing a diaper in the toilet.

The article caught the attention of the influential critic Lucy Lippard, who invited Ms. Ukeles to participate in a traveling show of female artists for which she created her first public work: a series of "actions" highlighting maintenance activities within a museum. At the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, in 1973, for example, Ms. Ukeles's performance involved washing the museum's front steps and the floor of one of its galleries, as well as taking control of guards' keys and temporarily closing various galleries, sometimes with visitors still inside.

Touching issues of gender and class, of labor and control, these early pieces were "really about power," Ms. Ukeles says. "I came out of early feminism and a vision of culture that says everybody is inside the picture. I saw a coalition between the ancient maintenance class of women and all the other people in the world doing maintenance work. I thought if we made common cause, we could reorder everything."

The contextual expansion of Ms. Ukeles's work — from home to museum, individual to group — accelerated in the following years. Her next major project, "I Make Mainte-



Front left: The New York Times



Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

**Mierle Laderman Ukeles at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island in February. At left, her 1993 "ballet" for 27 trucks, 3 barges and 100 tons of recycled glass, on the wharf and river at Givres, France.**

# The Sanitation Department's Artist: Examining Power

Continued From Page 37

nance Art I Hour Every Day" (1976) was for the Whitney Museum's downtown Manhattan branch, now closed. It was intended to highlight, through photographs and interviews, the activities of some 300 maintenance workers in the skyscraper where the galleries were housed. After a review facetiously suggested that New York's underfinanced Sanitation Department declare its activities "art" and apply for cultural grants, Ms. Ukeles sent off a letter proposing a collaboration. To her surprise, the commissioner's office called and said, "How would you like to make art with 10,000 people?" Ms. Ukeles laughs. "I said, 'I'll be right over.'"

To Ms. Ukeles, who saw sanitation work as "the domestic on the urban scale," the relationship seemed a perfect fit. Vito A. Turso, one of the first department officials to meet her, agreed. "I was totally engaged," says Mr. Turso, currently the department's deputy commissioner for public information and community affairs.

"This was one of the agencies that truly fit into the 'unsung hero' category, all the sanitation workers keeping the city clean and safe," Mr. Turso says. "And all of a sudden there was this artist, literally out of nowhere, who said, 'I want to tell that story.'

Recalling Ms. Ukeles's persistence in the face of skepticism among the rank and file, he says: "She converted thousands of hardened uniform workers. They appreciated the fact that she was with them, in the rain on a cold night on a dark street. It takes a special person with commitment, someone who cares. That's Mierle."

In the years since, Ms. Ukeles has produced a variety of projects with the department about maintenance, culture, visibility and power, from "Ceremonial Sweep," a 1983 performance in which sanitation bosses took up brooms and cleaned a 32-block Manhattan parade route, to "Flow City," a continuing project meant to transform a Hudson River garbage transfer station into public space, with artworks and viewing platforms.

Outside New York, her activities have included live choreographed "ballets" for vehicles like street sweepers, garbage trucks and barges around the world; public sculpture created from waste materials in Asia and work on land

reclamation projects at sites from Tel Aviv to Cambridge, Mass.

This engagement with reclaiming damaged land is also the focus of her most ambitious enterprise, a decade-long research effort, under the auspices of the Sanitation Department, into potential art projects at Staten Island's Fresh Kills landfill. The 2,200-acre, half-century-old dump, long the world's largest, had for years been slowly winding down toward closure and rehabilitation. It actually closed ahead of schedule in March 2001, only to reopen after Sept. 11, when debris from the World Trade Center collapse was taken there.

Despite the many issues surrounding this last, sad chapter in the life of Fresh Kills, Ms. Ukeles says the overall strategy for reclaiming the largest piece of open land in New York City remains in place. From a short list of three groups — each including landscape designers, engineers, ecologists and others — one will be selected by the city, with public participation, to develop a plan for the site's future after the cleanup is completed.

Ms. Ukeles will develop art projects with the chosen team, bringing intimate knowledge of Fresh

## Fresh Kills: Artists Respond to the Closure of the Staten Island Landfill

Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island. Through May 27.

Kills and the people involved with it. (Her most recent video project related to the site is on view in a group exhibition on the landfill at Staten Island's Snug Harbor Cultural Center.)

Although she's reluctant to discuss her concepts during the selection process, Ms. Ukeles is typically enthusiastic about the potential for making real difference through Fresh Kills.

"I've been waiting to get to work," she says. "Fresh Kills could be a great national asset, an international model. There are thousands of degraded places, brownfields, in the world. If this can be done at a high level, in terms of design and public process, it could be a model for the work of the next century. It could make people all over the world say: 'We could do something like that.' That's what I want." □



Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

"Washing, Tracks, Maintenance," an eight-hour performance by Mierle Ukeles at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford in 1973.

Kwon, Miwon. "In Appreciation of Invisible Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the 'White Cube'." *Documents*, no. 10

# In Appreciation of Invisible Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the "White Cube"

---

Miwon Kwon

There is a story to be told of the antagonism between art and architecture, between artists and architects, within the history of institutional critique—a history that is currently riddled with a profound misconception wherein a "spanking" by a museum is seen as a direct measure of a work's "criticality." The more intense the expression of an institution's irritation or discomfort, the more pleased are these "critical" artists and their supportive interpreters who actively cultivate, then relish, the chastisement of the institution as a mark of their difference from it. Outright censorship is regarded as the ultimate prize in this context, excommunication becomes a token of highest success. (Never suspecting in the meanwhile the possibility that the loud objections may in fact be exclamations of institutional pleasure!)

But such institutional wrath has always been a complexly false one insofar as "the prodigal son" always finds his way back home to be welcomed into the arms of the forgiving father—a return that is a mark of a deeper bond (dare I say love?) than either suspected or wanted to believe. What begins as a vehement assertion of difference can become the most effective stabilizing force in the (re)affirmation of sameness and continuity (i.e., business as usual). This is why I have always been suspicious of the self-righteous tone in much of the discourse on institutional critique. To me it often sounds more like denial than anything else, and the more adamant the refusal to acknowledge the mutually dependent dance of love and hate between the "critical" artist and the museum, the more suspicious I become.

But back to architecture. Or, more precisely, back to the modernist white architecture of the prototypical exhibition gallery. Many emergent forms of institutional critique in the early 1970s challenged the idealist hermeticism of the museum by physically and symbolically transgressing the seemingly inviolable conditions of its architectural whiteness, "penetrating" beneath the white skin to expose not only its material support but its ideological functions. Qualities commonly associated with the museum space, such as neutrality, purity, and timelessness, that are foundational to the institution's self-definition and self-justification, were unmasked—via the unmasking of the white surface of its architecture—as nothing more than myths. Thus, the white room came under sharp scrutiny as the material manifestation and emblem of the art museum's ideological tendencies.<sup>1</sup>

So what of an artist who, instead of aggressively countering the imposition of this repressive whiteness (by dirtying it up), opts to clean it? Instead of exposing

<sup>1</sup> Much art of the late 1960s and early 1970s that critiqued the idealist foundations of art and its institutions through an analysis of the conditions of the "white cube" indirectly challenged the dominant discourse of modernist architecture as well. For a critical study of the role of whiteness in modernist architectural discourse, see Mark Wigley. *White Walls, Designer Dresses* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1995).

the behind-the-scenes "truth" about the museum, decides to wash, scrub, and polish its public face—to maintain the fantasy of its pristine perfection? This was Mierle Laderman Ukeles' counterintuitive gesture in *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside* and *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside*. Performed on July 24, 1973, at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the artist spent four hours washing and scrubbing the entry steps and plaza of the museum, to be followed in the afternoon by four more hours of the same activity inside the exhibition galleries. The absurdity of *Hartford Wash*—Ukeles on her hands and knees for eight hours, soaked to the waist in dirty water, a minuscule figure in comparison to the grand majesty of the surrounding architecture—strikes a cord of pathos today when viewed in the form of its photographic documentation.

