

MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES Maintenance Art Manifesto (1969)

I. Ideas:

A. The Death Instinct and the Life Instinct:

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

The Life Instinct: unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species, survival systems and operations, equilibrium.

* Mierle Laderman Ukeles, excerpt from "Maintenance Art Manifesto" (1969); published in Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 220–21. © 1969 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

"I MAKE MAINTENANCE ART ONE HOUR EVERY DAY"
55 Water Street, N.Y.C. / Downtown Whitney

(excerpts from a letter distributed to 300 maintenance workers)

Dear Friend Worker:

I want to invite you to join with me in creating a living Maintenance Art work. This art work will take place all throughout the 55 Water Street Building from September 16 to October 20, 1976. Your supervisor has already O.K.'ed it. It is part of an exhibition during this time at the Whitney Museum on the 2nd floor of the building called "ART $\Rightarrow$ WORLD".

I am a maintenance artist. My work is called Maintenance Art Works. I use my "artistic freedom" to call "maintenance" -- the work that you do, and the work that I do -- "art." Part of the time I do private maintenance at home taking care of my family; and part of the time I do public maintenance in museums and galleries to show people my ideas. Like this Maintenance Art work I'm writing you about now.

I want people to know about and to see the kinds of jobs you do. Because this whole huge building NEEDS your work. Your work keeps this building going. Without your work, the whole building would not work. Then all the people who do office work and bank work and business work etc. couldn't continue their jobs here. In a way, it is your daily support work that keeps this whole building up just as much as the steel and marble and glass.

Your part is very easy. It will not take one minute of extra time or effort. You will not have to do anything different from the way you always do. Really, it will take place inside your head -- in your imagination.

This is how it goes: It's like a game you play with me. I ask you to take my idea of art for yourself! Pick one hour each day, any working hour, during all the days from Sept. 16 to Oct. 20 (5 weeks) and think during that one hour that your same regular work is Art. You do not have to tell anyone about it while you do it, or you can if you want to -- that is your business. You continue to do your work as usual -- just imagine in your head that your regular work from, say for example, 9 to 10 is Art.

I am asking you to do that. Also, at the end of every day, when you punch your timecard OUT, I will leave a form paper for you to sign -- very simple -- you write your name and the hour when you chose to do maintenance art that day, what kind of job (for example, floor washing, window cleaning, elevator repair, dusting, security, etc.) and any comments you might want to share. I will pick these forms up every day and put them in the museum on the 2nd floor so visitors can look at them.

Two more things. 1) I have a button to give you to please wear everyday on your uniform, so people in the building and visitors to the museum will know you're doing this Maintenance Art work with me. 2) I will be in the building every day during these 5 weeks, going around and taking same photographs of all the different maintenance and security work. I will show these photographs in the museum so visitors can get an idea -- for their own imaginations -- of how much human labor is going on around them every day and night to keep this building going in the world: your work. I won't bother you; I won't disturb your work -- but you'll get used to seeing me around.

Please help! Everybody is cooperating:

1. choose any one hour for imagining your regular work as Art DAILY
2. wear your button DAILY
3. sign your forms DAILY
4. I'll take my pictures DAILY

Together, we'll make a true picture of 55 Water Street, New York City.

Thank you.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Mierle Laderman Ukeles



MAINTENANCE ART SAYING:

If you don't know who's keeping you up
You don't know what's flying.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, from a letter distributed to 300 maintenance workers, 1976. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of the artist.

- B. Two basic systems: Development and Maintenance. The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?
- Development: pure individual creation; the new change; progress, advance excitement, flight or fleeing.

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

show your work—show it again

keep the contemporary art museum groovy

keep the home fires burning

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

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

- C. Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.) The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs—minimum wages, housewives—no pay.

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

- D. Art:

Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art. "We have no Art, we do everything well." (Balinese saying)

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

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

- E. Exhibitions of Maintenance Art: zero in on pure maintenance, offer it as contemporary art, and yield CLARITY.

Sanitation Manifesto! (1984)

Sanitation is the working out of the human design to accept, confront, manage, control, even use DECAY in urban life.

Sanitation, face it, is the perfect model of the inherent restrictiveness imposed by living inside our corporeal bodies, via material "necessity," in urban civilization (and its discontents), in finite planetary "reality."

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

* Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Sanitation Manifesto!" (1984); published in *The Act* 2, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1990): 84–85. © 1984 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

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.

Now, if that is true, how does that inextricable bond impinge on my commitment to Art in democracy as the primary system articulating the forms of (individual) freedom? What happens to the inherently "free" artist in a most mundane inherently restrictive public work system? Obversely, what happens to the notion of freedom and limitless value of a "public service" sanitation worker in this "free" society? How do these extremes relate? The contextual edges, boundaries and limits of each conflicting field-structure—free-art and social-necessity—shape, frame and ultimately define each other, in tension.

Sanitation is the principal symbol of Time's passage and the mutable value of materiality in organized urban life.

Sanitation, as an environmental energy system, is trapped in a miasma of essentially pre-democratic perceptions. The public generally doesn't "see" beyond the tip of its nose—or see where we put our waste, or see what we do or should do with it, or see what choices we have about managing our waste. Waste is our immediate unwanted past. Do we "conserve" its energy through transformation, or do we drown in it? We are facing an environmental crisis, because we are running out of space to put it "away." To begin to accept as "ours" the difficult social task of dealing with "our" waste at the highest, not the most mediocre, level of intelligence and creativity in reality, in all its effulgent scale here, people need to understand how they connect one to the other across our society, in all its scale. We need holistic interconnected perceptual models of how we connect and how we add up.

As a first step, we certainly need to peel away and separate ourselves from the ancient, transcultural alienating notion and aura of the caste-stigma of waste-worker, of "garbage-man," which has always translated, trickily, into "their" waste, not "ours"; they're "dirty," we're "clean."

Sanitation is the City's first cultural system, not its displaced-housekeeper caste-system. To do Sanitation is to husband the City as home. I think it can serve as a model for democratic imagination, as follows:

Sanitation serves *everyone*; it starts from that premise: it accepts that *everyone must be served in a democracy*, and the City must be maintained in working works *everywhere*, no matter what socioeconomic "culture." Sanitation works *all the time*, through all seasons, no matter what the weather conditions. *Sanitation is totally inter-dependent with its public: locked in—the server and the served.* Sanitation, in democracy, implies the possibility of a public-social-contract operating laterally, not upstairs-downstairs, but equally between the servers and the served. This is accomplished at totality of scale; yet it deals on an incremental basis (house to house, bag to bag), and it cuts across all differences. Out of these most humble circumstances, we can begin to erect a democratic symbol of commonality.

I believe we *do* share a common symbol system: we are all free citizens of this City. We all (should) have equal rights. We all share responsibility for keeping the City alive. We are inherently INTER-DEPENDENT: that is the essence of living in a City. That is simply a basic commonality; it does not deny each citizen's individuality, nor diminish the inestimable value of each living being. Rather it sets each of us in a CONTEXT of inter-dependence. We're in this together. Just as by law, we can't ship our garbage OUT, but *have* to deal with it in our common "home" manage it so it doesn't destroy us, *we too, all together, have to work our individual freedom out without destroying each other.*

Now, here is the intersection between Sanitation as the symbol of inter-dependent reality with free art:

WORKING FREEDOM—THAT'S AN ARTIST'S JOB.