

Interview: Mierle Laderman Ukeles on Maintenance and Sanitation Art

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Introduction

Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been active as an artist since the late 1960s. Her work has generally centered on issues of the environment, the city "as a living entity," and service labor, although she has undertaken a number of projects outside of the realm of public art, including installations in museums and galleries. For example, in 1997, she created an enormous installation at the museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, *Unburning Freedom Hall*, examining the meaning of fire in the city. However, in this context, I will focus on Ukeles's long-standing collaboration with New York City's Department of Sanitation (DOS), where she has been the official artist-in-residence since 1977. Since her role at DOS has never been funded by the agency or clearly defined, she has had the opportunity to chart her own course, to claim the *whole* city as her site (through a system that keeps it running), and to define her "community" as *all* New Yorkers. Ukeles has been able to work her way through the various divisions of DOS to create sanitation-based art works that have included performance, video, temporary installations, and (to be completed) permanent artworks.

After an education in international relations and art, Ukeles had a child. The transformations that this brought to her life changed her art as well, as discussed in the interview that follows. The essential elements of this transformation were clearly stated in Ukeles's "Manifestos Maintenance Art," of 1969, in which she declared survival work - maintenance- and art, including her domestic work and her art, were one (quoted in the Introduction). With the manifesto as a backdrop, she created the seventeen different performance works including "Maintenance Art Performance Series" (1973-1974) and "I Make Maintenance Art 1 Hour Every Day" (1976).

Ukeles's first year and a half at DOS (1977-1978) was spent getting to know the agency -from the workers to the history of waste management in New York to the structure of the bureaucracy. The commissioner assigned Gloria Johnson, an assistant for Special Projects, to help Ukeles through the department. In turn, Johnson introduced her to a series of foremen and workers. Ukeles began going to DOS every day, either to do research in the city archive, to talk to employees, or simply to go out on shifts with the workers. As Ukeles became a fixture at Sanitation, Gloria Johnson realized that Ukeles would need a desk of her own. She offered Ukeles an office in Waste Disposal Planning, which she occupied for sixteen years (1977-1993) before moving to her

current, larger office in Sanitation's downtown headquarters for Solid Waste Management and Engineering and Waste Prevention, Reuse, and Recycling.

Ukeles's first official work at DOS was *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1978-1980). This performance had two parts: *Handshake Ritual*, which consisted of visiting all of New York City's fifty-nine community districts, and facing 8,500 sanitation workers, shaking hands saying to each "Thank you-for keeping New York City alive" and *Follow in Your Footsteps*, which involved replicating the sanitation workers' actions as they collected trash. As in many of her collaborative projects, Ukeles wrote a letter to the sanitation workers to explain what she was up to:

I'm creating a huge artwork called TOUCH SANITATION about and with you, the men of the Department. All of you. Not just a few sanmen or officers, or one district, or one incinerator, or one landfill. That's not the story here. New York City Sanitation is the major leagues, and I want to "picture" the entire mind-bending operation.

Over the next five years, Ukeles intensified her collaboration with the Department of Sanitation, culminating in the "Touch Sanitation Show" in the fall of 1984 (cosponsored by Creative Time). This vast undertaking involved a huge exhibition at a Sanitation Department station on Fifty-ninth Street, a garbage barge ballet on the Hudson River, an environmental exhibition at Ronald Feldman gallery, and "Cleansing the Bad Names," a performance on Mercer Street with 190 participants.

In 1984, she wrote "Sanitation Manifesto!," this time speaking as the artist-in-residence at DOS. She saw the public system of sanitation as a bond that ties us all together; the subtitle of the manifesto was "Why Sanitation Can Be Used As A Model For Public Art." As opposed to other documents she had written, this text was clearly aimed at the art world, not sanitation workers. She speaks to every citizen's public interdependency and interconnectedness:

We are, all of us, whether we desire it or not, in relation to Sanitation, implicated, dependent if we want the City, and ourselves, to last more than a few days. I am-along with every other citizen who lives, works, visits, or passes through this space-a co-producer of Sanitation's work-product, as well as a customer of Sanitation's work. In addition, because this is a thoroughly public system, I-we-are all co-owners-we have a right to a say in all this. We are, each and all, bound to Sanitation, to restrictiveness.

While her primary focus had shifted to work in a public agency, she continued to work in traditional art world venues, often with the cooperation and collaboration of DOS. For an exhibition of community-interactive projects at Project Studios One (P.S. 1) organized by Glenn Weiss and myself, Ukeles created a multifaceted collaboration that

required cutting through three gallery walls. It included a 90-foot long, 18-foot wide, 13-foot high work with twenty tons of recyclables forming the walls, ceiling, and floor, and a sound work created with the sounds of recycling. The work, *Re:Entry*, was fabricated from all of the materials that were being recycled by DOS at the time.

While *Re:Entry* was an ambitious project for P.S. 1, it was only a maquette or prototype for a part of Ukeles's permanent work called *Flow City*, which will be the public portion of a marine transfer station at Fifty-ninth Street and the Hudson River. Ukeles's contribution will be made up of three basic components: a 248-foot ramp (much like the P.S. 1 model), a "glass bridge" for viewing the mixed waste and recycling operation, and a 24-monitor multimedia wall, including live camera images from sites such as the Fresh Kills Landfill.

This is an unusual public art project in that Ukeles intends to change the meaning and use of the site. Without *Flow City*, the facility would never be open to the public. Instead of allowing the building to remain separated from the city, she wants to draw the people into the transfer station's inner workings, or more accurately, to help them understand viscerally that they are already implicated in the plant's inner workings.