Certainly, in step with other practices of the period that directed their attention to the institutional framework of art, Ukeles' cleaning frenzy exposes the museum's appearance of neutrality and purity as artifice—an artifice that requires the repression of (the signs of) bodies and time. But in Ukeles' case, this repression is given a more complex articulation than that of a faceless institutional interdiction. The appearance of timelessness and eternal stasis, or simple orderliness, in fact, requires work. It requires the kind of work that not only erases the marks of bodies and time, such as dirt, dust, and decay, but work that continuously erases the marks of its own labor (including the body of the laborer). It's the kind of



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside*, 1973 (photos: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).



work that renders itself invisible, and is rendered invisible, in order to make other things ("real" work?) possible.

Ukeles' performances translate such invisible maintenance work—cleaning, washing, dusting—into the register of productive art work, elevating menial tasks mostly associated with women and the maintenance of households to the public realm of aesthetic contemplation. But beyond rendering the invisible visible across the divides of gender, private/public, high/low, and art/everyday life, Ukeles' effort reveals the extent to which the ideological machinery of the art museum is in fact extremely unstable: It weakens, falls into phobic unrest even, in the presence of such innocuous things as scuff marks and dust balls. That is, the austere and seemingly implacable architecture of the museum (I mean this in a literal and metaphorical sense now) is a very fragile construction. Its need for maintenance and upkeep is constant—a dependence that is never acknowledged. Ironically, this essential work of maintenance and upkeep, which contributes to the authority of the institution (and the cultural status quo), is carried out in large part by those most likely to be oppressed and excluded by its operations. For the work of routine maintenance—hidden labor performed on a daily basis—is relegated to a particular class of people whose work is seldom recognized as such.

There is an unsettling literalness in Ukeles' performances, too, a literalness that is far more resonant than the various performative projects of recent years—Rirkrit Tiravanija's "cooking," Glen Seator's "sweeping," Janine Antoni's hair "mopping," etc.—which also involve the body of the artist engaged in everyday "chores" or activities inside the gallery or museum. I think part of the reason for this discrepancy, besides the tremendous difference in historical contexts, is due to a greater fetishization and reification of "everyday life" in contemporary art and criticism now, which further isolates, abstracts, and mystifies the everyday, exacerbating a deeper sense of alienation from it. Ukeles' performance affects the reverse. Perhaps because of the literalness of her symbolic action (in *Hartford*

Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks. Maintenance Outside*, 1973 (photos: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks. Maintenance Inside, 1973 (photos: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).

*Wash* she really washed sections of the museum for hours until it was clean), the already fetishized and reified conditions of the museum are recast in relation to the maintenance of everyday life, and not the other way around. In Ukeles' bent figure, scrubbing the steps of the museum, one sees not only the secret labor required to sustain a specific cultural institution, but also countless other maintenance workers—maids, janitors, and mothers—whose largely unacknowledged and underappreciated labor sustains the daily existence of our individual and collective lives. In this way, Ukeles' performance points to the economy of labor that structures our entire society—from homes and offices, to communities, institutions, and cities.

Like most people, I have a list of maintenance work to attend to on a regular basis: wash the dishes, do the laundry, go to the post office, cook dinner, clean the bathroom, take out the trash, sweep the floor, shop for groceries, etc. Repetitive work without closure; work that goes nowhere. It's the kind of work that occupied my grandmother most of her life, work that defines my mother's life today; work that I could hire someone else to do if I could afford it (so that I can get to what I think is my real work, i.e., writing). But no matter who does the work, I know that it is work that's never done. It is also work that, when accomplished well, goes unseen.

## Work Stoppages: Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Theory of Labor Value

Helen Molesworth

Remember this picture: Marcel Duchamp's New York studio filled with ready-mades—a hat rack hung from the ceiling; a coatrack nailed to the floor; a painting lying on a table gathering dust; a bathing cap cut into strips pinned across the room; a urinal and a shovel suspended from the ceiling. There is a second picture, taken many decades later: Duchamp sitting in his apartment in Neuilly-sur-Seine, spinning the famous bicycle wheel wearing a lampshade on his head. Duchamp's humor always was a bit silly. All those readymades in his studio set up like traps for slapstick—a hatrack suspended from the ceiling, go ahead hang your hat on it, or pee in the upended urinal, after you've tripped over a coatrack nailed to the floor. Can you imagine trying to look at, much less make, art in such a space without laughing?

Jump cut: The pictures, taken in 1973 at the Wadsworth Atheneum, are of Mierle Laderman Ukeles—Ukeles washing the floors of the museum on her hands and knees, in the way of the visitors; Ukeles making what she called a "dust painting" as she cleaned a mummy case; Ukeles, running through the museum locking and unlocking gallery doors, looking like a Keystone cop; Ukeles, mopping the front steps of the museum, her clothing drenched with dirty water. Ukeles' humor was always born of incredulity and embarrassment. Can you imagine trying to look at art in a space where these performances were taking place? Do you think if you were there, you would have recognized them as art, or, more precisely, as "maintenance art"?

What is maintenance, and, by extension, maintenance art? It is the labor performed by mothers, maids, janitors, cleaning women, and sanitation workers—cooking, cleaning, shopping. "Maintenance," Ukeles declared, "is a drag; it takes all the fucking time. The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay."<sup>1</sup> Maintenance, then, is predominantly the province of women (even when it's not, the labor of cleaning is feminized labor), woven so tightly into the fabric of patriarchy and capitalism—in other words, everyday life—that its status as unpaid, unrecognized, and unvalued has come to be experienced as natural. Even though the truth of the matter is that maintenance is *the work that makes all other work possible*.

In *The Sexual Contract*, political theorist Carole Pateman argues that the sexual contract (marriage) is the hidden, unequal contract that permits all other forms of "equal" contract to occur within democratic societies. Hence the premise of

<sup>1</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Maintenance Art Manifesto*. 1969. Reprinted in this issue see pp. 6-7.

Marcel Duchamp, in his studio at 5 Rue Parmentier,  
Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1951 (photo: Henri-Cartier Bresson).



equality, established and insured by the ability to enter freely into contract, is always already flawed, as it rests on the inequality of the sexual contract which allows men to have power and jurisdiction over women. One manifestation of this inequality is the unpaid work of (house)wives. She writes:

*The social contract is about the origins of the civil sphere and capitalist relations. Without the sexual contract there is no indication that the "worker" is a masculine figure or that the "working class" is the class of men. The civil, public sphere does not come into being on its own, and the "worker," his "work" and his "working class" cannot be understood independently of the private sphere and his conjugal right as husband. These attributes and activities of the "worker" are constructed together with, and as the other side of, those of his feminine counterpart, the "housewife."<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Carole Pateman *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, 135.

In her *Maintenance Art* performances Ukeles took the hidden labor of the private sphere and submitted it for public scrutiny in the institutions of art. What happened when Ukeles's made visible the unrepresented; when the putatively private was thrust onto a "public" center stage?

In *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object* Ukeles selected an art object from the museum's collection, a female mummy housed in a glass case. It was the janitor's job to keep this case clean. Ukeles cleaned the case as a "maintenance artist" as opposed to a maintenance person, making what she called a "dust painting." The cleaned case, now designated a "maintenance art work," could only be cleaned by the museum conservator. Here the "work" in art work and the "work" in maintenance work (or housework) were made analogous as three different jobs became the same job. And as the labor of cleaning metamorphosed from maintenance to art, it became work that demanded the attention of museum professionals.

