



BLAZING EPIPHANY: MAINTENANCE ART MANIFESTO 1969!

An Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Toby Perl Freilich

Following are excerpts from an interview by filmmaker Toby Perl Freilich with artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles on the fiftieth anniversary of her seminal *Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969!* Ukeles is the official unsalaried artist in residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation since 1977. Her artwork, crashing boundaries between labor and performance, system and spirit, unveils connections between feminism, workers, the city, and environment. Key works include *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, *I Make Maintenance Art One*

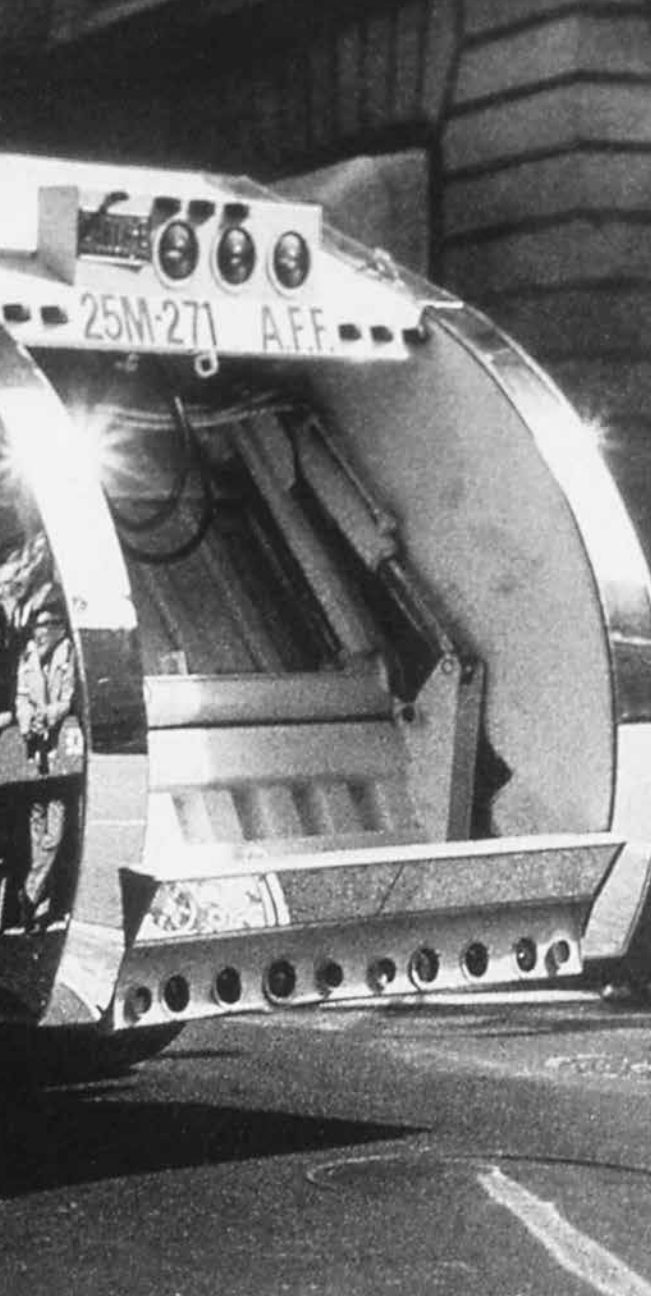


Figure 1 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *The Social Mirror*, 1983. Mirror-covered New York City Department of Sanitation truck. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, Hartford, Connecticut; and Smith College Museum, Northampton, Massachusetts. Represented by the Ronald Feldman Gallery, NYC, she exhibits and lectures internationally. Ukeles's work is the subject of an upcoming film.

Toby Perl Freilich: It's been fifty years since you wrote *Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969! Proposal for an exhibition "CARE,"* launching your career as a self-described maintenance artist. What life events and emotions led you to write it?

Mierle Laderman Ukeles: I had struggled for many years to be an artist. It was a long journey to know that that's what I am. Art is freedom.

My heroes in the avant-garde were my "uncle" Jackson Pollack, who gave the gift of free bodily movement in the work, my "grandfather" Marcel Duchamp, who gave me the gift of renaming or moving a simple object from one context to another and reinventing the whole meaning of it, and my "uncle" Mark Rothko, who gave me a gift in his art of the ability to move from one dimension to another.

