

Marcel Duchamp, in his studio at 5 Rue Parmentier, Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1951 (photo: Henri-Cartier Bresson).



equality, established and insured by the ability to enter freely into contract, is always already flawed, as it rests on the inequality of the sexual contract which allows men to have power and jurisdiction over women. One manifestation of this inequality is the unpaid work of (house)wives. She writes:

The social contract is about the origins of the civil sphere and capitalist relations. Without the sexual contract there is no indication that the "worker" is a masculine figure or that the "working class" is the class of men. The civil, public sphere does not come into being on its own, and the "worker," his "work" and his "working class" cannot be understood independently of the private sphere and his conjugal right as husband. These attributes and activities of the "worker" are constructed together with, and as the other side of, those of his feminine counterpart, the "housewife."²

² Carole Pateman *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 135.

In her *Maintenance Art* performances Ukeles took the hidden labor of the private sphere and submitted it for public scrutiny in the institutions of art. What happened when Ukeles's made visible the unrepresented, when the putatively private was thrust onto a "public" center stage?

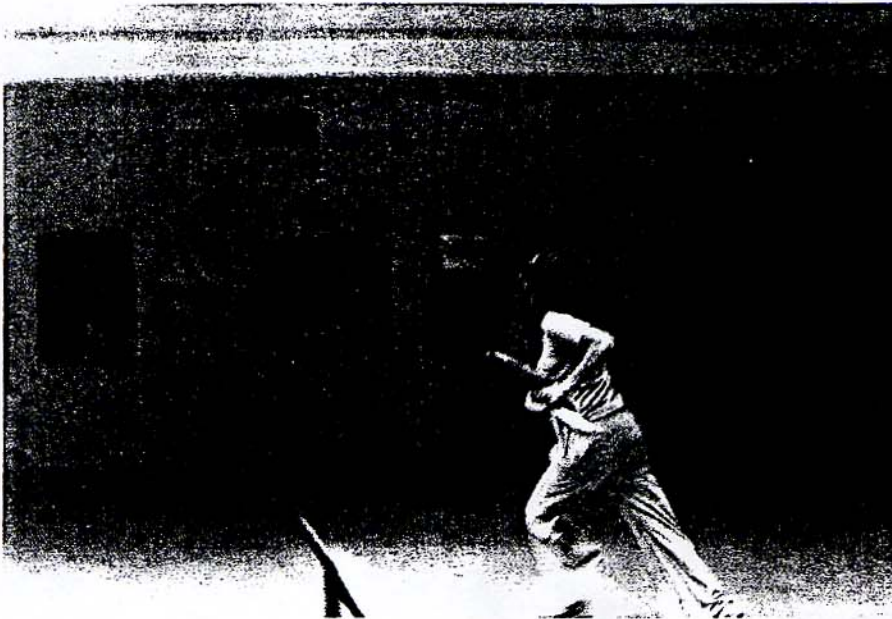
In *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object* Ukeles selected an art object from the museum's collection, a female mummy housed in a glass case. It was the janitor's job to keep this case clean. Ukeles cleaned the case as a "maintenance artist" as opposed to a maintenance person, making what she called a "dust painting." The cleaned case, now designated a "maintenance art work," could only be cleaned by the museum conservator. Here the "work" in art work and the "work" in maintenance work (or housework) were made analogous as three different jobs became the same job. And as the labor of cleaning metamorphosed from maintenance to art, it became work that demanded the attention of museum professionals.

This performance posited an equivalence between the devalued maintenance work that occurs across a spectrum of institutions—galleries, museums, private

homes. It challenged the notion that domestic labor is exclusively private by suggesting that the maintenance of homes is homologous with the maintenance of institutions. Ukeles' work insinuated that it is the work itself (all maintenance work) that must be valued, hence she lent it the value of art. By doing so, she unveiled some of the institutional structures that aid in the creation and preservation of the category of art (the conservator as opposed to the janitor). However, by exposing the everyday labor needed to maintain the institution of art, she put an extra cog in the institutional machinery; she gummed up the works. For the exposure of maintenance was not efficient, it slowed down, and sometimes even stopped, the "work" of the museum.