This performance posited an equivalence between the devalued maintenance work that occurs across a spectrum of institutions—galleries, museums, private

homes. It challenged the notion that domestic labor is exclusively private by suggesting that the maintenance of homes is homologous with the maintenance of institutions. Ukeles' work insinuated that it is the work itself (all maintenance work) that must be valued, hence she lent it the value of art. By doing so, she unveiled some of the institutional structures that aid in the creation and preservation of the category of art (the conservator as opposed to the janitor). However, by exposing the everyday labor needed to maintain the institution of art, she put an extra cog in the institutional machinery; she gummed up the works. For the exposure of maintenance was not efficient, it slowed down, and sometimes even stopped, the "work" of the museum.

In *The Keeping of the Keys*, Ukeles took the museum guards' keys and systematically locked and unlocked museum doors throughout the day, wreaking havoc on the logic of the museum's workday. The piece so infuriated the curators, who felt that their office should be exempt, that when Ukeles announced that the office was to become a piece of maintenance art, all but one curator ran out of the room, fleeing both the artist and their own work. Here the work stoppage that resulted from the privileging of maintenance work over other forms of work shows, as Carole Pateman has suggested, how absolutely structural it is to patriarchy and capitalism that the labor of maintenance remain *invisible*. When *imaged* as work, the maintenance work that makes other work possible arrests or stymies the very labor it is designed to maintain.

Flashback: In his studio, Duchamp's readymades deployed a version of slapstick humor designed to stymie domestic labor. They called into question, or heightened into relief, the status of "normal" domestic operations—keeping the house clean and orderly by hanging things up and putting them away in their "proper" places (the bottle rack, the coat rack, the hat rack). In so doing, the readymades



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *The Keeping of the Keys*, 1973 (photo: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts)

represented the normally obscured domestic labor, but they showed that labor as stalled, humorous, and impossible. But this impossibility, the futility of domestic labor, is perhaps precisely what should be imaged, acknowledged, given credence. The readymades offered an alternative to housework, an alternative that lay dormant in the phrase "a woman's work is never done." To the "never done," Duchamp perhaps replied, "indeed." And since Duchamp's domicile and studio space were one and the same, the readymades also prevented the work of artistic labor. It's hard to make work when the bathing cap you've cut up into strips is pinned maze-like across the room, transforming your studio into a labyrinth. It's hard to work on a painting that you've deliberately allowed to gather dust.

Ukeles' performances enable us to envision the readymades not only as everyday commodities, but as maintenance objects: objects for hanging, storing, drying, grooming, keeping tidy. If Ukeles' exposure of maintenance labor disallowed the smooth functioning of the museum, so too Duchamp's readymades altered the "proper" work of the artist's studio. But whereas Duchamp's insurgency against the tedium of both everyday domestic labor and artistic creation was evidenced by his stalling of them, hence limiting his production of art works, and the labor they involved, Ukeles knew all too well that the dust would catch up. Her mutiny took the form of her insistence that her unavoidable daily labor should work double time for double value, art and maintenance—maintenance art.



Marcel Duchamp, Sculpture for Travelling, 1918.

# Art Work Is (Yes, Really) Garbage

## Sanitation Department's Artist in Residence Finds Her Muse in the Refuse of Urban Life

By JAMES BARRON

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is staring at a 200-foot-long mound of decomposing leaves.

"This is sculpture already," she says.

Michelangelo had his ceiling, Frank Lloyd Wright had his falling water. Ms. Ukeles has her garbage.

As the New York City Sanitation Department's artist in residence, she works not with oil paint but with waste oil, rusty cans and old tires. Her palette is the flotsam and jetsam of urban life, her canvases far-flung, foul-smelling outposts — a landfill here, a garbage transfer station there.

Next week, an archway that she built with gloves discarded by workers from 12 city agencies and Con Edison will be sent to Expo 93 in Taejon, Korea. In her 13 years at the Sanitation Department, where she draws no

salary, she has displayed works made of piled steel shavings from subway car wheels. She has filled panels with recycled materials like plastic, aluminum, rubber and dirt. And she has received grants, fellowships and commissions.

But not all of her work has been the art gallery kind. Once she choreographed a dance of big white street sweepers that brought figure eights and Astaire-like grace to clumsy machines that beep and whir. She also did a performance-art piece that involved her shaking hands with all 8,500 Sanitation Department employees. She thought it would take 11 months. It took five years.

And then there are her out-of-town creations: a garbage-barge ballet in Pittsburgh, and a half-mile-long glassphalt path through a park in Cambridge, Mass., that used to be a landfill. She planted what she calls "smellers and wavers." To a non-garbage artist, these

look like trees and grass. And there is a project on "the concept of megalopolis" (which she says is bigger than a mere metropolis) in Givors, France.

"They want me to choreograph city work vehicles," she said. "But I don't know."

All of this raises the question: is what she does art?

"Her work functions as a mirror of our times," said Ronald Feldman, who has displayed works by Ms. Ukeles at his SoHo gallery. "It's part theater, part performance art, part traditional sculpture with non-traditional materials. Her work is both alarming and effective and gets our attention with no lesser shock than the Impressionists did in their day."

But the Impressionists did not come nose to nose

Continued on Page B5



Angel Franco/The New York Times

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the New York City Sanitation Department's artist in residence, visiting the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island.

# Artist's Work (Yes, Really) Is Garbage

Continued From Page B1

with things she deals with every day. The smell, for example. "This is not bad," Ms. Ukeles told a reporter wincing at the odor at the Sanitation Department's marine transfer station, on the Hudson River at West 59th Street. "There's one morning in the winter when it doesn't smell so much and after that you sort of forget. In March, you get the odor again and you forget you repressed it, and you think, 'Oh, God, there it is again.'"

## A Work In Progress

Of all her projects, she seems proudest of one that is not even close to being finished, the "museum of the environment," which she also calls "Flow City." The Sanitation Department calls it the marine transfer station. It is where garbage trucks dump huge loads of household garbage onto barges for the ride to Fresh Kills.

From Ms. Ukeles's perspective, it is a work in progress, and it has been in progress longer than she expected. She still dreams of the day when it will be a must-see on the school field-trip circuit. But budget problems have delayed her plans for what pupils will see as they walk up the gently inclined 248-foot entrance ramp. It is still barren concrete and plain windows. But Ms. Ukeles knows what she has in mind.

"I want this to be a formal processional experience," Ms. Ukeles said.

Maybe there won't be a graduation-style Elgar pomp-and-circumstance march playing in the background, but Ms. Ukeles envisions 20-foot sections of crushed glass, rubber and "encapsulated waste oil" on the walls. She wants to arrange all of those things in a corkscrew-like spiral.

"I want to hold it here in flux asking, what next, so it does not look like garbage," she said. "I want people to say: 'Oh, glass, it's sharp. Rubber, it's soft.' The characteristics of the material won't get stripped away."

At the top of the walkway, in a glassed-in observation area, she wants to install video monitors, each one connected to a camera trained on the trucks and the barges outside. Lighting the ramp will be flashers from garbage trucks. "I have them already," Ms. Ukeles said. "About 40."

## The Original Inspiration

Her interest in what she calls "maintenance art" began during the fiscal crisis of the 1970's, when her husband was a City Hall official. "This became our daily conversation: what is essential to keep the city alive?" she said. She created a performance-art piece reciting job titles of laid-off workers, read from the executive budget.

"To me, the Sanitation Department was easily among the most essential services in the city," she said, "and yet it was perceived in this very repressed manner of being beneath, a displaced service. Even the facilities are always out of sight, out of mind."

But people made fun of her. Her 5-year-old came home asking, "Mommy, are there a lot of other maintenance artists?" Ms. Ukeles recalled. "It was painful."

