
ART

How Mierle Laderman Ukeles Turned Maintenance Work into Art

Best known as the artist in residence at New York City's Department of Sanitation, the septuagenarian Ukeles is having her first full retrospective, at the Queens Museum.

Jillian Steinhauer February 10, 2017

Installation view, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* at the Queens Museum, with "Ceremonial Arch IV" (1988/1993/1994/2016) at center (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

How radical should artists be? This is a question that anyone who thinks about political art is destined to dwell

on, even more so in the time of President Trump. The [Queens](#)

Museum's institution-wide survey of the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles — the septuagenarian artist's first retrospective — raises it anew.

If you're familiar with Ukeles, it's likely because of her role as the artist in residence at New York City's Department of Sanitation (DSNY). Ukeles has held the official position for 39 years, though it's never been paid. Of course, when the department hired her in 1978, the city was on the brink of bankruptcy, and sanitation workers ("sanmen," for short) were between strikes; the department was not in a position to offer her money. Yet the contradiction of Ukeles's decades-long, authorized, uncompensated role cuts to the heart of the complications underlying her work.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Second Binding" (1964)

Ukeles began her artistic career in 1962 at Pratt Institute, where she made messy,

bulbous, and abstract sculptural works that so unsettled the school's male administrators, they deemed her "over-sexed." (The Queens Museum has one of these on display, and while the piece is satisfyingly visceral, it's hard to believe it caused such an uproar.) One of her teachers resigned in protest, and Ukeles dropped out soon thereafter. She enrolled in an art education program at the University of Denver while continuing to make her own work, imagining a series of inflatable interventions called *Air Art*. She got married in 1966 and two years later had her first child.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Air Art:
Baffles- Personal Air Conditioning
and Anti-Pollution Device" (1969)

This brought her to
a feminist
crossroads. Ukeles
was a full-time
mother, but she

was also an artist. Like so many women before and after
herself, she struggled to find the time to be both. "I literally
was divided in two," she told [*Art in America*](#). "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.'"

So she did what any good artist would: she wrote a manifesto.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto
for Maintenance Art 1969!, Proposal
for an exhibition 'Care'" (1969)

"Manifesto for
Maintenance Art
1969!" is a brilliant,
three-and-a-half-
page, typewritten
document divided

into two parts. In the first Ukeles lays out the distinction
between what she calls "two basic systems: Development and
Maintenance." The former, associated with the avant-garde and
implicitly male, is concerned with "pure individual creation;
the new; change; progress, advance, excitement, flight or
fleeing." The latter includes tasks generally associated — at
least in the private sphere — with women and domestic work:
"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." The
problem, Ukeles notes, is that our culture values development,
while maintenance "takes all the fucking time."

The solution, then, is to combine them — to create a show that “would zero in on pure maintenance, exhibit it as contemporary art.” She outlines her proposal for this show, titled *Care*, in the second part of the text. It would consist of three sections: personal — Ukeles doing household chores, but in the art museum, thereby elevating them to the status of art; general — interviews conducted with members of the public about maintenance and their relationship to it; and earth — various kinds of refuse delivered to the exhibition, where they’d be rehabilitated and recycled. Though it was never mounted (she sent the proposal to several institutions but was rejected), *Care* is remarkable for laying out so early and so clearly the themes and interconnected vision that have defined Ukeles’s career. Curators Larissa Harris and Patricia C. Phillips are wise to hang the manifesto at the very start of the Queens show.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, detail of
“Dress to Go Out/Undressing to Go
In” (1973)

In the following galleries, we see how Ukeles followed the trajectory of her text. She began by

performing at home but documenting for public view such intimate tasks as cleaning a dirty diaper (“Rinsing a B.M. Diaper,” from *Private Performances of Personal Maintenance as Art*, 1970) or dressing her children to go outside (“Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In,” 1973). Calling these actions art was a kind of radically feminist Duchampian trick (she cites him as an influence). She quickly scaled up to a place where

personal met public: the maintenance of the art institution. These make for some of Ukeles's most striking and thought-provoking works.

