

*On The Ground*, 1995

## **The Art of Maintaining Public Life**

### **An Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles**

Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been a public artist for the last 32 years. Ukeles has received a percent for Art Commission to be the artist of New York City's Fresh Kills Landfill, the largest such site on earth. Other current permanent works are in progress in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Portland, Maine. Current and recent temporary exhibitions include *City Speculations* Queens New York, Museum; *The Edge of Town*, Joseloff Gallery, Hartford, Connecticut; *Garbage* at the New York City Public Library; and upcoming shows at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York City and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. She has received several grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, and is a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow.

**OTG:** You've had a number of years of experience as a public artist, starting with some of your performance-maintenance art pieces. Do you have a sense of how things seem to be going for public art? Do you see any distinct directions for it?

**MLU:** Since I wrote my *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* in 1969, using my freedom, as an artist to call maintenance – or necessity – part of the cultural enterprise, I would say that there's been a huge change in public art. There's now an acceptance of bigger issues in public art, which is a very wonderful thing for myself and for quite a few artists who have been working for many, many years.

I proposed *Flow City* in 1983. I was invited to sit in on general design discussions with the Department of Sanitation in New York City, because of earlier works I had done. In a very open-ended way, with the design staff, the engineers and their consultants, we were thinking about redesigning the whole infrastructure of the City – the whole waste disposal systems of the City. And because I had been working for three years on a temporary work called Touch Sanitation Show at an old marine transfer station at 59<sup>th</sup> Street and the Hudson River, I felt that this transfer station – at the most exquisite location on the Hudson River that most people didn't know – should be a permanent public place. The Department responded to my proposal, what I call *Flow City*, in a positive way. However, there were quite a few problems to resolve; for example, it was against the law. It's against the law for the public to enter an operating waste disposal facility. And there are good reasons for it; that kind of work is very dangerous. People could fall into the barges, fall into the river, get run over by trucks. Sewage treatment plants, garbage facilities – the real work areas – are full of heavy equipment. They're slippery, full of unknown conditions, things can blow up, fires can start suddenly. It's very tough stuff – it's not very sanitized.

So the proposal was to let the public take its place inside a public facility that had never been a permanent place for the public. The first big hurdle was to get the zoning changed. When I heard that I thought, "Oh boy, they're just going to take a walk on me and say, 'Sorry Ukeles, there's no zoning for this, we can't do this.'" But instead the Department of Sanitation took a very progressive attitude. The Department thought it was time to do this, time to make a safe pathway for the public to come right into this daily operation. The notion of the public being in a daily operation is really a very radical notion. It's not public art as a leisure time activity or only happening on your lunch hour or your break or your weekend. It's letting the public into the real, everyday work. It is an immense barrier. For example, consider the image of a lobby in a corporate headquarters. The "lobby" is a very interesting architectural invention because it makes it look like you're in, but its function is to keep you out. In other words, the lobby is interior to the headquarters where the powerful work happens, but you as a non-member of the corporation can't get past the lobby unless you're admitted personally. The idea behind *Flow City* parallels breaking that notion of a "lobby" to keep people out, it's letting people all the way in, onto the factory floor.

I designed the basic structure of *Flow City* and that was built in as part of the facility. It actually received two grants from Art in Public Places at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and two grants from the State Council on the Arts and I threw in part of my Guggenheim Fellowship personally. Then the funding ground to a halt and it's in a dormant state now. Commissioner John Doherty, who started out as a sanitation worker and worked his way up to be the head of the Department, he and many in the Department are committed to Flow City. We're going to try to gather a group of people next year to go for a whole new round of funding, even in these dreadful times, because it's so important. It's the only way to open the system to the people who really own the system. It's a question of ownership.

I think that's where process-oriented public artworks, or new genre public artworks, are different, especially if they're focused on infrastructure or on environmental systems. The issue of ownership is a kind of new and original connection to public art. The connection between the public system and the citizens' ownership of a public works system, that's what the public art reveals. In other words, "I own this place, this is my place, and I have every right to be here because it's about my life." Literally. Older notions of public art didn't really address the issue of public ownership. They addressed the surfaces of building or left-over traffic triangles – things that tried to look like a public square – but the articulation of public culture didn't really happen. Or it happened in relation to real estate, superficially jacking up the stakes of development. The notion of public ownership has come to the fore, of the citizens owning the place, or having responsibilities for the place, or being directly affected by that infrastructure system. Public art has moved into systems rather than just being about places. I think that the area of systems is a very rich area that has not even begun to happen yet. I think that the possibilities for public art in relation to the design of infrastructure are enormous and extremely important.