Now, you might notice that my heroes happened to all have been men. And how they were supported in the world was something you didn't talk about; you focused on their genius. I wanted to be an artist to be free. And I felt that they fed me these gifts of great freedom out of their creation.

And then, in 1968, Jack and I, out of blessing and great desire, had a baby, and

Hour Every Day, Touch Sanitation, The Social Mirror, Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers, Snow Workers' Ballet, Unburning Freedom Hall, Cleansing the Bad Names, and LANDING at Freshkills Park (in process). In 2016–17, Ukeles had a museum-wide, career-survey exhibition at the Queens Museum. Her works are in the permanent collections of the Whitney, Guggenheim, and Jewish museums in New York; the Art Institute of Chicago (promised gift); Migros Museum, Zurich;

I ended up falling out of the picture of the avant-garde. I didn't know about babies. My heroes didn't change diapers. I just had a great crisis as did many women in the end of the sixties, beginning of the seventies. So, I literally divided my life in half. Fifty percent of the time I would be the mother with the baby. Fifty percent, I hired somebody to take care of the baby and I would go to another place and be that artist.

But when I was with the baby being the mother, I was thinking to myself, I'm going to lose it. I'm not going to be able to be an artist. I have to be an artist. When I was the artist, what am I thinking? Is the caregiver really paying attention to the baby? Is she crying? So, my wires were getting all crossed. I felt like I was two separate people in one body. I didn't like that feeling at all.

Before I had a baby, I did as little maintenance as a person could do. If anything got in the way of me making my art, I just wouldn't stick around. But now I wanted to take care of the baby. And actually, when you pay attention to a baby, you go through thousands of discoveries. Like, the baby doesn't arrive with a little manual on how do I stand up? How do I speak? To be around a creature like that, inventing day after day is just an amazing thing.

I wanted to take care of this baby, not just so she's not sick, or mildly taken care of, but robust. And if you take really good care of them, you enable that to happen.

And one evening, it came out of huge fury. And then it came as a blazing epiphany: I talk about freedom all the time. If the artist is the boss, then I'm the boss of my freedom. I choose maintenance and I name maintenance "art." I name necessity "art." It is art that is going to have to change. Art follows me. I realized that's my freedom. I don't have to shape

up to Jackson, to Marcel, to Mark. I don't have to copy others; I can't have that life; I choose this life. Why? Because I'm the artist and I say so.

TPF: What were the larger socioeconomic and cultural forces in New York City in the sixties that helped shape your manifesto?

MLU: Jack Ukeles, my husband, was trained as a city planner and was working in the New York City Department of City Planning with a small group of colleagues, very progressive people, on the draft comprehensive plan. I sat in on some meetings. They knew New York from a very granular level and yet they had big ideas about the city.

Their biggest idea was that the city would be an "opportunity generator" to pull people up out of poverty into the middle class, and a generator of income opportunities and cultural opportunities for all its residents. Now, this was a pretty radical notion. And this small group of highly trained city planners was trying to structure a plan where city government has two missions. One, maintenance, and one, development. And that is where I got that idea, because Jack was living and breathing this.

Maintenance is what a city traditionally does: clean the streets, pick up the garbage, put out the fire, fix the potholes. But they were saying the city also has a mission of development, to bring everyone up at least into the middle class. It was a revolutionary idea. They worked on this for a very long time, and it did not come to pass.

So, this notion of development and maintenance really did come from this passion for the city, that the city could be such a creative force. This was the end of the sixties, such a highly idealistic, progressive



Figure 2 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Show Part II: Maintenance City/Sanman's Place* (Maintenance City installation detail), 1984. Multimedia installation at Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. Photograph by D. James Dee. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

time. We felt that we could fix everything. This was before the fiscal crisis, when the city started falling apart.

My whole education was to prepare me to be one of the elites of the country, and to focus on development, on creation, on having power. But there was a whole world of maintenance that nobody spoke about. There were no words for it; it was not part of the culture, there was very little honor for people that were doing it.

People who knew me as a student or artist and who would speak to me in a respectful way—what do you think about this? what's your opinion about that?—and then I would meet people, pushing my baby carriage, and they would say something like, do you do anything? And I was working harder than I ever worked in my

whole life, trying to keep this all together! And that made me so pissed off.

So I became fascinated by this development and maintenance. I attached it to the notion of death and life, like it was really for me a life-and-death situation. That was the structure of this manifesto. Jack was focusing on development. I was entrenched in this stew of maintenance trying to make sense out of it.