On the other hand, she said, "What was good about it was that I was meeting sanitation workers who had worked for the department for 20 or 30 years who, when their uniforms were washed, hung them in the basement so the neighbors would not know what they did. Their kids were made fun of, too. I thought that out and realized I was in the context I wanted to be in."

## 'Extension of Ourselves'

The current Commissioner, Emily Lloyd, said that when she heard the department had an artist in residence, "I thought it was odd and frivolous." But she has become a fan.

"Her philosophy is my own," Ms. Lloyd said. "She's saying, 'We have to understand that waste is an extension of ourselves and how we inhabit the planet, that sanitation workers are not untouchables we don't want to see.' She advocates having our facilities be transparent and be visited as a way for people to be accountable for the waste they generate. It's just a bunch of old orange peels, sneakers and stuff."

And leaves, like the ones in the compost mound at Fresh Kills, the nation's largest landfill and still growing.

"My eyes are seeing images of sacred earth mounds, burial grounds in China," Ms. Ukeles said. "How can you not think about that?"

Then, inspiration struck. Why not plant a television camera inside the compost and watch the bugs nibbling their way through leaves, or whatever happens there?

"Just think," she said, "I could create a work that would make it possible for people to see what's really going on."

Monday, September 10, 1984

# Homage To Garbage

New York Artist Starts  
New Ashcan School

## In New York, Garbage Becomes Art

*GARBAGE, From B1*  
ting crunch of grinding garbage filled the room. A row of garbage trucks and street-cleaning equipment lined the cavernous river-front station, identified by museum-style labels: "rear loading compacting refuse collection truck with graffiti," and "cubic yard Athey wagon used to transport refuse to landfill site on Staten Island called Fish Kill."

"My fleet is coming in," quipped Mayor Edward Koch, wearing a set of earplugs to muffle the sound of grinding gears and the long and short blasts of the tugboat out on the Hudson, as the crowd of downtown art lovers in T-shirts and blue jeans encircled the podium. "Only in New York could you have a sanitation department that becomes a work of art. I remember in the [John] Lindsay years we had happenings in Central Park. We thought that was elitist—we have ours in the Department of Sanitation."

Ukeles, dressed in the official orange sanitation department T-shirt and a khaki vest pinned with buttons from labor organizations all over the world, kept her speech brief. "Thank you for coming," she said. "Welcome to the sanitation

department. I think that the sanitation commissioner, Norman Steisel, is like a modern-day Medicis. That he would use me as raw material is wonderful. The tug's calling us."

A pair of 500-foot-long barges glided gracefully from the river into the transfer station. It was intended to simulate what it is like when the garbage trucks line up along the railing of a transfer station to discharge their contents onto barges. But they didn't today. This station, one of several along the river, has been closed for three years for repairs. That was the end of the barge, but not of the event.

Everyone then moved downtown in a city bus with the words SUBWAY SHUTTLE flashing on and off to the Ronald Feldman Gallery in SoHo. There the street was roped off, and on the gallery walls were obscenities written in water-based paint: "WHY DO YOU MORONS WITH THE TRUCKS MAKE SO MUCH NOISE?" "SLIME PICKERS." "YOU GUYS ARE WORTH NOTHING."

Ukeles climbed the steps of the gallery in her black patent leather shoes and green chartreuse stockings and turned to address the crowd. "One day I heard a story I

want to share with you," she said, brushing her red hair back from her face. "A man walked up to me and said, 'Mierle, I never thought you'd do it, but you have. Seventeen years ago we were picking up garbage in Brooklyn. It was hot. It was humid. We came to a break and sat down on the front porch of a lady. She opened the windows and said, 'Get away from me, you smelly garbage men. I don't want you stinking up my steps.' For 17 years that has stuck in my throat. Today you cleared it away."

"Today we are going to clear all the throats. Right here in front of this gallery we are going to stop naming garbage men as bad, wrong. We are going to wipe it away."

Ronald Feldman, the gallery's director, grabbed a sponge and went to work washing away the word "Slimebag."

"I thought it would take me five months to complete my project," said Ukeles in a quiet moment, standing by her mirrored garbage truck. "It took me more than five years. I guess I am bad with arithmetic."

"The whole thing started when I was changing my baby's diaper back in the late '60s. I began to think about maintenance. I began to think

about my life. There I was, an expressionistic artist with degrees in International Relations and African History from Barnard and children and a husband. And yet I was out of touch with the world. I went to the sanitation department and made a proposal—I would meet all the sanitation men and turn their work into something dignified."

Over the course of her first year she shook hands with all 7,000 workers and witnessed some 8 million tons of garbage being ground up and disposed of. She mirrored the truck that is parked here today outside the gallery. She cleaned the floor of a New York museum. And she won some loyal adherents among the all-male force.

Doug Borkowski, eyeing the crowd of SoHo art fanciers in Christo T-shirts and one that said "Taste=Waste," said, "Sanitation men are not like a bunch of gorillas. Some of us have college degrees. Mierle has made us feel good about ourselves. If that's what art is, it's fine by me."

"Maintenance," said New York artist Bonnie Lucas, "is the traditional feminist role. That's what Mierle is all about. And I think she is a breath of fresh air in this effete art world."

By Jeffrey Hogue  
*Special to The Washington Post*

NEW YORK, Sept. 9—As a crowd of art fanciers looked on, today a 44-year-old artist turned this city's biggest liability into an asset, Garbage became art.

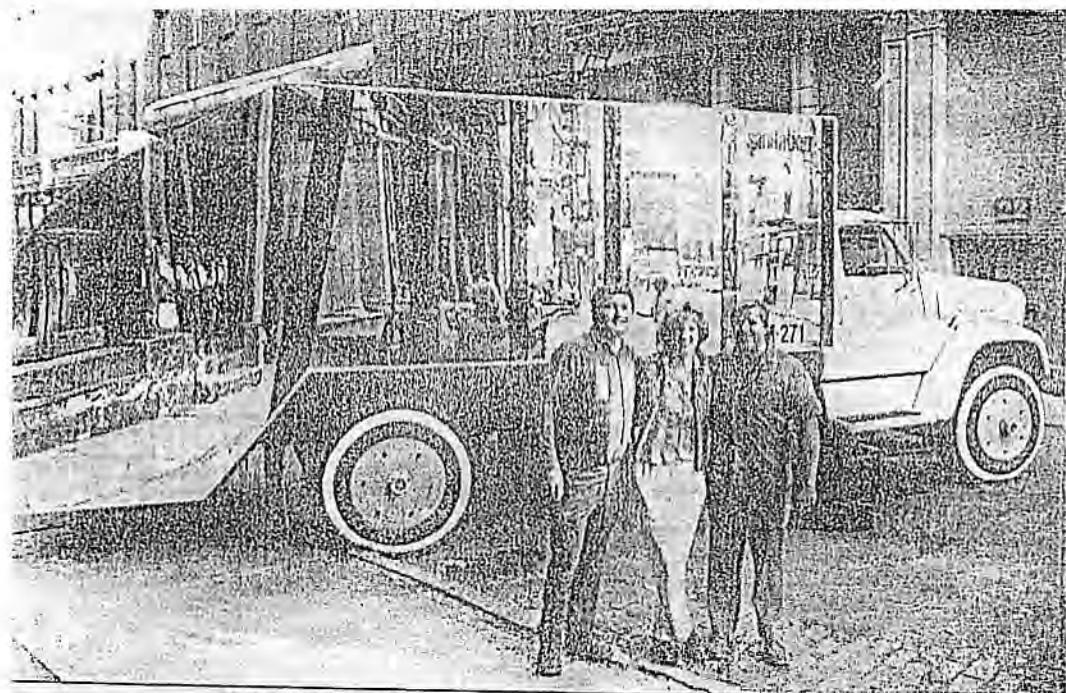
It was billed as a ballet for garbage barges, the first sound and light show ever held inside a garbage dump, the first garbage show held inside an art gallery, and a "cleansing ceremony" to wipe obscenities directed at garbage men from the window of a SoHo gallery.