At the present time, Mierle Ukeles is beginning to participate on a design team that will address the 2002 closing of Staten Island's Fresh Kills Landfill and its eventual opening to the public as a park. Her participation on the team will be funded by New York City's Percent for Art Program. Fresh Kills, the city's only operating landfill, covers 3,000 acres, and its enormity is mind-boggling. The *New York Times* described the landfill thus:

It grows cell by cell, each 20 feet high and 7, 000 to 2, 000 feet in length, advancing 75 feet a day as giant trucks dump more and more, and 35-ton vehicles with giant metal rollers compact the earth . . . Nearly 600 people work (at Fresh Kills Landfills unloading the barges that arrive 24 hours a day, six days a week . . . The fill rate, at 74,000 tons per day, 306 days a year, equals five million cubic yards per year.

While certainly not our greatest achievement, the landfill is the world's largest manmade structure. Though Ukeles has spent many years observing the landfill and has been working on related issues for the last thirty years, her budget for work on this design team calls for hundreds of hours of additional research. She plans to know the landfill "inside out" before beginning to contemplate what design might begin to address the needs of the site. She will undoubtedly consult with a wide range of people within and outside the Department of Sanitation, a range that would be impossible if she were not already *in* the agency.

Ukeles's presence at Sanitation is a complex fusion of outsider (independent artist) and insider (long-term fixture in the Department). In working on Percent for

Art projects, I met many Sanitation administrators, *all* of whom know Ukeles personally. A typical response to Ukeles and her work came from a contract officer who had been at Sanitation for over thirty years. (Ukeles's two-and-a-half decades at DOS, by the way, is not a particularly long tenure by department standards. Many workers go to Sanitation for job security and spend their entire adult life there.) When Ukeles's name came up, the officer chuckled, and said that she was a "pain in the ass" who had put him through a lot of extra work. "But seriously," he said, "she's really a dynamic lady. Do you know she took the time to meet every sanitation worker when she came on board?" His attitude was one of amused bewilderment mixed with appreciation for what she had done for the agency and its workers.

In a 1994 *New York Times* article, Emily Lloyd, then the new commissioner of Sanitation, discussed how she had overcome initial doubts about the Department's artist-in-residence. She said of Ukeles:

Her philosophy is my own . . . 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 that 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.

This is a remarkably succinct summary of Ukeles's goals, and it demonstrates the commissioner's commitment to environmental consciousness rather than simple waste removal. What is left out is the means that Ukeles employs. After all, she is an artist, feminist, environmentalist, and social activist, probably in that order.

This interview, conducted in spring of 1996, focuses on Ukeles's early work, and how she came to collaborate with the New York City Department of Sanitation. The manuscript has been edited and revised by the artist in Winter 1999. Certain word usage, punctuation, and capitalization are Ukeles's addition, and they reflect the emphatic way that she talks and writes.

Tom Finkelpearl: Where did you go to school?

Mierle Laderman Ukeles: My undergraduate degree is in international relations and history, at Barnard. While I was an undergraduate, I would return home every summer to Colorado, where I was born and go to artschool at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I was leading two lives, I wrote my senior thesis on Tanganyika, but after a trip to Africa, as an appointed aide to President John F. Kennedy's Delegation for independence in 1961, I decided that the diplomatic world was too constricted, too diplomatic, so I chose art. I got into Pratt

Institute, and I went there in the early 1960s. I was making very personal works. The artist Bob Tannen had thrown out a whole bunch of cheesecloth. I found this soft, sort of translucent / transparent, wonderful material, and started wrapping, binding, pouring huge amounts of watered glue to stiffen it, tying over and over, in a very ritualistic way that ended up looking quite organic. I wanted to see how much I could stuff these forms until they were so completely full of energy they would almost burst. I recognized that I was in a new ballgame; I both didn't know what I was doing, and yet I was the only one knowing what I was doing; I had entered my own zone, and became a real artist.

The dean and the chairman of Pratt Institute told my teacher, Robert Richenberg, that I was making pornographic art, and I had to be stopped. This was in the beginning of the sixties when the rumblings of students beginning to get very uppity was happening, and they said to him: "Obviously, she's oversexed, and we have to put a stop to this!" They were hysterical. But Richenberg kept saying: "This is terrific, original, " kept my work openly displayed, and encouraged me to keep going. So I kept working, and they fired him. I was some kind of last straw for them. I thought the whole school would march out on this issue of academic freedom, that the faculty would leave. I was so naive. There were a few demonstrations. Tom Hess wrote an article in the New York Times, and then things slid back to quiescence. The cause died. I switched for a semester to the University of Colorado at Boulder, and got a lot of support from my professor, Roland Reiss. Then I tried Pratt again for one more semester, but the tone there sickened me. I just couldn't stand being there; so I quit. I went back to Colorado again, to the University of Denver, and got a teacher's certificate to teach art. For the art education degree, I wrote several curricula-a one-year curriculum on Love & Hate, and one on Peace & War. I liked thinking about art education very, very much. I subsequently returned to New York, and in 1967, started grad school all over again at New York University, in a program called InterRelated Arts, where, eventually in 1973, I got a master's degree.

While in Boulder and Denver, I continued developing the stuffings that I had started at Pratt. They turned into room-sized installations. I was looking for structures to wrap, stripping away the canvas and using the frame as an armature. Soon I needed stronger structures: window frames, doors, bed-springs, baby furniture-cribs and playpens. My being drawn to the baby furniture really scared me. I was buying rags by the hundreds of pounds, then started buying stuffed animals-hundreds of pounds of stuffed animals, because

they had more coherence than rags, and (liked them better. I was stuffing these animals into tubes and rags, but my pieces would get troubles. I would be stuffing and pouring one piece all day long, sliding around, sort of skating, in gluey water. I would push past the point of tension it could withstand, and it would get hernias-explode on me-all the stuffing was so wet, full of glue, drowning in glue, and all this crap running all over the floor.