So, I wrote this manifesto, which is a statement of determination that I'm going to survive. And I was very calm writing it, even though I was fully aware that this is a highly revolutionary document.

The first section is ideas. I'm saying a kind of tricky thing. Separation, individuality, avant-garde, to follow one's own path to death, do your own thing, dynamic

change—I'm describing Western culture actually—highly autonomous individualistic change, I'm attaching to a death instinct. The life instinct—unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and maintenance of the species, survival systems and operations, equilibrium—this is not Western culture.

From the *Manifesto*:

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.

Now, that's Western culture. That's what I was educated for, certainly as an artist. Everything has to be new, change, that's the avant-garde, that's the modernist idea. You know, they can become so contaminated, all of these words.

TPF: What do you mean by contaminated?

MLU: Well, if everything has to be constantly new, that sounds like Madison Avenue, like throw out the old, don't repeat yourself, abandon anything that's not exciting. It has a kind of beauty in it, of progress, but it also has this evil underbelly of abandonment. And if someone isn't keeping up, the hell with them, leave them behind. Most of the people in the world can't keep being so exciting, because they're trying to stay alive, make a living. They don't keep changing, they just try to stay put and survive.

So that's *development*, and I love that, I mean, that's what I wanted, I wanted to be this avant-garde artist moving into the unknown.

From the *Manifesto*:

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.

So, there, you have this sort of settling weight, like I'm saying, you think it's exciting? Then you have to sustain it. Sustain is not the same as initiation, creation. You know, the creation can happen in a second, like the egg and the sperm. Then it takes a whole world to make a living creature. You have an original brand-new idea that nobody ever had before—and we lust for that in Western culture, to invent, to move into some place that no one has been before. We have that power of creation in us. But once you create, then what happens Monday morning? Do you stick around? Do you move on and leave the shards for somebody else to pick up, to clean up, to take care of? Why? Because I'm a creator, I move forward.

So, this paragraph about preserve the new, sustain the change, it's actually a contradiction. Protect progress, defend, it actually sounds boring. It's boring, changing a diaper again and again, even though you have this vision of the inventive character of the child. Making lunch, cleaning up, and saying you have to go to bed can get very boring. Why? Because it's chafing against this capability that we have to create something unique, something new. We have both of those in us, and they're in conflict.

TPF: You're criticizing the avant-garde, but your thoughts are daring, pushing the envelope of the avant-garde. Can you address the paradox here?

MLU: Being able to write that paragraph about “keep the dust off the pure individual creation,” I had such a lust for being the one that made the individual creation, and I began to understand that that’s why I wanted to be an artist. But to maintain the creation, then you have to dust it, you have to take care of it. Those processes of taking care were not part of my education or of Western culture because the education was for people who have power, who intend to keep it. They have others to do the dusting, the preserving, the defending. They don’t do that stuff.

Now, women as a class for thousands of years were told, you’re the one that takes care of the home and the children. I don’t think people ask women, would you like to take care of the home and the children? They said, this is who you are and this is what you do, period. And that statement is still made to many millions of women. And the people who have power and decide things, they’re supported by most of the other people in the world. So that the image was an image of how the world is organized. And maybe it doesn’t have to be organized like that anymore. Maybe we have to learn how to think about maintenance with the same level of creativity that we think about other things, to start all over again and rethink everything. Because a person like me needs that to happen.

From the *Manifesto*:

Maintenance is a drag. It takes all the fucking time. Literally. The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs, minimum wages. Housewives equal no pay.

TPF: It sounds here as if you’re putting maintenance work down. Are you



Figure 3 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, 1973. Part of *Maintenance Art* performance series, 1973–74. Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

glorifying maintenance or kvetching about having to do it?

MLU: Look, I have in me a capability of creating something that never existed before. That’s why I’m an artist. I need to be free, limitless in the universe. But then I have to take care of a lot of things to keep going. And I’m asking the question, can I use that piercing originality of thinking to turn it around and rethink this whole taking care thing? Because if we don’t do that, we’re not going to stay here. This is our world. If you take care of it, it can be magnificent for everybody.

In a funny way we’re creatures that aren’t really made to keep doing repetitive work. We’re made to be discoverers. Inventors. However, there’s also something not so terrible in doing maintenance work. Maintenance isn’t just a drag, it’s complex. What’s great about walking

around with sanitation workers is that they have agency. They can see a street full of garbage, that's all messed up, and they can fix it.