But for Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the official artist-in-residence of the

New York City Department of Sanitation, it was the culmination of six years of work on the force, during which she shook hands with all of the men on their routes and collected anecdotes along the way about the plight of "the housekeepers of the city." In her first artwork she sheathed a garbage truck in mirrors, "so people could see who makes garbage." At approximately 2:30 this afternoon the second phase of her art piece came to life in the Marine Transfer Station.

A row of orange warning lights flashed on and off, and the ear-split-

See GARBAGE, B9, Col. 1



Joe Tomazello, left, with Mierle Laderman Ukeles and garbageman Doug Borkowski; by Nancy Kaye for The Washington Post

Brooke, James. "Sanitation Art Showings Brighten Workers' Image. *The New York Times*, September 10, 1984.

# Sanitation Art Showings Brighten Workers' Image

By JAMES BROOKE

Edwin Sheridan held his tie with one hand and scrubbed vigorously with the other, erasing the taunting graffiti: "Trash Hound," "Garbage Man" and "Can Man."

"I've been called these — and worse," said Mr. Sheridan, a 25-year veteran of the Sanitation Department.

By scrubbing the window of a SoHo art gallery yesterday, Mr. Sheridan helped mark the opening of the "Touch Sanitation Show," two exhibits designed to celebrate the 8,500 men and women who clean New York City's streets and to do away with the image of the derogatory nickname "garbage man."

"Because they do dirty work, it does not mean they are dirty," Norman Steisel, Commissioner of the Sanitation Department, told a crowd of politicians, artists, union officials and sanitation workers at the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery on Mercer Street. Later, the group joined together to scrub taunts and slurs collected in a department survey that had been painted on the gallery's windows for the occasion.

## 'Tipping Floor' Exhibit

The first of the exhibits had opened earlier in the day at the Marine Transfer Station at 59th Street and the Hudson River, which is to be demolished after the show ends Sept. 30. On the station's "tipping floor," where for decades trucks dumped garbage into barges, there was a 350-foot-long light sculpture made from the roof flashers from old garbage trucks, a trough containing 22,000 gloves worn out by sanitation workers last year, and dozens of tools of the trade, including antique wooden shoes once used by men in incineration plants.

"I love the idea of art outside the gallery system," said Ray

Kelly, a sculptor from the Lower East Side, who aimed his video camera at an enormous clamshell bucket.

Mr. Kelly spoke over the din of six loudspeakers that filled the cavernous transfer station with groaning pneumatic lifts, squealing steel, shouting men and shattering glass — "industrial music" according to the show's organizer, a self-styled "maintenance artist," Mierle Laderman Ukeles. She holds the official, but unsalaried post of artist in residence at the Sanitation Department.

## A 'Barge Ballet'

Later, the show moved outside, as six barges performed a "barge ballet" in the Hudson. The ballet, most of which was not visible from the transfer station, was the latest in several mobile productions by Mrs. Ukeles. Last year, six street sweepers glided through a five-movement, 32-block "Ballet Méchanique" on Madison Avenue during the New York City Art Parade.

The pièce de résistance of that parade, a garbage truck sheathed in mirrors, reappeared yesterday at the SoHo gallery. Called "The Social Mirror," the truck illustrates the link between garbage producers and garbage handlers, said Mrs. Ukeles.

Other exhibits at the gallery were a 1,500-square-foot transparent map showing the locations of Sanitation Department offices; three piles of televisions on which videotapes of sanitation workers were shown, and an old, department-section office furnished in "mongo," discarded furniture salvaged by sanitation men.

These exhibits, Mrs. Ukeles said, showed that, "the day of the garbage man, of linking the man with the waste that is not his, is over."

**W**E couldn't find a place to throw out an empty potato-chip bag as we walked west on Fifty-ninth Street last week, but, starting this fall, it's going to be easy to spot a litter basket on the Coney Island boardwalk from the Hayden Planetarium, in Manhattan, or aim for one in the Bronx from the roof of the Swingline Staple Building, in Queens. The Sanitation Department's new baskets will be painted a color called ten-mile orange, and we had a chance to preview them on Pier 99, at the West Fifty-ninth Street Marine Transfer Station, a long, dark shed open at one end to allow garbage trucks to dump their contents into waiting barges. The baskets were there as part of an art installation—a world away from the Met and the Maoris—by a woman named Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who is the official but unsalaried artist-in-residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation. The exhibit is packed with the impressive tools and vehicles that keep the city from going to wrack and ruin, among them a Bombardier Snowplow, which, according to its manufacturer, "goes where all others fear to tread," more than a thousand gloves actually used by the Sanitation Department over the past year (Mierle received the collection from individual workers, and suspended it in a kind of wire trough), and a Rear Loader M-truck, plucked from its regular lower-East Side route for its display of thoroughgoing, flamboyant graffiti.

There were a lot of people on hand for the opening of the show, and some of them took the microphone to say a few words. Mayor Koch, who was a little late, said, "Only in New York could you have a sanitation facility where you could also have an art gallery. Notice there's no stench on anything—even our garbage."

John Coleman, who is an important man in foundations, said, "In the human language, there's no word more important than 'love,' except maybe 'dignity.'"

Norman Steisel, the Commissioner of Sanitation, was relatively silent, but Mierle, who is tall and Titian-haired, said that Mr. Steisel, who cleared the way for the show, reminded her most of the Medicis in

Renaissance Italy. "I'm not making a joke, though it sounds like that," she said. "After all, the Sanitation Department didn't say, 'O.K., we're doing art for a few months, forget about picking up the garbage.'" For the finale of the New York City Art Parade last year, Mierle choreographed a dance called "Ballet Méchanique for Six Mechanical Sweepers," and to open this exhibit, which is called "Touch Sanitation Show," she choreographed another—a ballet called "Marrying the Barges." "Barges travel in couples—lashed to both sides of a tug—as they make their way to Staten Island," Mierle went on. "When the couples are joined together, it's called marriage."

Looking downstream, we saw a tug that said "MCALLISTER BROS." on its beam. It was one of two tugs and six barges that were about to go into their dance. The tug near us had been attached to orange cleats on a blue barge with lengths of heavy white line; earlier, we had talked to a man who showed us how to splice a rope, and now it gave us a little secret pleasure to know that inside each of the lines was a plastic strip that read, over and over, "City of New York." Soon the barges, which were empty of garbage, were doing glissades out in the Hudson, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves. They floated a way off from the Marine Transfer Station, from which they normally head for the dumping ground in Fresh Kills, and in the final moments of the ballet the tug maneuvered the blue barge safely into its slip. Before we left to go on to our next stop, we leaned over the railing and peered down into the cavern of the barge. There was an inch or so of water in its hull, and it looked vast and deep and patient.

**L**AFTER that afternoon, many of the same people reconvened on Mercer Street, in SoHo, outside the Ronald Feldman gallery, to watch a non-Maori ritual called "Cleansing the Bad Names." The bad names were names that people had called garbagemen over the years; in fact, one of the bad names was Garbageman. "The day of mingling the person with the waste that's not even his own must be over," Mierle said. "It's your garbage, not their garbage. Anyone who makes garbage is a garbageperson." Some other bad names were: Scavenger, Can Man, Slob, Trash Hound, and Goof. Mierle Ukeles got her list

straight from the sanitation workers—she shook the hand of every member of the department during an eleven-month performance-art project five years ago. One man told her about a hot, humid day seventeen years back when he and his colleagues stopped for their break and sat on the porch steps of a house in Brooklyn. "The lady opened the door and yelled at them, 'Get off my porch, you stinking garbagemen!'" Mierle said. "The man told me that those words had stuck in his throat ever since." Mierle had painted all the bad names on the windows of the gallery, and she handed out sponges to city officials and just about anyone else who wanted to help scrub them off. "It is our right as free human beings to say the time of the smelly garbageman is over," Mierle said.