Then in the summer of 1966, I got an idea that I could stuff these things with air-inflatable sculptures. I could make very big work (because I always wanted to make big work), and these things could be in the water, on the land, in the air. When they weren't being used, they would fold up. The central image was a giant piece that, when I was finished showing it, I would fold it up, put it in my back pocket, and I was free. I wouldn't have to take care of these works, schlep them around and worry about them.

This was the sixties when materiality was suspect. There was something wrong with occupying space, something imperialistic about it. This was the time of Vietnam, where the United States essentially was spreading beyond its borders, dominating, controlling. Art, on the other hand, was about utter freedom. Freedom was Art's only ally. Any connection to an institution was corrupting. The de-materialization of the artwork really came out of pulling away from materiality itself, the marketplace, selling objects. It was also an ecological idea.

All this was aimed at work that would be free, unencumbered, and not imperialistic. But it ended up differently. I worked in heat-sealing factories in New York and Philadelphia, trying to make these inflatables, where they use di-electric radio-frequency sealing. I didn't understand until later that I was still trying to hand-make my art even though I was completely dependent upon industrial processes. So there was a big glitch between concept and process. And they all leaked. They had horrible maintenance problems. I got deeply involved in valves, chambers, openings and closings. I was also dependent upon getting materials from companies that weren't used to working with artists, and they neglected to tell me basic things, such as the vinyl cracks and the seals break when the temperature drops below a certain degree.

At the same time, I became pregnant. I sort of became an inflatable myself.

My own body was expanding, which seemed not unrelated to what I was doing. I was the favorite student of a famous sculptor. The first time I came to class when it was obvious that I was pregnant, he took a look at me, and said: "Well, I guess now you can't be an artist." You know, things were different then.

It threw me. I got amazingly angry and disappointed in him. So we had our baby, that we wanted so much. Then I entered this, this time of "Who am I?" and "How am I going to do this?" I literally divided my life in half. Half of my time I was The Mother. I was

afraid to go away from my baby. I was very nervous about leaving her with people that I didn't know. And half of the time, I was The Artist, because I was in a panic that if I stopped doing my work I would lose it. I just had this feeling. Maybe it was a lack of confidence, or maybe I had struggled for so many years to become an artist, I felt that if I stopped working, it-the magic "it"-would evaporate, because that happens to a lot of people.

TF: Yes. Like me.

MLU: I was so rigid. It was 2.5 days of the 5-day work-week: 50/50 down the middle. But things were a little confused. When I was with my baby, changing a diaper for the 200th time, I would actually feel my brain saying to me: "Is this what I'm supposed to be doing?" The repetition was astounding to me. You know, I hadn't baby-sat; I hadn't stayed inside at home when I was growing up except when I was sick. I focused on being an artist, being free, being like Jackson Pollock. Like Marcel Duchamp. I wanted this baby. It is obviously not a superficial thing if a human life is dependent on you, in your hands. So, nothing in my whole, long, long education, in international relations, in sculpture, nothing educated me for how to bring a wholeness to taking care, not only creating life, but maintaining life. The creating, the originating, that's the easy part. And that's actually always true, even in art. The art, the creation, is often like that [snaps her fingers]. It's the implementation of getting it out there, follow-through, hanging in there, deepening, not throwing up your hands and running away. I had no models, none, in my entire education to deal with repetitiveness, continuity. I had the best education that this society provides but nothing in my head to help think about getting from this minute to the next minute. I was doing work that's so common; yet there was no cultural language for this work. People would ask: "Do you do anything?" I had never worked so hard in my whole life as when I had a little baby. Ever. Trying to be a decent parent, trying to keep myself alive as an artist, trying to make some money. I was working like a maniac. But there were no words in the culture that gave value for the work I was doing.

So I had a crisis, an absolute crisis. I felt like I was two completely different people. Inside I could physically feel my brain separating from my hands, and I think I became an artist because I liked having my brain connected to my hands. I had spent my childhood making up games while playing around in the mud, outside, in Denver. I was one person. I was all connected. My notion of being a free person was being a whole person. I had to come to grips with how vastly selfish the ego was that my education directed me toward "refining." The way I was educated to construct my perception and thinking through almost all my education was "I want," or "I think," you know, "I think that Africa blah...", "you know "I, I," it was "I."

If anything got in my way of being an artist, I was out the door. It was painful, scary, and hard. Before we got married, my husband, Jack, and I took three years of yelling and screaming at each other before we could get to a "we." I mean, this was serious, It was hard for me to get to a "we" where I felt that my artist part would not get disintegrated. But we kept working at it. I mean, we are still working at it and we're doing a great job. It's not an easy thing. I know what I'm scared about. I'm scared about something that's legitimate-to lose freedom. It's hard. You can lose it, at any moment.

But when I had a baby, I realized that my language needed to open up out of the "I." O.K., I'm changing my baby's diaper. The baby's crying. The baby needs, the baby; the baby needs. The need is not in me, it's outside in another human being. At the very same time, in my work, so much trouble with maintenance of the inflatables whose purpose was to be so free, unfettered, and ended up being a complete list of maintenance nightmaresleaks, this, that, this, that. I spent four years trying to make these things. Four years of factories. Total maintenance troubles. And out of free choice, we had this child. I wanted this child. I fell madly in love with this child. So, I became a maintenance worker. I no longer understood who I was. I got so pissed-off. I became utterly furious at not feeling like one whole human being. Then the fury turned into an illumination, and, in one, sitting, I wrote a manifesto calling maintenance "art."

TF: This is now 1969?