TPF: The term *manifesto* brings to mind a radical transition point. Or a call to arms, the *Communist Manifesto*—workers of the world unite! What were you thinking of when you called it a manifesto?

MLU: I wrote a manifesto because Dadaists and Futurists wrote a manifesto, a lot of artists from a little earlier time wrote manifestos and they fully intended to change the world. And I think that that's something that artists do.

The *Communist Manifesto* actually became corrupt and destroyed some of the greatest art movements of the early twentieth century. You know there were performance works in factories, moving into life, created for the masses in early Russian revolutionary art. I felt very close to these social revolutions that are very similar to the notion of maintenance. But the Soviet government shut it down.

However, I did feel very close to the notion of thinking about all the people, not just a few artists. That everybody has this creative power, and everybody needs to survive. It wasn't just personal. It was about society and about the earth itself in peril. Very, very strong at the end of the sixties. And I felt they flowed into each other. You can't fix one without fixing the other.

TPF: Take me through your three maintenance categories.

MLU: The manifesto and especially the proposal for an exhibition that I called *CARE* was about personal maintenance; societal maintenance, especially about

taking care of the city; and about taking care of the earth. It was always about all of that. It wasn't just a set of ideas and about being pissed off; I wanted to do something about it. And the doing is the art. The second part of the manifesto is realizing what this new world could look like.

And, actually, I had an image that it would take over the whole Whitney Museum when it was uptown on Madison Avenue, and the first floor would be personal maintenance. I would live in the museum with my husband and my baby at the time. We would take care of everything. I would dust, change the light bulbs, clean. I would do the maintenance work. I would even feed people and then wash the dishes. Like, you would come in—there would be no art, there would be work. The working—that would be the work.

The second floor was prior interviews of fifty people, all different kinds of people, every kind of job you can imagine. And I would ask them a series of questions. What do you have to do to keep going, to survive? And then I would say, what happens to your dreams when you have to spend most of your time doing maintenance? What happens to your freedom? And these interviews would be mounted on all the walls of the second floor. And then there would be tables and interviewers, and I would ask people that came to the exhibition that same set of questions, so that the ubiquity of maintenance would become manifest across all kinds of people.

And then every day a truck-load of garbage would arrive at the museum, be unloaded, taken up to the third and fourth floors. A container of polluted Hudson River, a container of polluted air, and a container of degraded land. And on these two floors the museum became a place of transformation where degraded materials would be made robust and returned to the city.



Figure 4 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance*, July 24, 1979–June 26, 1980. Citywide performance with eighty-five hundred sanitation workers across all fifty-nine New York City Sanitation districts. Landfill (location and date unknown). Photograph by Deborah Freedman. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Now that really is a little complicated because, first of all, how the hell do you do that? The manifesto doesn't really lay that out. But the image of the museum, the secular center of culture, as the fulcrum where the transformation of material of our lives and of the planet becomes robust—they come in degraded, they go out healthy—that miraculous transformation happens in the culture, not somewhere else.

TPF: How did you move out of the home from personal maintenance to institutional and then city maintenance and then to earth maintenance?

MLU: Well, the early works were about thinking that my maintenance work in the home was art. So, I tried various strategies, like every single maintenance task that I did I was writing down. So then that record, which is an artwork, is several pages long. But I hit a certain point where I said, not only do I have to do this boring work, but then I'm going to write about it and soak in it. And I abandoned it.

I was invited by Lucy Lippard to be in a show called *c. 7,500*, and the show traveled around the whole country and its second stop was at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum. Now after I wrote

this manifesto, I had a new brain and new eyes. What do I see when I go to the museum to propose a performance work? I see the people cleaning, I see the guards standing there the whole day protecting everything, I see the litter around the museum. In other words, I saw the underside that nobody focused on. I had scaled up, from washing the diaper in the toilet or cleaning a chicken to make soup. I come to such a great big museum and I see the same work has to be done: take care, clean, keep going. So, my work immediately scaled up to a building. You want to have a museum, you have to do a whole bunch of things and they never go away.

TPF: Your work is strongly feminist and yet you eventually moved into working at the Department of Sanitation where all the workers were men. Did you consider yourself a feminist back then?

MLU: I actually was. There were levels of coming to an understanding in 1969. I was reading about second-wave feminism. I wanted to be more in touch with other feminists, but I didn't have the time, I was trying to hold everything together. Later, I was involved with a group of feminist artists and that was a lifesaver.