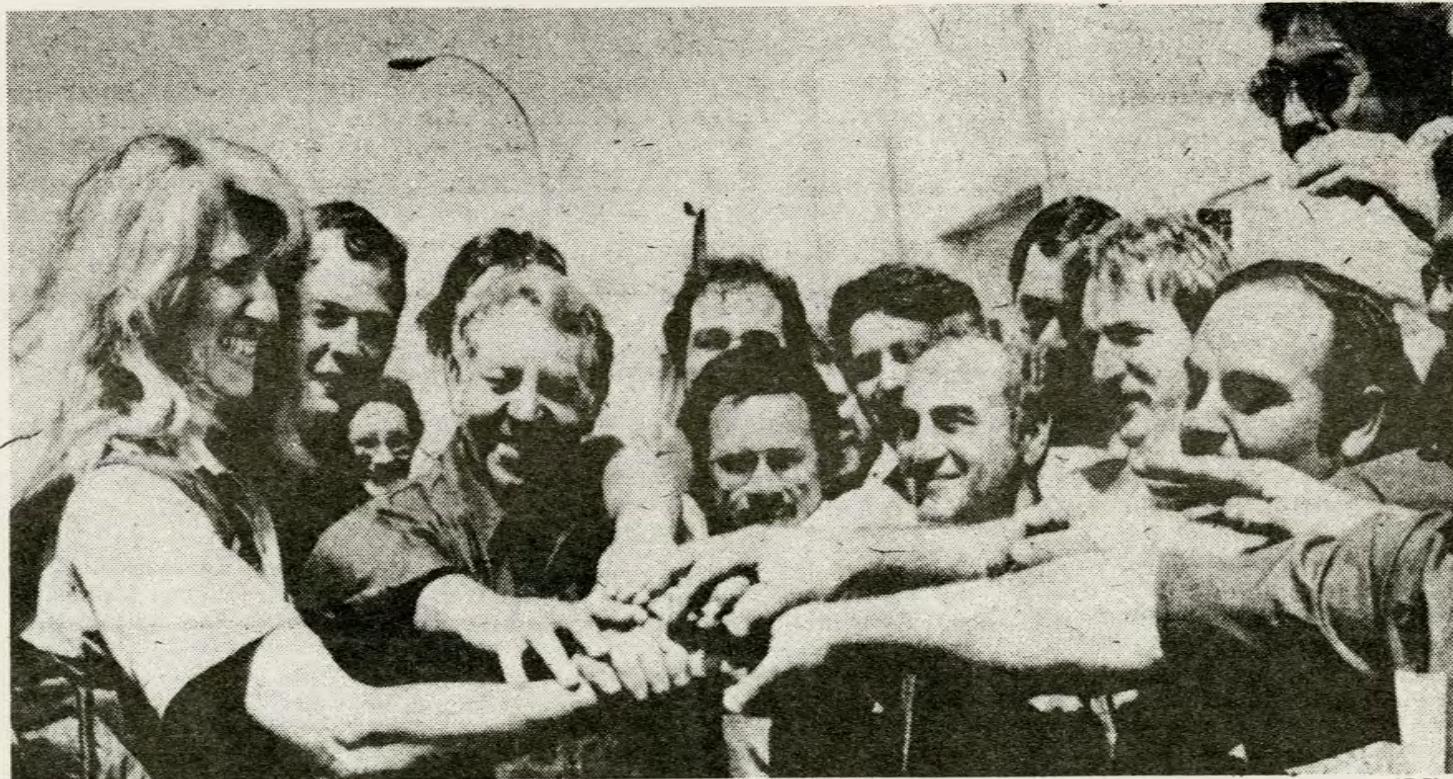
A nicer name than Garbageman is Sanman, and inside the gallery Mierle had built an exhibit called "Sanman's Place," which was a painstaking reproduction of a department locker room. The walls sagged with what artists call found objects, and what Sanmen call "mongo;" in fact, this locker room contained a number of artifacts from the departmentally famous "mongo wall" of Brooklyn's District 10, complete with beer signs, velvet paintings, and Elvis bumper stickers. "Sanman's Place" was a shrine dedicated to refuse, and we were moved. Next to it was a reproduction of a state-of-the-art locker room, boasting a Universal weight machine and a computer on a desk. Everything was very neat.

On the gallery walls Mierle had silk-screened eleven hundred and sixty-nine clock faces—one for each eight-hour shift in a year, and seventy-four more for symmetry. Her empathy with the sanitation workers is obviously immense, and it is catching. Outside, a woman in a stylish black dress stood listening to speeches by Mierle and others. She was smoking, and she casually dropped her cigarette butt to the ground. A few minutes later, though, right around the time Mierle was saying, "They've got to do their job every day—they never get to wake up and think, Perhaps no one put anything out this morning," the woman reached down and picked up her butt and tossed it into the wire-mesh trash basket provided for that purpose. Which, not to make a big deal out of it, is precisely where it belonged.

# Newsday

THE LONG ISLAND NEWSPAPER / 25 CENTS / FRIDAY, JUNE 27, 1980

QUEENS  
EDITION



AP Photo

## An Artist's Final Touch

Conceptual artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, left, joins hands with Sanitation Department workers yesterday after completing an 11-month attempt to shake the hand of every department employee. *Page 7*

FRONT  
PAGE

continued  
p. 7

# All Hands Hail Her Final Shake

By Ken Gross

New York—It was not as simple as a handshake after all.

It was heat and cold and mean streets; it was 6 AM roll calls to midnight sign-offs. It was all day, day after day. It was going out when you didn't want to go out. It was hitting the pain barrier, like a marathon runner, and then continuing the race. It was as close to becoming a sanitation worker as she would ever come.

Yesterday, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the conceptual artist, completed her project of shaking the hand of every man in the New York City Sanitation Department. It had taken 11 months and 10 sweeps of the city to reach 8,000 men in 58 sanitation districts. But she wore her 10 hash marks, denoting the 10 sweeps, proudly on her vest. And on her shoulder were the stars and bars of rank awarded her in the field by the officers and men who had come to take her seriously.

And in her right elbow was the wound that she will carry with her forever: She has, like some of the men whom she has accompanied for the past 11 months, a touch of arthritis.

As she stood in a puddle of the smelly Manhattan headquarters garage, surrounded by an adoring group of converts, the concept behind the conceptual art project became clear.

"I thought it was dumb—at first," said Louis Mandalino, 42. "Shaking hands. It sounded dumb, you know? And then I'm out working one night. It's freezing, you know. My hand is sticking to the garbage can. I lost my glove. And along comes this pretty little girl. And she doesn't just shake my hand and run back into the car. She stays with us for an hour. Up one street and down the next. And she listens. We tell her about the broken toilets and the frozen pipes in the garage. And she listens. You gotta love somebody like that."

Down Gansevoort Street came a man leading three children. It was Ms. Ukeles' husband, Jack. He had in tow their three children: Yael, 12, Raquel, 9, and Meir, 7. "Last week, it was my turn," said her husband. "I was holding a press conference in Connecticut and she brought the children."

The end of the project appeared to be a relief to the children, who threw themselves into their mother's arms. She had made her last 4 AM roll call at this garage on the Hudson River yesterday.