In

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, detail
of "Washing/Tracks/Maintenance:
Outside" (July 23, 1973)

"Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside" (1973), documented in an iconic set of black-and-white photographs, we see Ukeles washing the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum: wielding her mop (like a paintbrush, as some have noted), pouring water, scrubbing the pavement with a rag. Here, the anointed white artist does the hands-on maintenance work that art institutions usually reserve for people of color — the reversal feels meaningful. In another piece performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, "Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object: Mummy Maintenance: With the Maintenance Man, the Maintenance Artist, and the Museum Conservator" (1973), Ukeles used the vitrine housing an Egyptian mummy to engineer a three-part role exchange between maintenance worker, artist, and conservator; in the process, she forwarded a quiet but substantive critique of the way art institutions assign value.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, detail of "I
Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every
Day" (September 16–October 20, 1976)

In 1976, Ukeles scaled up once again. Invited by the students in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program to participate in an exhibition called *Art < > World*, Ukeles decided to make her contribution a collaboration with 300 maintenance workers in the building where the show would be held. For "I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day," she spent five weeks in the building, approaching workers, photographing them with a Polaroid camera, and asking them to classify what they were doing at that moment as work or art. As with "Transfer," she used herself as a conduit, giving the maintenance workers access to an artistic authority that she had outlined in her manifesto: the act of naming. "Everything I say is Art is Art," she had written in 1969. Now she was passing along that power.

Critic David Bourdon reviewed *Art < > World* for the *Village Voice*. After writing that Ukeles's work gave the exhibition "real soul," he ended by quipping:

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.

Though the passage was likely meant as a clever kicker, Ukeles cut out the review and mailed it to DSNY Commissioner Anthony Vaccarello, asking if he might be interested in having

an artist in residence. Not long after, she got a call from his assistant, who asked her: “How would you like to make art with 10,000 people?” (Her response: “I’ll be right over.”)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “I Make
Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day”
(September 16–October 20, 1976)

With “I Make
Maintenance Art
One Hour Every
Day,” Ukeles had
begun to see
maintenance not

just as a personal issue but also as a systemic one. A set of proposals and notes on view at the museum, collectively titled “Maintenance Art Works Meets the Department of Sanitation” (1977–79), shows her working to understand that reality.

“Garbage is the ultimate mixed media,” she wrote on one page; another features a hand-drawn, looping line tracking how “raw material” becomes “garbage.” Ukeles funneled all of this into her first project with DSNY, and arguably the *pièce de résistance* of her career, “Touch Sanitation Performance” (1979–80).

For the performance, Ukeles spent 11 months shaking hands with and thanking New York City’s sanmen — all 8,500 of them. She methodically mapped out her routes (which she called “sweeps”), spending 8- or 16-hour days visiting sanitation crews in different locales, shadowing workers, interviewing them, delivering speeches about her own work and the value of theirs. “Thank you for keeping New York City alive!” she told every one of them.

Installation view of documentation of
Mierle Laderman Ukeles's "Touch
Sanitation Performance" (July 24,
1979–June 26, 1980)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, photo of
"Touch Sanitation Performance"

Museum, plus additional material on the Panorama of the City of New York across the hall — makes clear the scale of the project. Photographs tiled around the walls, maps, videos, typewritten plans, and a binder of press clippings — not to mention Ukeles's goodbye telex to the sanmen, written over the course of an entire eight-hour shift (and never sent because it would have taken eight hours) — evidence the depth of the artist's commitment: she didn't want to just thank the sanmen; she wanted to understand their world. The videos are especially compelling, as Ukeles, often clad in pink and with swooping blond hair, listens to the complaints and frustrations of the uniformed men. Ukeles offers her own emotional labor as a way of validating their manual work.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, photo of
"Touch Sanitation Performance"

A handshake and a
thank you may
sound slight,
perhaps even silly,
but the
documentation of
"Touch Sanitation
Performance" —
which fills a gallery
at the Queens

In shining a
spotlight on the
undersung sanmen,
Ukeles was doing
something

unquestionably political, especially in late-1970s New York.

Yet, viewed more than 30 years later, I can't help but wonder what it might have looked like if she'd taken her project further — by, say, speaking out in support of strikes or lobbying for better wages or working conditions for the sanmen. The question returns: how radical should artists be? At the core of “Touch Sanitation Performance” was an artistic proposition, not a political one; as Patricia C. Phillips writes in the book accompanying the exhibition: “Even if she had never shaken a single hand, the preliminary planning, listening tours, observation, research, and analysis required to imagine and implement the work would stand as key examples of late twentieth-century Conceptual art.” The work used art to understand and help maintain an existing system of maintenance; it did not consider the possible need to change it. Was that enough?

