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## An Artist Redefines Power. With Sanitation Equipment.

By HOLLAND COTTER SEPT. 15, 2016



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 YOU-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).