**OTG:** Your work speaks to the maintenance of public life and I take it that you think there are ways that urban form can make that maintenance of public life more meaningful – what are some of your specific ideas about that?

**MLU:** I think that right now I would say the maintenance of public life is played out in the most critical way in terms of environmental systems like rivers, waterways, garbage disposal facilities – all kinds of materials handling, going from clean ones like recycling facilities to dirtier ones like landfills. All these basic systems are the result of us having bodies, using materials, and disposing of materials, the general flow of materials through the system. The systems get clogged up and bogged down if they are not designed at the highest level of creativity, instead of the most mediocre.

When I say that there are great possibilities for public art, public design in infrastructure systems, I'm not only talking about artists, I'm talking about architects, landscape architects, many kinds of people. I don't think it's all that interesting to maintain the strict definitions or strict pots that people get stuck in. Although they do often have different gifts to contribute, I would say the great potential for change in a positive way is open to many, many creators. I've been thinking about this a lot over a number of years. The environment right now – this sounds crude but it's true – the environment is owned by engineering firms, law firms and government agencies that relate to corporations. Things that happen in the environment get turned into big contracts for great big engineering firms and law firms who are designed to do these things. These big firms have their government counterparts, sort of mirror forms in the U.S. government like the Army Corps of Engineers, The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Energy. These are the groups that mediate the environment, that re-mediate the environment, that transform the environment.

There's something lacking. Big firms and government agencies have a lot of things that they know a lot about, but there's something gravely lacking in this present reality. None of these players know how to come all the way forward to the public. They know how to do law and they know how to do engineering and they know how to make things stand up – sometimes – but they

don't know how to make places for the public. It's not in their training, which is immense; I have great respect for these people. I work with them all the time. Nothing in their training prepared them for the public.

**OTG:** Do you think that designers, landscape architects and artists are prepared for the public?

**MLU:** Artists and designers do worry about these things. They ask the right questions. How is this public? What's the meaning of this place? We need to open up the decision-making table to creators, and it's going to have to get bigger. It's not impossible, it's just hard. We're going to have to let in a lot of other people to create places. I'm talking about places like rivers, I'm talking about the sky – places that will change the nature of rivers, or the nature of air or the nature of our water. The process must include creators who can come to the table and ask, "How is the public to find it's meaning here? Does the public understand that they own this place?" Someone needs to declare that the public owns it and the public has every right to know if these places are working, if they're damaging to the water, if they're good for the health of the water, the water needs to speak. And lawyers and engineers are not trained to let the water talk back, but creators are.

I'll give you an example. An engineer came up to me after one of my talks and he said to me, "We have lied to the American public for many years about the hazards of storing nuclear waste. Now all these storage facilities are leaking and we have to redesign them and relocate them. This is urgent, and will cost billions of dollars, and nobody wants us and nobody will believe us. Do you think artists can help?" So I thought to myself, when powerful organizations come to artists for help, you know they're in really grave difficulty, because if they could have done it alone, they would have. It's a measure of great frustration. It's also kind of a joke; if the Department of Energy can't get us out of this mess, what are a bunch of artists going to do? However, if the kind of dreadful fantasy of the question can be overcome, there is a possibility. The possibility means opening up the process so that it becomes much more public.

I think artists can form great alliances with pure science as well as engineering, because I think that scientists have a way of working that's close to artistic practice. A lot of learning comes from science. For example, soil, which I am madly in love with. An appreciation of soil, water, flow, evapotranspiration, the carbon cycle itself, comes through science. These are the majestic, simple systems of everyday life. I don't think most people, as grown-ups, have a clue about these systems. People may have been in a state of wonder about nature when they were children, and nature may have stayed in people's minds in a very child-like way. I think that we have an ignorance about each other in the art enterprise and the science enterprise. Together these enterprises could call all these basic life support systems into public examination. That's what I think the public deserves.

**OTG:** Artists are bringing freshness to projects that designers are sometimes too constrained to provide, but others worry that artists won't really last in the "establishment" that's required to create public works and public space. What are your perspectives on that debate?

**MLU:** I hear both sides of the debate. I do think there are fresh perspectives that are critical and a lot of artists and designers can do that. What I'm talking about isn't funded yet, so artist's contributions are still really "one shot." There isn't an establishment that allows for artists' ongoing contributions. Once it becomes part of the establishment and continuous, then of course there are criticisms that it becomes as bureaucratized as the engineers' contribution.

**OTG:** Do you worry about that?

**MLU:** I worry about it. Engineers worry about it too. An engineer once complained to me that environmental regulations aren't performance-oriented. They're cookbook, so they prevent engineers from doing the "art of engineering." I think when artists are able to come into infrastructure or public works projects, they offer, even beyond themselves, a kind of freshness to

the other professionals, like engineers. The engineer can feel a possibility of expansiveness because of the artist's presence, and that's a great benefit. That's happened to me several times. Where not only I want to open things up, but my presence is a kind of implicit invitation to others who feel, "Well, now's the time to be more expansive."

The country seems to be ready to collapse the NEA funding, although I think there should be not only the NEA, but the NEA should have formal connections or programmatic conduits into the Department of Energy, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the EPA, agencies that have much bigger budgets than the NEA. The NEA's function would be to assure that professional standards and peer review panels are maintained, but the money to fund projects wouldn't come from the NEA. Money from the NEA never really amounted to anything anyway, it's chicken feed and it always was chicken feed. Arts funding should be part of these big, mega-contracts that go to engineering firms. Maybe the whole contract should go to an artist and let the artist hire the engineer. I mean that very seriously. Or maybe the contracts should go to an architecture firm, a landscape architecture firm – a group whose function is to not cease working until there is a meaningful place for the public, until public culture has been articulated and defined, not just until cookbook regulations have been fulfilled. We can't continue to shove off the questions of meaning, pushing important ecological questions to the side, to the back, and then not have time to deal with them.

**OTG:** It seems that many projects require multiple goals that include, for example, seeking meaning for the public as well as other technical performance goals. You've worked on landfill projects such as Danehy Park where you collaborated with engineers and landscape architects. Do you find professional goals conflicting? Or do you see an evolution of professional practice that allows for respect of individual disciplines as well as the ability to occasionally bend out of disciplinary rigor?

**MLU:** It's still discouragingly hard to collaborate successfully. Even after things get rolling, it's still very hard. I think one vital role is played by the public art administrator. It's critical. I don't think that any of these projects can happen without a great public art administrator. They protect the artist. They do a lot of liaison work among varying interests operating in public works facilities, and there can be tremendous numbers of interests including city officials and other design firms. It also depends on individual personalities. The city of Cambridge was fortunate to have John Kissida, the Park's chief designer, attached to the Danehy Park project for over 12 years. That's rare. A lot of these projects come down to people.

Let me tell you about Danehy Park. The deputy city manager, Richard Rossi, worked in the dump when he was a teenager. He grew up in Cambridge, and this was a terrible, stinky, horrible dump. This was before environmental regulations. The place was a disaster, and he worked there several summers. There were good people who worked there, and there was a sort of humor in the dump. That had a big impact on him, the people part of it. And it was such a mess in this neighborhood, it stank, there were rats, it was really grotesque. He made a commitment when he was a kid, "I'm going to do something about this." He became deputy city manager and he stayed on this project as a personal commitment for all these years – 15 or 20 years. Then there's John Kissida who also became personally obsessed with this place. Then there's Pallas Lombardi, who's the head of the Cambridge Arts Council. She's a very gifted public arts administrator. When there was a question of something impinging on the artistic nature of my proposal, she would fight for me to maintain the aesthetic qualities. She would do it as much as me, so I didn't have to be a lone voice. She had tremendous courage to face anyone. She stayed on the project; I'm staying on the project. Her public art committee is staying on the project. These projects take a long time. They don't have to, but because they don't have funding, you have to slog through the cycles to get your funding together. It can take many, many years. All four parts of Danehy Park project are going to be completed in the next few years. They are determined to raise the money and build it. I think it will be a significant public artwork because it will be really public. The reason it will happen is because you have a group of very determined people who are not going to let go of this thing until it happens.

Let me mention another project, the Fresh Kills Landfill. The director of landfill engineering, Philip Gleason, he's one of the great engineers of our time. This is his life's work – Fresh Kills Landfill – transforming it from a god-awful, unfunded end-of-the-world place, to the largest landfill on earth at the finest level of engineering. That is his personal life's work. I have a percent-for-art commission to be the artist of the Fresh Kills Landfill, and the Commissioner of Sanitation is determined that this be a great public works project. It takes a sort of personal commitment for these things to happen.