MLU: Yes. I wrote that if I'm the artist, then whatever I say is art, is art. It isn't an ego-thing, it's what the artist needs. It's the work conditions that you need to make art-to be able to say what your work is. I loved Pollock because he was so physical, and I swallowed all the propaganda about action, about abstract expressionism, moving into the unknown, making freedom. For him, make a work and it's behind you, it's not even there for you anymore. Your job is to move into the unknown. Alone. This model was so phony. Pollock appeared autonomous, didn't need anybody, hardly needed gravity itself. It wasn't living in the world, in a planet that has finite resources, where we need to stay alive, in connection with other people. It was a total phony thing. It had an evil underside of autonomy, only the "I "; not acknowledging who holds you up, and who supports you, and who's providing the food, and the raw materials, and who are the people who are taking them out of the earth, and what are their working conditions, and what are the pollution costs of moving materials all around the world, who's paying for what, and any fact of human life. The model of the avant-garde that I swallowed, that I lusted for, presented images, embedded within and contiguous with individual art works, of human freedom and free expression. The exquisite articulation and refinement of free expression in these works are among the

greatest accomplishments that have ever happened in the world. But there can also be an evil side to that model of freedom.

TF: So the disconnection of modernism created a personal crisis for you.

MLU: Right. But I was having the privilege of taking care of another human being to the extent that her life was dependent upon what I did, and that gave me a connection to most other people in the world who live their lives having to deal with how to stay alive, how to keep their families alive. I went to the school of diapering my baby, feeding my baby, putting the needs of another in front of my own needs. That was the basis of the connection. I had a responsibility, and my "I" could provide the needs. I had the ability to provide the needs for a child, and the child could thrive, or die depending upon what I did. It was that powerful. And through that, I got the beginning of an understanding of working to get from this minute to the next minute; to get that close to the unfurling of basic existence. It's as if I looked up suddenly, after all my formal education in autonomy, and I saw people doing support work, to keep something else going, and not necessarily only themselves. Workers.

TF: How were all of these ideas in your Manifesto?

MLU: First of all, the Manifesto proposed an exhibition, called "CARE," where I would move into a museum with my husband and my baby, and I would do my family things, and also take care of the museum, maintain it, as well as taking care of, servicing, the visitors who came to the museum. The museum would be home. And that would be the art-work. In other words, I would clean it, I would change the lightbulbs, whatever was necessary to keep this place operating. The museum's life-processes would become visible. That would be the art-work.

Second, the Manifesto's exhibition proposed to ask all different kinds of people in society, "What do you have to do to keep alive? How do you get from minute to minute?" There would be many tables where people would be interviewed about what they did to stay alive. In Western culture, you're not supposed to talk about this stuff in polite company. Certainly in 1969, there were very few words to talk about ongoing sustenance.

The third part of the exhibition was constructing an image of the earth (outside) as a needy and finite place. Every day, containers of ravaged earth, air, and water would be delivered to the museum. Each day, scientists and pseudo-scientists (artists) would process and purify these elements in the museum, and then return the elements to the city in a healthy mode. My image of the museum was the site of alchemy, where polluted earth, polluted water,

polluted air, could become transformed and returned to the city, revived. It was such fantasy, right? But I actually believed that creativity and restitution sit right next to each other, that scientific pursuit of knowledge can teach us how to use a material without destroying its integrity and potentiality for re-use. But the creative jumps come from artists. Sort of leaps across things, crashing categories.

That was the Manifesto. I sent it to Jack Burnham, whose writings I admired. He published an article about the end of the avant-garde in Artforum in 1971, and excerpted most of the Manifesto in there, using my work as an example of another way to proceed. I just sent it to him and he published it. I thought, "This is a snap!" So I sent this proposal to the Whitney museum. I got a letter back on half a piece of paper from James Monte, a curator, and he said: "Try your ideas on or in an art gallery before approaching a museum." That was it. A slap on the wrist. But he misunderstood. You see, I felt that it was the museum that could be the site where the public comes to understand itself.

Well, I dropped the museum proposal; but continued on with maintenance as art.

TF: After the Manifesto, what sorts of projects did you undertake?

MLU: In 1973, I was invited to be in "C. 7,500," a show that Lucy Lippard organized of women artists. I sent several photo-series documenting maintenance tasks such as Jack [Ukeles's husband] diapering the baby, me dressing the children-by now there were three-to go out in the winter and undressing them to come in, doing the laundry washing the dishes, other workers in my neighborhood doing repetitive tasks. The exhibition traveled, and I got jealous. I thought, if my work can travel, how about me? So I started contacting these locations where the show was going, asking them if I could come do a maintenance art performance work. I ended up doing about 17 different maintenance art performance works. I dealt with maintenance of continuity in nature, personal maintenance, institutional maintenance, maintenance of ethnic traditions. In these art institutions, I'd take over the persona of The Maintenance Worker, who is supposed to be unseen, and cleans behind the scenes, after hours. Or the guard, who keeps the keys silently. I was trying to bring maintenance out in public.

In 1976 I was invited to be in a group show called "ART <--> WORLD," at the Whitney's branch at 55 Water Street. I went to check out the site and said, "Oh my God, a skyscraper!" I had been waiting for years to get my hands on a skyscraper. Why? Because a skyscraper needs tremendous main-tenance. In this

sort of high-end commercial building, the maintenance people are supposed to be completely invisible. There's an Apollonian ethos in a skyscraper. Its maintenance mission is to create, during the property owners and their clients' prime action hours, an appearance of stasis, beyond time. The goal is to look publicly as if nothing has happened and everything is always clean, always quiet. Which is actually shocking if you think about it. In other words, everything is secret. At 55 Water Street, for example, the maintenance workers were supposed to wear ties, and keep their longsleeved shirts buttoned, while cleaning, because that was the proper presentation for the real estate interests that owned the building-that one could do this maintenance work without even sweating. Of course, at night, when the office workers went home, when no "one" (important) was watching, people would wash the floors in their undershirts.

"The branch-museum concept was actually a utopian idea the Whitney: a branch in an office building, so that people could have art right in the middle of their work day I loved that idea. You didn't have to leave your life to go to the art museum, the art museum would come to your life. Except that the 300 maintenance workers in the building never, ever came into the museum, except to change a lightbulb and wash the floor. So I tried to turn the tables, make a piece with all the workers that kept this building operational twenty-four hours a day. The Whitney got me connected up with the owners, who said they would allow me to do this. I wrote a letter to 300 workers in this building. I invited them to do an art-work with me. The piece was called "I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day". I asked them to select one hour of their regular work, and think of that work, that one hour, as art. It was completely up to them if they wanted to do this or not. Opening up the power to choose and power to name was critical.

I went around with a Polaroid camera documenting their work. There's an inch of white space at the bottom of each picture, which always intrigued me, so I made labels that fit that space. One label said "Maintenance Work," and the other said "Maintenance Art. " I would approach a worker, and I would say, "Can I take your picture?" If they said yes (and they all said yes), I would show the picture to them when it came out of the camera and said, "Is this art or work?" In other words, have I crossed your path during that hour that you picked? Some people would say, "This is art." Sometimes, when people were working together, one person would be making art, and one person would be making work. (I also gave everyone a button that said "I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day," which, shockingly, most people wore for the seven weeks of this exhibition.

I remember one guy who was probably the greatest maintenance worker of all. He was a star, every single move looked effortless. His name was Bruno. This building is huge. The hallways are literally a block long. One day the elevator door opened up, and there's Bruno. He had stuffed the elevator with huge garbage bags; then he saw me. I was a block away. He yelled, "This is not art! This will never be art! This is not art!" And the doors shut. It was so great! I caught up with another worker, Vanilla, at 4:00 a.m. in the sixth week of the performance work. "I've been waiting for you every night for six weeks," she told me. Then she took me on rounds. She was making Art. There was a tremendous testing of me by workers, which was a fine learning experience. First, they needed to check out if I worked secretly for the owners of the building. Second, did I work for the unions? Third, did I work undercover for the immigration service, because a lot of people had a shaky status. What got me accepted was that I kept showing up every day, just like they did. I entered their work-patterns. I actually worked two shifts a day. I just kept coming back.

The building at 55 Water Street was the headquarters of Chemical Bank. Much of the cash in New York City is stashed there, five levels below ground. There were levels and levels of security. The Whitney tried to get me admitted into these places, and everybody said nothing doing, but the maintenance people took me right down there with them. Maintenance people have access. Every day I mounted the photographs I had taken in the museum. When I started the show, "my space" was empty. Over the seven weeks, there was a gradual accumulation of photographs that recorded the choices of the people: this is art, this is not art.

TF: How many pictures did you take?

MLU: By the end, over 700, It ended up looking like a grid, like the building itself, actually. But it was a grid of voices of the people who didn't have a way for their choices to have a cultural venue. That was the function of my piece in the museum-700 choices whether or not to call their activity art-part of the culture. Of course, there were many, many stories that people began to tell me about how they didn't like being invisible.

When I wrote this Manifesto, I had come to understand that, as a woman, as a mother, I was connected to most people in the world-the whole entire world of maintenance workers. Women were never invited to become a maintenance class, we were just told: "You are like this. We know what you think. We know what you are. You take care of us. " Women have been defined like that within

the domestic sphere, while service workers, of either gender, do this stuff outside, to make a living. That's most of the people in the country, and most of the people in the world. If women could get together with service workers, as a political coalition, they could become a majority with great potential power. Society could get reorganized. Taking care of the planet could grow out of ancient work-wisdom, and would be attached to great power. Now the feminist movement failed to a large degree because it never understood the inherent power of what women were walking away from, the power to connect with other people who did a similar kind of work. The feminist movement failed to take into consideration, for example, the millions of women of color who were already working. They had always worked, because they had no choice. They always had to balance several lives; they didn't want to starve to death; or in a more luxurious longer view they wanted to lift themselves and their loved ones up from day to day subsistence. Those women never felt connected to the angst of identity that asks work outside to provide the answer to: Who am I? What do I want to become? It was a privileged, thus limited discourse in the feminist movement. However, it is a great discourse in human history, that came out of the civil rights discourse of, Who has rights? Who are we? What is this country about? Who is free? The questions raised by early feminism are a continuation of a great movement in human freedom. Again, like the avantgarde, it was unconnected, not understanding that unless everybody is asking those questions to each other, we don't yet have a complete conversation.

It was a partial image, not a very whole image. A lot of things, I think, have actually gotten better, largely because more people, including women, have entered into public life. I've been around men who also accepted a dirty deal for many, many years. Where they accepted, as a given, that they might get injured at work, that they had a very, very unhealthy, unsafe work environment. Now, I think that there's a lot more room for people to say, "Hey! I shouldn't have to get silicosis for United States Steel." You don't automatically trade away your health to make a living. I really believed that there could have been a revolution linking up feminism with service workers, crossing gender with economic class; that did not happen. Instead we got partial and mainly middle class measures: health clubs, preventive maintenance, flextime. There was no major reorganizing.

TF: Was it just after this project that you hooked up with Sanitation?

MLU: Yes. David Bourdon wrote a review of the project at the Downtown

Whitney. He ended with a very tongue-in-cheek statement. Remember, this was

in the fiscal crisis in the seventies, when the city was laying people off like crazy, and there was great fear that the city itself was going to go bankrupt, and die. So Bourdon said that perhaps the Sanitation Department could think of its work as performance art, and replace some of the budget, which had been cut, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. I read this comment, and I thought, "Sanitation Department!" I had dealt with 300 workers in a skyscraper, and I thought that's the most people that any artist could ever work with. I looked up the address and sent a photocopy of this review to the Sanitation commissioner. I got a call from a person on the commissioner's staff, and she said to me, "How would you like to make art with 10,000 people?" And I said, "I'll be right over." And I met the commissioner.