As the cameras and officials closed in to present his wife with plaques and medals, Jack Ukeles said that he, too, had come to understand the concept. As a management consultant, Ukeles deals with government agencies regularly. "I would say to her, when she came home crying and tired, 'Why don't you just sample?' That's what we do when we want to find out how something works. We sample. You don't have to go out day after day. You take samples. But she said no, she had to go beyond that. She had to keep going when she didn't want to go on any more. She had to go beyond endurance."

A score of men in T-shirts clustered around Ms. Ukeles at the Manhattan garage. Sal Soccoa, 56, of Ridgewood, who has been on the job for 20 years, stood back, looking skeptical.

"People do not understand that garbage is endless," Ms. Ukeles was saying. "The public does not understand that the 'sanmen' are the life of the city. The idea came to me when I had my first child. I realized then that there are some kinds of work that are endless. Some jobs go on forever."

Soccoa, with his arms folded across his chest, smiled. "She's beautiful," he said. "Someone's finally on our side."

The project had been funded privately, with \$12,500 in grants and contributions obtained through the State Council for the Arts. [and other sources]

Through the past 11 months, Ms. Ukeles missed only 500 members of the 8,500-member staff: some of the men had been reassigned, or were on leave. "I gave extra handshakes to men in the field for those I missed," she said.

At 10:55 AM, she shook her last official hand. It belonged to John Navarria, 27, of Staten Island. But she had already shaken his hand four months earlier when he was on the job on Hudson Street. "Thank you," she said as she shook his hand.

"No," he replied. "Thank you. You have done us a lot of good."

Sanitation Commissioner Norman Steisel presented Ms. Ukeles with a plaque and a badge, making her an honorary deputy commissioner. Mayor Edward I. Koch sent a letter of praise. But what she will cherish most, she said, is the foreman's bars awarded her in the field by a sanitation officer in one of the Queens garages. "The bars belonged to his father before him," she said.

Newsday

JUNE 27

1980

Cont.

from

front page

## ART

By David Bourdon

Housepersons of the world, unite! If urinals and soup cans can be art, why not an ordinary activity like sweeping? Manhattan conceptualist Mierle Laderman Ukeles is making a name for herself as the originator of something called "maintenance art," which consists of all the routine chores most people hate. Currently, she has the maintenance staff of a Wall Street building, located at 55 Water Street, executing a performance piece, titled "I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day." A round-the-clock crew of elevator mechanics, security men, cleaning women, window washers, and others continue to do their regular work, but for 60 minutes each day they are now asked to look upon their daily tasks as "Art" (the italics and capital A are Ukeles's).

The Ukeles performance piece is part of a group show, called ART WORLD, on view at the downtown branch of the Whitney Museum, 55 Water. The conceptualists involved use, film videotape, maps, deeds, questionnaires, and legal agreements to make art works that comment satirically or seriously on social, political, ecological, and economic subjects. Newton and Helen Harrison display three maps, projecting possible allocations of the world's oceans. Les Levine shows nearly two dozen photographs of raunchy subway scenes, each picture being a "working plan" for a proposed sculpture with live performers. Don Celender's book, which compiles working people's attitudes toward the arts, and Agnes Denes's showcase of dust specimens (including human dust) are among the livelier attractions. But it's Ukeles's contribution that gives real soul to this otherwise frothy exhibition.

Let's hope that New York City's financiers pursue the implications of Ukeles's maintenance art. If the Department of Sanitation, for instance, could turn its regular work into a conceptual performance, the city might qualify for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. (The downtown Whitney is open Monday to Friday, 11 to 3; through October 20.) □

# PROBLEMS OF CRITICISM, IX

This is the ninth in a continuing series of articles on the subject, Problems of Criticism.

Artforum Jan '71

**"It is not the art works which are under attack, but the epistemological structures through which the illusion of high art is consecrated."**

## JACK BURNHAM

In his introduction to the esthetics and art criticism of John Ruskin, Robert L. Herbert describes Ruskin's ambivalent feelings towards the usefulness of science:

Any science that adds to the descriptive knowledge of nature, and thus acts as the artist's servant, is all to the good; any science that deals with analytical knowledge, is only bad.<sup>1</sup>

Science bred a kind of rational, uniform truth, in opposition to the artist's far more valuable "imaginative truth." Herbert goes on to explicate the tension and doubt that lingered in even Ruskin's mind about the matter. He cites a passage in Ruskin's *Pre-Raphaelitism* where the great essayist juxtaposes the "blissful ignorance" of artistic perception with the fragmented unresolvedness of the scientist's point of view. But then, in a footnote, Ruskin, the archpolemicist against Victorian notions of technicalized "progress," tries to reconcile "the facts of science" with esthetic feeling, as if scientists were not eternally damned but were only "virtuous pagans" residing on the first circle of hell. To enter purgatory they need but recognize science as a different and subordinate category of art.

If only such conceptual antipathies were easily resolvable. More likely each is reconciled by the progressive revelation of the other's absurdities and delusions. Still the notion of change—the prime sustainer of the philosophy of history—would have art and science evolving independently, neither really affecting the other. No one with any sensitivity really thought it could last this way. For more than a century the intelligentsia harbored profound suspicions of science and technology's ultimate intentions; doubt now pervades all sectors of society. In Claude Lévi-Strauss's terminology, we are a "hot" society cooling off rapidly... I none too soon are we returning to the tril of state. But it is ironic that tribal consciousness not only destroys the hubris and superficial rationality behind technological elitism, it also obliterates the historical conser-

tualizations which make high art a reasonable assumption of Culture. In Cioran's words, "A minimum of unconsciousness is necessary if one wants to stay inside history"—or: wreck the Machine if you will, but feign naïveté so Culture will not go with it.

By the late 19th century the double-edged myth of progress had been sold to all the artistic avant-gardes. Progress became everybody's product. And if Red China has sought to institutionalize revolution, she is simply parodying two hundred years of Western history. Marxian or bourgeois, the objective has been the same: how to stabilize or Hellenize the revolution. Objective: to create a revolutionary prototype which never attempts to revolutionize the revolution. Answer: the mythic structures of modern cultural historicism.

Reading current art criticism in this light is a fascinating experience. Take Barbara Rose on the "Culture Collision":

To [Barnett] Newman and his generation it still seemed possible to rebel against the past while remaining within the Western tradition. Judging from "Information" and the innumerable future versions of it, such as The Jewish Museum "Software" exhibition of data-processing systems, few younger artists continue to hold that view. The peculiar oddness of the moment is that we are watching the death of our traditional culture as outstanding individuals who rose above the crowd, like Newman, pass away, even as we witness the birth of another culture dedicated to the ephemeral and the temporary, which has no use for excellence, individualism, or the past.<sup>2</sup>

Allowing for the fact that "Software" was hatched nine months before "Information," is it possible that some artists know something that Miss Rose does not? For instance, Joseph Kosuth, a young artist eminently disliked by Formalists, Antiformalists, and even a number of his Conceptualist colleagues, has performed a valuable service for the art world, one which has been mainly lost on the art establishment. When, fifty-five years ago, Ludwig Wittgenstein recognized that the bankruptcy of German Neo-Idealism and British Logical Empiricism lay in an inability to cope with or use ordinary language, the philosopher saw his mission as a kind of psychotherapist. Much of his therapy involved explicating the absurdities resulting from the misuse of language, or as he would say, "converting concealed nonsense into overt nonsense."<sup>3</sup> He saw that neither applying metaphysics nor science to language could work, but only using language as it is meant to be used, i.e., understanding the natural limitations and logic of ordinary language. Acting in a similar capacity, Kosuth—like Daniel Buren and a few others—has partially revealed

the bankruptcy of historical avant-gardism mainly by demonstrating that avant-garde art operates according to transparently logical mechanisms. Merely by understanding and using some of these, the artist reveals their inherently linguistic nature at the same time that he becomes enmeshed in their historical superstructure. The illogicality of every mythic assumption is exposed by a simple test: do not act out the myth; rather act out the wishful thinking motivating myth-makers.

