

## Mierle Laderman Ukeles

QUEENS MUSEUM, NEW YORK

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"MAINTENANCE ART," Mierle Laderman Ukeles's dense and radiant Queens Museum retrospective, is not only about maintenance but about commitment: a groundbreaking practice of labor and care that the artist invented and to which she has remained devoted for decades. The blessing/crisis of motherhood precipitated her bold conceptual move. In 1969, as a young artist burdened by the demands of housekeeping and childcare, she had little time to devote to her "real" work, so she hit upon a Duchampian-feminist method of designation to transform her crucial yet unrecognized labor—and eventually that of many others—into art. A urinal is not Maintenance Art, but the process of disinfecting one could well be. As Ukeles explains in her famous, wonderfully off-the-cuff manifesto composed that pivotal year, *maintenance*, the term for repetitive tasks of sustenance, preservation, renewal, repair, and clean-up, is unjustly deemed inferior to *development*, a category encompassing the exalted activities of innovation and authorship.

In proposing to perform her everyday chores in a museum ("I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls... MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK"), Ukeles challenged the sexist ruling-class values of the avant-garde, including those of Conceptualism and process art—and transformed the readymade itself, redefining its status as found object to encompass the found event, the recognition of an otherwise repressed or overlooked act. Yet the advent of Maintenance Art was more than an art-historical chess-move: Ukeles's gesture expanded the possibility of the readymade to ask not only what art can be, but who is excluded from making it. Working at the height of the Vietnam War and at the dawn of the women's movement, Ukeles was responding to the deep inequities and patriarchal capitalist hierarchies responsible for mass destruction and ecological ruin.

Following the generous spirit of her art, the museum offers copies of Ukeles's manifesto free to take right at the

start of the show, and you soon get to know the artist. In early works, she puts her own life under the microscope. *Personal Time Study*, 1973, is an excruciatingly detailed typewritten log of her activities in half-hour or fifteen-minute increments covering a four-day period in February. Nursing and diapering constantly interrupt her attempts at short spurts of administrative work on her artistic endeavors. She dispassionately records unrecognized time sucks, such as listening to her daughter tell her what to do or "looking for a place to put things down." While text is an important part of Ukeles's decades-long practice—she writes in a plain, vivid, cheerfully confrontational style—her work is also visually disarming. Humbly and stylishly presented, some pieces from the 1970s employ craft materials, office supplies, and the look of classroom displays. The assiduously compiled family album-like portfolio of photos *Maintenance Art Tasks 1973*, is, on closer inspection, not simply a family photo album: In it, daily routines, recorded with discipline and formal consistency, take the place of special-occasion snapshots or posed portraits.

Ukeles's collaborative performance *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, 1976, marks an ambitious turn. Enlisting the participation of three hundred maintenance workers employed at 55 Water Street in New York's Financial District for five weeks, she asked each to devote an hour of every shift to making Maintenance Art—an activity outwardly identical to their customary work—and to wear a button broadcasting their participation. An impressive grid of roughly seven hundred Polaroids shows the laborer-artists at their posts and honors the secret, after-hours life of the skyscraper.

As she shifted her art's focus from her own experience as a so-called housewife to the lives of working-class maintenance employees, Ukeles risked appearing as an interloper, mining the work of others for material. Yet she has successfully avoided this trap. Without hogging the spotlight or absenting herself from subsequent works, she ceaselessly communicates a respectful and bottomless curiosity about her subjects, as well as a heartfelt desire to reorder society. We learn from her passionate writings that hers is an agenda energized by a tradition of her progressive Judaism, that of making prosaic, profane tasks sacred.

Ukeles's most famous project is her ongoing collaboration with the New York City Department of Sanitation as

its first artist-in-residence. There is such a rich array of materials associated with this brilliant and unprecedented project on view, you get the feeling it's just the tip of the iceberg. Proving that women need not be the subject of feminist art, the striking photo-documentation of *Touch Sanitation Performance*, 1979–80, in which Ukeles shook hands with eighty-five hundred sanitation workers and thanked them for "keeping New York City alive," shows the intrepid artist trailing exclusively male work crews and interacting with the "sanmen." To celebrate the value of these often overlooked or maligned professionals and their vital service to the city, Ukeles also created installations, sound pieces, and light-hearted public performances, such as the choreographed routines for DSNY trucks and barges she called "work ballets."

An array of proposed earthworks similarly highlight the profound underpinnings of her mission, and her desire to illuminate ignored or misunderstood waste-management systems and spaces, the challenges and crises

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they face, and the people who power them. A display devoted to Ukeles's study of Staten Island's Fresh Kills Landfill includes her unrealized design for *Flow City*, 1983–2001, a publicly accessible, functional sanitation facility—a museum of sorts—at the West Fifty-Ninth Street Marine Transfer Station in Manhattan, where barges destined for Fresh Kills were once loaded with garbage. In Ukeles's noble—and witty—body of work, such grand dreams are the flip side of her reverent attunement to the intimate and quotidian: The personal is political, but it is also planetary—and requires steadfast creative maintenance. □

"Mierle Laderman Ukeles: *Maintenance Art*" is on view through Feb. 19, 2017.

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Visit [artforum.com](http://artforum.com) for a video interview with Ukeles made on the occasion of this exhibition.



From left: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art Tasks 1973* (detail), album with gelatin silver prints, chain, and rags, 13 x 12½ x 1¾". Photographs by Joshua Siderowitz, 1973. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance*, 1979–80. Performance view, Brooklyn, NY, April 18, 1980. Photo: Marcia Bricker. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *The Social Mirror*, 1983/2016, garbage collection truck, tempered-glass mirror, acrylic mirror. From *Sanitation Celebrations*, 1983. Installation view. Photo: Hal Zhang.