**OTG:** Do you think that the personal commitment is generated by the desire to have these projects set good precedents? Or is it that people become committed because the projects are located in their own communities?

**MLU:** The commitment happens because it's a great thing – a great project. No one has ever built garbage up to this height ever in the history of the world. It's amazing. It's the size of three Central Parks. This is such a great opportunity. It started from such a bad place. There's a possibility for transformation, if you believe that human beings have that power – and I believe it, Phil Gleason believes it, the Commissioner believes it. Five hundred people working on this landfill, many of these people believe that human beings have this power to transform things. Maybe they only want to transform it in an engineering sense. I want to transform it all the way until it becomes a public place. It has to do with a belief in possibilities of human transformation. I think that's what it's about.

I don't want to sound ridiculous, because the fact is the funding mechanisms don't exist yet to really do this right.

**OTG:** Seeing as it takes so much personal dedication, are there enough people who can afford to do it?

**MLU:** Well, I can't. Every year it gets harder and harder. In a way it gets drearier. It's stupid, when it could be so terrific. The possibilities are very real ones, and there are many people who could make significant contributions.

There needs to be room in public art for very personal expression. It's a kind a fuel, or nourishment for the artist, why one hangs in there. Sometimes there's an artist trying to fit in with all these other actors, and the work can end up getting bland. What art has to offer is an individual voice, even if it's expressed by many people in the public sphere. There needs to be room for the individual, the vision of the artist, or architect or other designer, because if that gets lost, I don't think we have that much more to offer than a lot of other people. The encouragement of expression can take many, many forms – some of them are not all that palatable, but that's necessary. Personal expression is why a person keeps doing art, the benefits of public art are sort of bizarre. There has to be room for personal expression or it's not worth it. It's a delicate balance.

I started out in performance art and much more process-oriented work. I'm still interested in that. I've done very large ballets in Holland and France and Pittsburgh with 27 trucks and three barges and hundreds of tons of recyclables. I love doing that temporal performance work. It enables people to do their work in public as a cultural thing. Unless public culture involves many people throughout society, unless they personally feel, "There's a place for me in this public enterprise," then it isn't yet public. And I think that's one of the big jobs of our time – to make the culture reach everybody, to make people understand their role and say, "hey, I'm in this, it's not about other kinds of people. It has to do with my life, even the central, most basic questions of my life." That's public.

For example, today I was in a recycling warehouse of the New York City Department of Sanitation preparing some works of mine that are being shipped to a big exhibition in Hartford. The workers

have a connection to this artwork. It's made out of work gloves, worn out work gloves from 12 different public agencies like fire, sanitation, transportation, sewage treatment, police, utilities. These gloves come out of them, out of their work, but now their work has become a part of culture through art.

**OTG:** You've mentioned a number of positive and negative indicators for the health of public art. What do you make of these, in a sort of final analysis?

**MLU:** It's a little scary, on the one hand. On the other hand, there are these multi-million dollar contracts. The NEA may be closing up, but all these public works contracts are not closing up. This stuff is happening. The need to construct infrastructure systems is not going away – cities would be flooded, there would be no drinking water, garbage would pile up. The design of public infrastructure is at a rather mediocre level, and there are very powerful structures that intend to keep it that way. I don't want to make this whole interview be about the NEA, but an entity like the NEA serves such an important function of preserving a level of artistic excellence and protecting the art enterprise or the design enterprise, just like public art administrators. Without that function being accomplished somewhere, I am gloomy.

**OTG:** Do you think arts administrators and municipal programs for the arts are relatively entrenched around the country at this point?

**MLU:** No, I don't think so. I hope that they are, but I know of specific instances where whole programs, for example percent-for-art programs developed in the '70s and '80s, have ended. Maybe there ought to be much more creative ways to do these things than "percent-for-art." Percent programs might be very self-limiting. However there's a spirit afoot in the country to lop off a lot of programs. I'm waiting for the mass of citizens who have benefited from a lot of unpaid labor from a lot of creators over the last 20 or 30 years to rise up and say, "But we don't want to end these programs. This great stuff and my life have been enriched by this." But I'm not hearing that.

But the possibility for really rich, meaningful work is so apparent to me, no matter how gloomy I sound when I can't pay my bills!