But what about excellence or individualism? Are they dead, or, more likely, is the framework which proscribes certain acts by certain individuals as excellent under reconsideration? Remember that every critic ties him or herself to a stable of artist superstars. The tacit assumption is that whoever keeps his or her superstars visible for the longest time becomes, in effect, a meta-superstar. Individualism does not die, just the convenient notion that it is invested in certain glamorous individuals. Or to cite Cioran again:

The destruction of idols involves prejudices. Now prejudices—organic fictions of a civilization—assure its duration, preserve its physiognomy. It must respect them: if not all of them, at least those which are its own and which, in the past, had the importance of a superstition, a rite. If a civilization entertains them as pure conventions, it will increasingly release itself from them without being able to replace them by its own means. And what if it has worshipped caprice, freedom, the individual? A high-class conformism, no more. Once it ceases to "conform," caprice, freedom, and the individual will become a dead letter.<sup>4</sup>

Several years ago in a series of lectures on the subject of "Systems Esthetics," I made some observations on the complexity of those repositories of individualism, art museums. It seems that museums preserve the idiosyncrasies of the revolution in an incredibly Surrealistic way:

...one of the most difficult kinds of information to get from any institution is specific knowledge of the way it protects its collection from theft and vandalism. Most of these "On Guard" electronic systems are usually hidden to the casual observer. Audio protection with the aid of microphones is one device in use, although only if noise levels are low and constant. On the other hand motion detection systems can work by picking up sustained soundwave frequencies. Other common devices include vibration detection systems, photoelectric systems, and radiofrequency detectors. Closed-circuit television cameras connected to centrally located monitors are coming more into use. But admittedly, these are almost nothing but preventative window dressing. Outside museums fences can be used to set up electrostatic fields which act as alarms. Fire detection and protection operate on several pick up principles including fire location by heat,

Burnham, Jack. "Problems of Criticism, IX." *Artforum* (January 1971): 40-45.

light, infrared, ultraviolet, alpha particle radiation, or by smoke itself. Fire surveillance systems can define a threatened area at once if they are built into a data center.

Not to be outdone, museum conservation laboratories have become rather complete and scientific in the past twenty years—as witness the elaborate conservation facilities which the Los Angeles Museum plans to share on a cooperative basis with other West Coast museums. Vacuum-hot tables such as the one belonging to the Guggenheim Museum are used to dry out and reline damaged and old paintings. Other items of standard equipment are infrared photography, X-ray units, air compressors and spray guns, heat filtered medical lamps for detailed inspections, binocular microscopes, special light meters, and radio decay detection equipment for testing possible forgeries. To this one could add a phenomenal list of chemicals and special treatments. Computerized curatorial archives are under way, but far from complete.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously many people are going to a great deal of trouble to preserve all those iconoclastic icons. But somehow the past decays almost as fast as, maybe faster than, it can be acquired. Can technology, which destroys that past so effortlessly, also preserve it? Or is the ethos behind an invincible technology and a revolutionary art a reciprocal myth? Are we so far into Thanatos that the next upheaval can only be the death of illusionary revolution?

In a prospectus for an exhibition of "Maintenance Art"—a most elegant and philosophically timely proposal—Mierle Laderman Ukeles explains art in a super patriarchal society. It begins with the heading "Ideas" and is worth quoting at length.

A. *The Death Instinct and The Life Instinct.*

*The Death Instinct:* separation, individuality, Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one's own path to death—do your own thing, dynamic change.

*The Life Instinct:* unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and maintenance of the species, survival systems and operation, equilibrium.

B. Two basic systems: *Development and Maintenance.*

The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?

*Development:* pure individual creation; the new: change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing.

*Maintenance:* Keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight.

Show your work—show it again

Keep the contemporary art museum groovy  
Keep the home fires burning

Development systems are partial feedback systems with major room for change.

Maintenance systems are direct feedback systems with little room for alteration.

C. *Maintenance is a drag:* it takes all the fucking time, literally; the mind boggles and chafes at the boredom; the culture confers lousy status and minimum wages on maintenance jobs; housewives = no pay.

Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby's diaper, finish the report, correct the typos, mend the fence, keep the customer happy, throw out the stinking garbage, watch out—don't put things in your nose, what shall I wear, I have no sox, pay your bills, don't litter, save string, wash your hair, change the sheets, go to the store, I'm out of perfume, say it again—he doesn't understand, seal it again—it leaks, go to work, this art is dusty, clear the table, call him again, flush the toilet, stay young.

D. *Art:*

Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art. "We have no Art, we try to do everything well." (Balinese saying a la McLuhan and Fuller)

Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials.

Conceptual and Process Art especially claim pure development and change, yet employ almost purely maintenance processes.

E. The exhibition of Maintenance Art, "CARE," would zero in on maintenance, exhibit it, and yield, by utter opposition, a clarity of issues.<sup>7</sup>

Mierle Ukeles then proceeds to explain her three-part exhibition "I am an artist . . . woman . . . wife . . . mother (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc." Up to now she's also "done" art, but now Mierle Ukeles is willing to do all that drudgery in a museum on an exhibition basis. "I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls (i.e., floor paintings, dust works, soap sculpture, wall paintings, etc.), cook, invite people to eat, clean up, put away, change light bulbs . . . My working will be the work." Second, typed interviews with various people from maintenance professions and museum-goers concerning their views on the piddling but essential tasks of life would be presented. Finally, "F Maintenance," the last part, involves delivering use to the museum where it is "purified, depurified, rehabilitated, recycled,

and conserved by various technical (and/or pseudo-technical) procedures . . ." Incidentally, this is an offer which Mierle Ukeles hopes some enterprising museum curator will seriously consider; the offer is real.

Mrs. Ukeles is implying that avant-gardism amounts to running around in tighter and tighter circles, doing the same thing over and over again but trying to make it look and sound different. It seems that the mythic drive behind high art has run its course. The sudden transference of some avant-garde artists to politics stems from a desire to find a viable revolution, one providing the needed psychological surrogate. Presently avant-gardism can only mean revival, unacceptable iconoclasm, or the deliberate presentation of nonart. This, of course, is bad news to the critics who have enjoyed the major portion of their careers amplifying praise for avant-garde heroes while damning various purveyors of "bad art" and esthetic license. While Harold Rosenberg fits this description, he is a critic who continues to make intelligent and insightful commentary on an art world which he finds less and less to his liking. In regard to recent conceptually-oriented exhibitions Rosenberg writes:

The dilemma of the museum is that it takes its esthetic stand on the basis of art history, which it is helping to liquidate. The blending of painting and sculpture into decorative media, the adulteration of styles, the mixing of genres in order to create an "environment" for the spectator have completed the erosion of values derived exclusively from the art of the past which was begun by the avant-garde art movements. What is needed to replace those values is a critical outlook towards history and the part of creation in contemporary culture, politics, and technology. Esthetics does not exist in a vacuum. The museum seems unaware how precarious it is to go as far out from art as it has on no other foundation than its simple-minded avant-gardism. In the direction it has taken, nothing awaits it but transformation into a low-rating mass medium.<sup>8</sup>

This is the old story of the revolution that revolutionizes itself out of existence. On the scenes are mediators who attempt to hold the center by welding feuding factions together or by excommunicating the "bad apples" who are incapable of recognizing the boundaries of approved revolt. Most ironic is the art world's rejection of science and technology without realizing that the same ethos of "progress" that characterized technological change in the 19th and 20th centuries is equally responsible for the illusion of avant-garde art. Such critics are caught in an even tighter dilemma. How can they understand the history of modern art—that rationale that has led to the apparent dangers of technological art and Conceptualism—if they cannot comprehend that