Ukeles's sweeps for “Touch Sanitation Performance” are lit up with colored lights on the Queens Museum's Panorama of the City of New York

This may have been due, in part, to the time. Conceptual art made a radical break with what came before it, but

by design it valued ideas over implementation. In her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, art historian Lucy Lippard [writes](#), “Unfettered by object status, Conceptual artists were free to let their imaginations run rampant. With hindsight, it is clear to me that they could have run further...” Yet, as pointed out by critics [Ben Davis](#) and [Mostafa Heddaya](#) in their own reviews of the current show,

Ukeles did have predecessors and contemporaries who advocated a more explicitly political type of artistic action, including the Art Workers' Coalition.

Much has been made of Ukeles's success in crossing gender and racial barriers with "Touch Sanitation Performance," but it strikes me that its shortcomings result from her not crossing them in a deeper, more meaningful way. Ukeles came to understand the workings of New York's sanitation system, but she failed to grasp the larger social system in which she and it existed. Artists — even disempowered female ones — had (and still have) the social capital to turn their maintenance work into maintenance art, simply by saying so; sanmen do not. What's personal is political, but personal politics cannot replace mass organization. Ukeles was able to use art to transform the conditions of her own life — in fact, to turn maintenance art into a development — but doing the same for the sanmen would have required a more radical leap.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles,
"Vuilniswagendans (City Machine
Dance)" (May 15, 1985)

In the following years at DSNY and beyond, Ukeles continued to make grand projects that favored symbolism

and gesture. They include a series of slowly mesmerizing work ballets that feature operators moving pieces of heavy machinery in choreographed motion; a trio of pieces for the grand finale of the 1983 NYC Art Parade, including Ukeles sweeping the parade route alongside the DSNY commissioner and other high-level officials; and *Touch Sanitation Show* (1984),

a multifaceted exhibition held simultaneously at the West 59th Street Marine Transfer Station and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. The last stands out for seeking to give the public a deeper understanding of the realities of DSNY and its workers. It featured an immense installation of equipment (which Phillips deems an “anthropological extravaganza”) and a performance that invited visitors to erase the “bad names” that sanmen had been called.

Installation view of documentation of
Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Touch
Sanitation Show* (1984)

Arguably, though,
Ukeles's most
effective enactment
of maintenance art
has come in her
fulfillment of the

third part of her early manifesto: earth. The Queens Museum atrium is devoted to the artist's work on [Fresh Kills](#), a massive Staten Island landfill that's currently undergoing a 30-year process of being transformed into a park, as well as two other, smaller landfills. Lined with drawings, renderings, plans, and videos, this section of the show is the least eye-catching, but one of the most meaningful.

Here we see Ukeles doing more than just attempting to grasp the complexity of Fresh Kills — she's also imagining how the landfill might one day be something different. “How does a place switch its meaning and become something else?” she writes in a 2001 proposal. To her, Fresh Kills is “a true social sculpture composed of 150 million tons from literally billions of individual decisions and acts of rejection.” Early on she envisioned a series of projects in which members of the public

would donate objects they considered valuable for embedding in soil at the site. That proposal gave way to another one, since approved, that she's been working on since 2008: "Landing," an overlook positioned between two earthworks in Fresh Kills' South Park. The model and structural drawings for the project are a bit cryptic, but what's crucial is the sense of transformation they convey. As it turns out, maintaining and caring for the earth offer all sorts of possibilities for developing the world anew.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Landing"
(2008–ongoing)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Proposal
for 1 Million People to Participate in a
Public Artwork: Public Offerings:
Made by All, Redeemed by All"
(2001–02)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Selection
of Fresh Kills landfill closure and
developing park images" (2007–16)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles at the press
preview for her Queens Museum
retrospective

Mierle Laderman

Ukeles:

Maintenance Art

continues at the

Queens Museum

(New York City

Building, Flushing

Meadows Corona

Park, Queens)

through February 19.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "The Social
Mirror" (1983)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, detail of
"Ceremonial Arch IV"
(1988/1993/1994/2016)

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC