

**ON EDGE** Two days after 9-11, the Fresh Kills landfill reopened to take in the wreckage from the World Trade Center. "That was very, very shocking to me," says artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose six-channel video piece about the former dump—*Penetration and Transparency: Morphed*—is currently running at Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island. ■ She remembers thinking she'd been misinformed: "The city would never do that. They would never mingle human remains in a place where they put garbage; that would collapse a taboo in our whole culture. That crosses a line." But no other site was big enough; no other so secure. Ultimately, about 175 of the landfill's 2200 acres were given over to sifting through the hundreds of thousands of tons from Ground Zero, no doubt some of it human ash. This added a layer of tragedy to a site that was already contested, fragile, enormous, resented, and political. ■ Ukeles has been the sanitation department's unpaid artist-in-residence since 1977. She's devoted her entire career to thinking about garbage, recycling, ecology, and the endless invisible labor involved in keeping things clean. In 1989, the Department of Cultural Affairs gave Ukeles a commission,

MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES, THE SANITATION DEPARTMENT'S UNPAID ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE

# WASTE. NOT!



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After 9-11, about 175 of the Fresh Kills dump's 2000 acres were given over to ground zero wreckage. C.Carr zooms in on video artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles's meditation on sanitation, garbage, and tragedy.

## Fresh Kills Becomes an Urban Artwork BY C.CARR

making her the official artist of Fresh Kills. She'll now participate in its transformation, working with whatever design team wins the international competition. (Proposals by the three finalists are currently on view at the City Planning Department.) She's come up with her own conceptual design for the site that she isn't yet at liberty to discuss. But everyone's future plan includes a memorial.

What Ukeles has on display now is Phase 1 (out of a projected six) of her Fresh Kills project: reconnaissance. For a while, though, the September 11 disaster stopped her in her tracks. When Snug Harbor's long-planned exhibition "Fresh Kills: Artists Respond to the Closure of the Staten Island Landfill" opened last October, Ukeles decided to observe a traditional 30-day mourning period with her piece and ran just a text crawl on four monitors, posing questions that amounted to: *Is any of this still relevant?*

Then she began to phase in interviews with people she calls pathfinders: for example, landscape architects, wetlands specialists, environmental engineers, experts on the fine points of decomposing garbage and its odious by-products—methane gas and leachate, a kind of brown bilgewater.

Ukeles, with videographers Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra, also taped many of Fresh Kills' post-industrial vistas. Some of the former dump, which is two and a half times the size of Central Park, looks surprisingly bucolic. Underneath those mounds of trash, now capped with plastic and covered with dirt, are pipes and drains, gas lines and leachate collection systems. She marvels at the engineering design—not just a complicated infrastructure but a flexible one, since everything's settling at the average rate of two feet a year. It will take many years of "healing" before Fresh Kills becomes a park.

Last Sunday at Snug Harbor, Ukeles added the last of her pathfinders to the exhibit and celebrated the completion of her Phase 1.

■ Ukeles has been waiting to get to work at Fresh Kills for 24 years. That's when she first visited the site. Back in the '70s, every borough but Manhattan had a landfill, and she went to see them all. She thought of them as urban earthworks, social sculpture made by all of us.

When Ukeles began to place an art framework around sanitation activities, she had a context for it. In those years, certain avant-gardists designated parts (even all) of everyday life as art, and feminists pointed out that housework was unvalued labor. Ukeles shifted her own art away from abstract expressionist painting after she had a baby, and, in effect, became a maintenance worker. Now she was not just someone engaged in repetitive tasks; a small human life depended on her ability to perform those tasks. When Ukeles wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* in 1969, it was a decision to make house-keeping of all kinds visible. In her 1973 piece *Hartford Wash*, for example, she scrubbed the floor of the Wadsworth Atheneum for four hours, then scrubbed the front steps for another four—and called it art.

Then, when she turned her attention to the New York City Sanitation Department, she created one of the signature performance pieces of the '70s. In *Touch Sanitation*, she spent 11 months meeting each of the department's 8500 workers on the job (at the time, they were still called "garbagemen") to shake hands and say "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." As she made her way to every worker on every shift, she saw that morale was terrible. "You can't ask people to pick up your garbage and then treat them like they're not there, or like they're part of the garbage, which was how they were feeling," says Ukeles. "As a feminist, I recognized something in that. The fury they felt, I knew about as a woman who was seen as invisible. The maintenance work that I did had no cultural sound. It didn't exist."

Her mirrored garbage truck was created in 1983 to send a message: It's *your* garbage. The essential fact of her work is this: Discarding something does not make it invisible. It goes somewhere, and she is the artist of where it goes.

Ukeles has found more and more layers to this work over the years. Certainly, it isn't just political. In her office at the sanitation department, she's taped a xeroxed news photo to a filing cabinet: "Cleansing the Soul." Masses of Hindu pilgrims wade into the holy rivers at Allahabad, India. She points out the people in the photo who've reached out as if to embrace the river. This one joyful and relaxed. That one tense. Both ecstatic. "That's what I've been searching for all these years. You make a place; it'll have huge emotion, but allows room for difference." The photo inspires her as she works on a public art piece for Schuylkill River Park in Pennsylvania. The Schuylkill is extremely polluted. "I'm trying to build an artwork that incorporates moving with joy towards the river. Is there any way to become transformed?"

Sanitation, she points out, is not the same as garbage. Sanitation creates order out of chaos, and in that way it's artlike.

"I consciously put myself in a position to deal with some of the hardest issues in our society: What to do with our garbage, how might we transform a place that's completely poisoned and degraded by our own waste, how might these places become available to us again? Placing myself in the sanitation department, where these questions never go away, is a way for me to keep myself in the real. If our dreams can be expressed in material form, then I want to place myself where the material is completely degraded. I want to deal with the landfill. That's the center of reality; that's where I try to locate my work." ■

*Penetration and Transparency: Morphed and the rest of the Fresh Kills exhibit is open at Snug Harbor through May 27.*