However, there were many parts of



Figure 5 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers IV*, 1988–2016. Installation view of Mierle Laderman Ukeles: *Maintenance Art*, 2016–17. Photograph by Hai Zhang. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy the artist, the Queens Museum, and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

second-wave feminism that I felt were going down the wrong path because the model of success was a male model of success in Western culture: that women needed power, they should be executives. But they were forgetting everybody else. I mean, it actually walked away from many women who didn't decide that they were going to leave the home and have a job to realize themselves. They had a job because they were feeding their family. And pink- and blue-collar workers were not dealt with by a lot of the thinkers of second-wave feminism. Many African American women, in particular, felt absolutely abandoned by the feminist movement, and I felt like I don't want to "dress for success" and wear one of those suits. It was always bigger than all that.

I've spent a lot of time trying to build coalitions between different groups like women and sanitation workers, seeing women as a kind of ancient maintenance class, often associated with the interior, the home, children, who aren't seen for what they're doing because they've been

doing it for thousands of years. And I see sanitation workers as—the city is the home they're taking care of. And I felt they were doing something that we're so dependent on and who are doing something for everybody else; it's not their garbage. They're not seen for what they're doing either. The thing that I shared with sanitation workers was we were all maintenance workers who were royally pissed off that people didn't see us, couldn't hear us as humans who are pretty complicated.

There were sanitation workers who said to me, "You know why people hate us? 'Cause they think we're their mother. They think we're their maid." Now, I'm thinking to myself, "Hey! Who are you talking to? Like, are you really saying if you were the mother it would be okay to hate you?" You know, there's so much built into that sentence; it was hysterical!

TPF: What was the larger art scene like when you wrote the manifesto in 1969? What spoke to you?

MLU: Around the end of the sixties, pop art, minimalist art were rising. Abstract expressionism, which actually had turned me on initially, had become rather bombastic. There was a kind of exhaustion—people were going through the motions of huge expressionism. Pop art was quite ironic, humorous—very different attitude—abstract expressionism had no humor. Minimalism was very reordering, and I was very drawn to minimalism because I was trying to reorder the whole world! But these two movements were so full of energy—and I mentioned in the manifesto that they themselves were infected by all sorts of strains of maintenance but not acknowledging that whatsoever. They were still operating on this notion of the avant-garde: new, change, not paying any attention to, What do you have to do to keep going? Not acknowledging the people.

For example, Richard Serra was throwing molten metal steel against the edges of a room. Like, the protean genius artist, powerful male throwing metal. I mean they were terrific, even his great threatening leaning steel pieces, so full of power, very clear. But a lot of that work came out of a world of steel makers, of shipbuilders. All of his work came out of worlds of work. But there were no people, there was only the unique artist. That's what bugged me, because I felt that he was dealing with

them with wonderful ways of creating things but chopping off—just like men had chopped off for a kazillion years—the people who did this work. So, I was trying to schlep in all the people that are doing this stuff!

TPF: Did the manifesto work? Did it change anything?

MLU: Does the manifesto mean something in this world? A lot of people have said that it has had impact in their lives. It's in a lot of languages. It's taught all over the world.

No one has invited me to come take over their whole museum and have this exhibition. Yet!

I call the manifesto a sculpture that's a text. It's because it's weighty as a sculpture. I think that it has a certain amount of weight, these four pieces of paper.

Acknowledgments

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Note

Ukeles's projects may be viewed on the Ronald Feldman Gallery website at feldmangallery.com/index.php/artist-home/mierle-laderman-ukeles. *Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969!* is available at feldmangallery.com/index.php/exhibition/manifesto-for-maintenance-art-1969.

Toby Perl Freilich is a film producer, director, and writer. Freilich coproduced and codirected *Moynihan* (2018), a biography of Daniel Patrick Moynihan; directed, produced, and wrote *Inventing Our Life: The Kibbutz Experiment* (2010); and coproduced and wrote the documentary film *Secret Lives: Hidden Children and Their Rescuers* (2002). For *Secret Lives* she was nominated for a news and documentary Emmy in the category of Outstanding Achievement in a Craft: Writing. She also coproduced the Emmy-nominated *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans* (2001), an independent PBS documentary that was broadcast nationally. Freilich is a contributing writer to the *Jewish Review of Books*, the *Forward*, and *Tablet* magazines.