In *The Keeping of the Keys*, Ukeles took the museum guards' keys and systematically locked and unlocked museum doors throughout the day, wreaking havoc on the logic of the museum's workday. The piece so infuriated the curators, who felt that their office should be exempt, that when Ukeles announced that the office was to become a piece of maintenance art, all but one curator ran out of the room, fleeing both the artist and their own work. Here the work stoppage that resulted from the privileging of maintenance work over other forms of work shows, as Carole Pateman has suggested, how absolutely structural it is to patriarchy and capitalism that the labor of maintenance remain *invisible*. When *imaged* as work, the maintenance work that makes other work possible arrests or stymies the very labor it is designed to maintain.

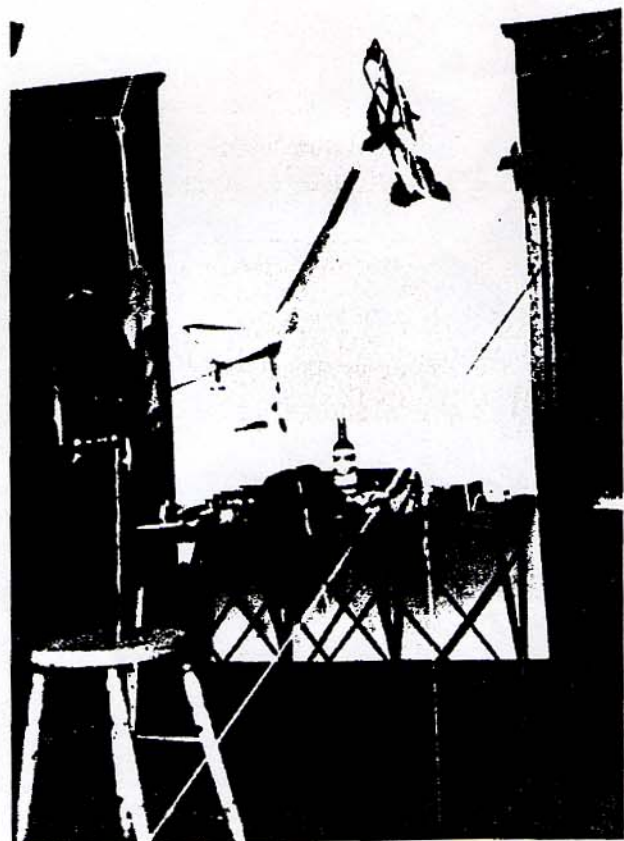
Flashback: In his studio, Duchamp's readymades deployed a version of slapstick humor designed to stymie domestic labor. They called into question, or heightened into relief, the status of "normal" domestic operations—keeping the house clean and orderly by hanging things up and putting them away in their "proper" places (the bottle rack, the coat rack, the hat rack). In so doing, the readymades



Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *The Keeping of the Keys*.
1973 (photo: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts)

represented the normally obscured domestic labor, but they showed that labor as stalled, humorous, and impossible. But this impossibility, the futility of domestic labor, is perhaps precisely what should be imaged, acknowledged, given credence. The readymades offered an alternative to housework, an alternative that lay dormant in the phrase "a woman's work is never done." To the "never done," Duchamp perhaps replied, "indeed." And since Duchamp's domicile and studio space were one and the same, the readymades also prevented the work of artistic labor. It's hard to make work when the bathing cap you've cut up into strips is pinned maze-like across the room, transforming your studio into a labyrinth. It's hard to work on a painting that you've deliberately allowed to gather dust.

Ukeles' performances enable us to envision the readymades not only as everyday commodities, but as maintenance objects: objects for hanging, storing, drying, grooming, keeping tidy. If Ukeles' exposure of maintenance labor disallowed the smooth functioning of the museum, so too Duchamp's readymades altered the "proper" work of the artist's studio. But whereas Duchamp's insurgency against the tedium of both everyday domestic labor and artistic creation was evidenced by his stalling of them, hence limiting his production of art works, and the labor they involved, Ukeles knew all too well that the dust would catch up. Her mutiny took the form of her insistence that her unavoidable daily labor should work double time for double value, art and maintenance—maintenance art.



Marcel Duchamp, *Sculpture for Traveling*, 1918.