TF: Who was the commissioner?

MLU: Anthony Vaccarello. He had a great influence on me because he said, "Go talk to the workers. They're great people." He arranged for me to have somebody introduce me to many people and to show me various kinds of sanitation facilities: garages, "sections," (locker rooms), incinerators, marine transfer stations, landfills. Then I met Superintendent Leroy Adolph. He was the head of the training center for new sanitation workers. I spent a lot of time there. He insisted on teaching me every aspect of this department. He gave me a big view-cleaning, collection, waste disposal, all the shifts, twenty-four hours a day, He sent me out on field research; I started talking to sanitation workers, going to incinerators, landfills, bumping into people. I had already done many works with different maintenance workers, so I recognized the maintenance talk right away, but there was a whole other layer of the stigma from garbage. It was so bad. There was such a level of disconnection ratified by almost everybody that I met, I'm invisible, I don't count, I'm part of the garbage. It was sick.

Here's the picture around 1977. In a sanitation garage, there are no women, but there are entire walls of photographs from raunchy pornographic magazines well beyond Playboy. It's a very hard, ugly environment, very unforgiving, so that these men would fill up entire walls with images of women who were soft, yielding, and available.

TF: And demeaned, lower than them.

MLU: Right. These facilities, in the seventies, were in abandoned jails, condemned firehouses. I mean, these were utterly disgusting places. They had no furniture of their own. If the city wanted to give a message to the workers that they are

garbage, they couldn't have designed a more efficient environment than what sanitation workers had in those days. So, I'm standing there, a feminist, in front of all these pornographic photographs, and I'm talking away about my connections to them, how they keep the city alive. And then they would say things like this: "Do you know why everybody hates us? Because they think we're their maids," or "because they think we're their mother." There were always images of women, but it never occurred to these people that this would be an insult to me. I was supposed to automatically understand, oh, of course they hate you because they think that you, the man, are a woman, that if you were a woman it would be natural to hate you for this. It was so split, Tom, so alienated, so sick.

These workers would say, "Nobody ever sees me. I'm invisible." I mean, they're out performing their work in public every day in New York City. Why aren't they seen? I mean, the disconnection between what is in front of your face, and what's invisible, what's culturally acceptable, thus formed and articulated, and what is outside culture, thus formless and unspeakable, was almost complete. It was so severely split, that I thought to myself, "This is a perfect place for an artist to sit, inside of this place, because things are so bad that they've become very clear." The level of denial was so extreme outside in the general culture, and at the same time, inside the Sanitation Department, that I felt I couldn't find a more valid place to make an art that aims to create a new language.

Initially, I proposed a series of works that I called "Maintenance Art Works Meets the NYC Department of Sanitation." The first was a performance work called "Touch Sanitation." I felt that I had to establish a certain validity for an artist to be present and counted inside this heavy work system.

It was also a way to gain a level of credibility for myself, so that I would get approval to proceed to the other works that I wanted to do. I saw "Touch Sanitation" as a portrait of New York City as a living entity. To create this, I decided to do the opposite of what social science or the mass media does. Social science samples, abstracts, selects. The media takes a huge, vastly complex system and boils it down to a sound bite. I wanted to do the opposite. I went to every single place, every single facility throughout the New York City Department of Sanitation. I tried to face every single worker, person to person, as if there were no means of mass communication. I faced each person, shook hands with each person, and said to each person, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." I was saying that we have to start over again, that culture begins here with maintenance and survival. Culture and survival are twins; they go together. Art begins at the same time as basic survival systems. Art doesn't wait to enter

after everything else is all put together. The only way to do this was the simplest, human way, by walking out into the city, and facing each worker, and walking out into the streets, and staying behind the trucks, and listening to people, and seeing the city from garbage can to garbage can, from bag to bag, from street to street, through all the weather.

I modeled my performance work on work shifts, constancy, endurance, on all kinds of virtues that didn't have too much value in culture. I thought it would take three months. It took eleven months. I'm always amazed that nobody asks me, "Well, how did you find all the workers?" I spent a lot of time designing the mapping of this piece. I modeled the work on the same mapping processes the Sanitation Department uses to go find the garbage. I liked the idea that sanitation goes everywhere, and they never, ever stop. That's a great model for art. Art should go everywhere all the time. There's no special place, no special time. The Sanitation Department divided up the city in districts, and then subdistricts. So I did the same thing, and I went to the first district in Manhattan, then the first district in the Bronx, first district in Brooklyn, first district in Queens, first district in Staten Island, then the second in Manhattan, and so on. I circled the city. I could have done all of Manhattan, then all of the Bronx, but I felt that if I did that, then the people of Manhattan would think that I ran away and never came back. This way, I did a circle, came back again, It took something like ten circles. Little by little, the word got out; it grew.

At 6:00 a.m. roll calls, I started making fiery and fiery-er speeches. I would say, "I'm not here to watch you, I'm not here to study you, to judge you, I'm here to be with you. That's the art, and I want to say thank you." What a great way to see the whole city!

I got some grants, which I used for audiotaping hundreds of hours of interviews and videotaping during seven days, which was all I could afford throughout the eleven months of the performance work. When we took video, I always said this was going to end up in a show. Then I would ask the sanitation workers, "Where should the show be?" A lot of sanitation workers said, "Let them come to us." One of the best things a worker said was, "Look. You're not a normal artist. You're a real artist. This show has to be real with trucks and barges. So why can't they see what it's like here?" Then I asked, "Would you bring your family, if it were in a sanitation facility?" And many would say no. I'd say, "Why not?" And they'd say, "'Cause it's a dump. It's awful here." And I'd say, "But you feed them out of what you do here." And they'd look at me, and they'd say, "You're right, but I'm not bringing my family here. Why can't we be seen in a nice place. In an art place." So I realized what I was hearing was that Sanitation has no place that's

understood as being inside culture, as a place for everybody. So I chose to represent my citywide portrait journey as one exhibition, called "Touch Sanitation Show," sundered into two separate kinds of places: one in a workplace and, simultaneously, the other in an art gallery. It was divided, disconnected, because the reality is disconnected, because there is no one place where this could really be fully manifested.

It took four years to raise the money, get the zillions of permissions required, and make the works for this show.

The workplace part of the show, called "Transfer Station Transformation" was in the old marine transfer station at Fifty-ninth Street and the Hudson River. It began with a barge ballet that I choreographed, with six garbage barges and two tugs. I asked to work with the best tugboat captain in New York Harbor. I said to this guy, when I sat down with him, "What have you always wanted to do, if the Coast Guard wasn't watching you?" He responded immediately, "I always wanted to make a figure eight across the Hudson River. " But he took out his tide book, looked up the date that we had picked, and said, "It's too dangerous. I'll do a spiral. " For me, the spiral was perfect.

We did a ballet called "Marrying the Barges," which is a sanitation term for linking up four barges. The transfer station itself was a 35,000-square-foot facility.

I did a sound work with Stephen Erickson, called Trax for Trucks & Barges, selected from the hundred hours of very frank, unscripted interviews that I had with sanitation workers. They used to say to me, "If only the trucks could talk." So I had 78 trucks lined up, a full array of vehicles-equipment for snow removal, street cleaning, flushers, garbage trucks, and humongous equipment from the landfill. Five of the trucks spoke with different voices. Many expressed deeply felt emotions, sometimes painful to hear. The trucks were empty, because I was trying to set up a condition where the visitors to the exhibition would hear human voices coming out of the trucks, but there was nobody there. And I was hoping that as a visitor approached the big truck, with the driver's door slightly ajar, speaking, the idea of, "Who is talking? Maybe that could be me," a role reversal possibility would get moved into the visitor's head.

These localized voice parts were interspersed with an all-over eighttrack audiowork composed of field recording sounds harvested by Stephen and me from the entire Sanitation system, from the garages, to the transfer stations, to the landfill, recorded with exquisitely sensitive equipment arrayed as impeccably as if in a fine audio studio, as, for example, we tromped through the deep garbage at the landfill, capturing the rhythms of Athay wagons, cranes, and bulldozers. This part of the

sound work was played through many concert-quality speakers installed throughout the entire station, deep in two barges in the slip of the Hudson River, one floor below the tipping floor, and lashed all over the steel girder ceiling. The whole place became saturated with real industrial music. The first time we turned it on, it sounded like the building was crashing down. It was fabulous.

Cut through the end wall of the transfer station, we cut this sentence, "What are we going to do with the garbage? No more landfill space RE-." A collection of giant boxcars of recyclable materials was welded to the wall, as if rising up out of the deep below. There was one big container of soda bottles, bursting through the roof, up at the top.

At the Ronald Feldman Gallery, in Soho, the site of the second half of the two-part exhibition, I was again presented with the problem of distilling Touch Sanitation Performance's citywide spatiality and year-long temporality into one place.

Again, I started with a performance work called Cleansing the Bad Names. It came from one of the thousands of stories that I had heard. The sanitation worker told me: "We were in Brooklyn. It was over 90 degrees, humid; we were very tired. We loaded a lady's garbage into the truck, and sat down on her porch steps for a minute. She opened up the door, and she said to us: 'Get away from here, you smelly garbagemen. I don't want you stinking up my porch.'"

This story, to me, crystallizes denial; it was garbage from her, not them. Then he said to me, "That stuck in my throat for seventeen years. Today you wiped that out." Bang: the best thing that ever happened to me as an artist to date. And then he said, "Will you remember this?" His last question blew my mind. It was as if he were saying that, while, for him, I healed his ancient, wound, but maybe, for me, I would forget about it by the next day. Was that the deal with me? He wanted to know. He sent me down a path, that guy. He understood the power of art. I realized he was saying to me, Listen, artist. This that I am giving you, this piece of my gut and my soul, isn't personal for you, even though I trust you enough to enter into this healing with you. This isn't your personal property; it's your job. He was really giving me a job description: My-job is to take this deep-inside 1:1 exchange and make it public.

So for the performance work at Feldman Fine Arts, I rebuilt the lady's porch on the gallery's front steps on Mercer Street. One of the functions of art is to play time over again and remake history better this time. I sent out a telex, from headquarters, all over the Sanitation Department, asking workers to tell me if anyone ever called them a bad name. I got back hundreds of names. We copied the bad names all over 75 feet of plate glass windows along the Mercer Street facade of

the gallery and its neighbors. We built a two-story scaffold in front of the windows, because they were very high. For the guy who asked if I would remember, I rebuilt the porch, and 190 cleansing-participants washed away all the bad names. These 190 individuals represented different cuts through society because I felt that it's the job of the whole society to wash away the bad names, not me, I was playing out my half, enlarging this exchange of my unspoken deal with him: just as Sanitation cleans the city for all of us, it's our job to take away the stigma from our "stinking" garbage from them.

Inside the gallery there were two installations. One was called Maintenance City. I aimed to set up a valence between an all-over installation in this large whole space and the ubiquity of one Sanitation year: Sanitation is all over the city, works everywhere, all the time. Every inch of the walls of the large front gallery was filled with a continuous print installation, a collage of thousands of clocks showing every hour of work, all the work shifts, one folding into the other, season flowing into season: a whole year's work in one room. Sanitation workers picked the colors for each season. Just overhead, a 1,500-foot transparent map painted with all of NYC's fifty-nine districts was suspended by a support web of fine wires. I wanted the weightiness of supporting the city to be a palpable presence. Four 12-foot-high video towers, representing four seasons pierced through the map, played a multi-monitor videowork of the whole system, In the center, an old telex spewed out telex messages from me to sanitation workers endlessly.

The second installation, called Sanman's Place, was a recreation of two Sanitation "sections, " an old one and a new one. Sections were places where sanitation workers had lockers, a place to eat, wash up, go to the bathroom, a place to change from being a person to being a sanitation worker and back again. During snow emergencies they were required to sleep there. Real old sections that I encountered all over NYC, showed, I believe, how the city and the public felt about Sanitation workers. During my early research, it was one of the ugliest things I encountered: many sections all over New York City were in condemned real estate, abandoned firehouses, jails, only half a roof, bathrooms-one toilet for forty workers. Most toilets had no doors on them. Many had no heat. Sanitation never, in the history of NYC, had their own furniture, only that which someone-cops, kindergartens-threw out and what they scavenged for themselves on the street. They began to get their own new furniture during the time I was creating Touch Sanitation Performance, Many told me this policy shift had a lot to do with the attention I was getting for the workers from my artwork.

I wanted this installation to ask the question, "What is the place of sanitation workers?" I sent another telex from headquarters all over the department asking: "What is the worst section? What's the worst locker room? The ugliest facility? The most

disgusting, demeaning?" We got hundreds of responses: "We do. Us. Come see us. We have the ugliest, the worst, the most demeaning in the whole city. " I went around with the official, who had been appointed to get the first new furniture for the sections in the history of New York City. We collected chairs, a desk, a table, that people had gotten from the streets, like a thrown-out, broken kindergarten chair that a 200-pound man ate his lunch on. "Take this," he yelled, "show this, what people want me to sit on. What are they telling me? Wait a minute, I'll sign my name on it. " What does that tell you? When we took this furniture it was on the condition that it would never be returned; they would get new for old. We got the best of the worst.

Out of these things, I made the installation with many craftspeople from the department. Every single item came from a real section somewhere. Even the siding of the walls, one miserable toilet, stained sink, and broken, cruddy shower. We marked each board as if we were doing a historical reconstruction and these were the most precious materials. Besides furniture and bathroom, I crammed the section with a decor of "Mongo," items workers selected from the waste flow, that they refused to put in the truck-art, religious figures, dolls. I got great stuff, parts of collections from several famous treasure rooms in sections in Brooklyn and the Bronx that most workers knew about. You could see the creativity arising from the discerning selections plucked out of the city's dross in flux by these masters of flowing material. Their fascinating taste made a certain luster rise from these objects and lit up this bedraggled space.

Juxtaposed with the old section was a spanking new section, the first new furnishings. Well, the new furniture was ugly as sin, brown, fake-wood tables, and still reflected old rigid values: backless benches. "How about a back to lean on for a tired sanitation worker on lunch?" I asked an officer. "I lean, " he replied, "the worker gets a bench. " So even though there was still a long way to go, they were first-time use just for Sanitation workers. It meant real change was possible, and that overturned the old received wisdom that weighed down the whole department. My art had a lot to do with it.

My biggest coup was getting enough fixtures for a really humane, sufficiently large, new, clean bathroom for the new section. To me it was the culmination of clinching a new place for Sanitation. That meant several toilets with doors that locked, individual sinks, not horse sinks, and several private showers, so you didn't have to take a shower with everybody. Good lighting. I sweated blood to get them. The bureaucracy was dragging its heels on this one, even though they had turned themselves inside out for me on every other thing I had requested. I hung in there refusing an offer of one sink, one toilet, one shower, even though new, because it was the same old message: forty workers, one-half hour for lunch, One bathroom, one toilet. Nothing doing. I said I would shut down the show. (This was a few days

before the opening.) The bottleneck got released only from a direct order by Commissioner Norman Steisel to "Just do it!" They appeared and they signaled a revolution! How ironic: bathroom/icon/Sanitation!

High on a locker, between the old section and the new, a one-hour videowork circled on a rotating disc, showing hundreds of workers talking, as I made my journeys around the city in "Touch Sanitation" about the deal of their "place" with the citizens, seen now in the context of the old section and now in the context of the new section. I was trying to raise the question about where these people with our garbage belong-trapped in the old place, which itself is made of garbage, or in a place that we can create anew.

Postscript (written by Ukeles in 1999)

I look back at this "show" that took place fifteen years ago and happened seven years after I landed in Sanitation. I am amazed at the level of cooperation, participation, and interaction I got from every single layer, office, bureau, division of an entire city agency-who were not known before as contemporary art specialists. For example, at the transfer station, for a five week show, to counter municipal nervousness about allowing the public into an old, dangerous workplace, they erected a waist-high steel fence along the 350-foot tipping floor. Three kinds of electricians-automotive, in-house, exterior-wired the station for sound. Everyone pitched in: people from different, sometimes competitive parts of the department itself, to completely unrelated people. A private commercial gallery turned itself inside out, literally, to become a public art installation with sanitation trades working next to sanitation workers working next to gallery preparators. We just did it.

I dreamed that I could make public art grow from inside a public infrastructure system outward to the public and that the growing would affect both the inside as well as the outside. When I first got here, people said that the way things were-the terrible way-was the way things would always be. "That's just the way it will always be." Hundreds of people said that to me in great sorrow. It's simply not true. I learned in Sanitation that vision and will can change just about anything. Didn't Art always know that?