



'rak'rum (noun):
the back room of an art gallery
where artists and art lovers hang

Mierle Laderman Ukeles



Mierle Laderman Ukeles,
TsimTsum / Shevirat Ha-Kelim...
2008, mixed media

✦ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, courtesy Contemporary
Jewish Museum, photo by Aaron Hegert

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is a public artist for whom labor and the environment are central themes. She incorporates many kinds of labor into her performances and conceptual pieces, including service work and the urban environment. Ukeles gained national recognition for her amazing thirty-year-long artist's residency in the New York Department of Sanitation. Touch Sanitation, her large-scale pe...[\[more\]](#)



Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles

San Francisco - In May 2008, Artslant's Natalie Stanchfield was able to catch up with Mierle Laderman Ukeles as she was installing at the Contemporary Jewish Museum's new facility near the Yerba Buena Center in SF. Her piece entitled Tsimtsum / Shevirat Ha-Kelim: Contraction / The Shattering of the Perfect Vessels, Birthing Tikkun Olam will be on view until January 4, 2009. The first Day of Transfer and Exchange, on which museum visitors who sign up at [the CJM's website](#) will be able to take home a piece of the installation in exchange for a covenant of tikkun olam will take place on July 31 at 7:00 pm.

Natalie Stanchfield: *So what does your installation entail here at the CJM?*

Mierle Ukeles: It's a very ambitious undertaking for a brand new museum, I think. I've been working on this piece for about a year. Connie Wolf invited me; I know her from New York, from many years back. She was very familiar with my work that dealt with maintenance and the many projects I've done with sanitation workers, about the landfill, about remediation, recycling and

maintaining the city. She invited me about a year ago. Actually I was in a show here called Scents of Purpose, at the [CJM's] old building. I didn't come--I sent the piece, but she actually bought it for her own collection. As I make very large, site-specific public art, I'm not used to people actually buying my work, so that was pretty cool. So I was in New York and she told me about the new building, designed by Daniel Libeskind, who I know from the whole Trade Center saga. I don't know him, but I know that he's been through hell. He won the World Trade Center memorial competition and got involved with a very complex process where many other actors, including other architects came into the picture and I don't know what's left of his vision. I think he's been through a very demanding thing.

So the Contemporary Jewish Museum, what the hell does that mean? I think there's no other museum that has a name like that. But when she invited me I thought, "Oh my god, this is so exciting," and I just said yes immediately. I just thought it sounded like a huge adventure. Also, for me as the artist of Fresh Kills Park, previously the biggest municipal landfill in the world, it is so complicated. So I feel an empathy for Daniel Libeskind who has to deal with multiple bureaucracies and multiple governments. Fresh Kills is not all that different. There are many actors; it's very complicated. The funding is very complicated. I've been working on Fresh Kills since 1989, and the thought of being in a show that has a beginning, a middle and an end--that I can make a piece and it's finished--was thrilling to me. I'm also involved in a project in Cambridge, Massachusetts called *Turnaround Surround* for Danehy Park, formerly a landfill, now a park, much smaller but very challenging.

I've completed four parks since 1990 and they've funded a fifth component, but that will take a few more years. So having a coherent work sounds delicious, rather than these endless, long, complicated bureaucratic deals--public art. I got so passionately interested in public art because I felt that it was completely accessible to everyone. That's what was appealing to me. But actually it turns out that all those ideological passions about public art and how it actually plays out, I think it gets very compromised, weakened and bureaucratized. You're selected by a jury that evaporates, not selected by a curator who's passionate about your work. The person that you work with is an administrator who hasn't actually selected you. Now they could be very fine professionals but the fact is they're not linking up with you because they share a certain understanding about art as a curator does, they're doing their job to be a good professional.

NS: Let me ask you since we're already on the subject of public art, what do you think about the recent development in art--street art or artistic

interventions in public that are not necessarily legal--as in street artists who do wheatpastes, graffiti artists, things like that? Is this a new form of public art? One that does away with the committees and the juries?

MU: I would say that when I got very active in public art in the 70's there was way more street art happening then. My work focused in and around New York City and New York City was in such dreadful shape fiscally that you could mess around and could do things and not get too involved in a lot of permits. I think there was a lot of street art activity in New York in the 70's that was quite interesting. A lot of early feminist art also had a similar aspect--that you just did it.

When I did a whole series of performance works in the 70's it was such a different time. It never occurred to me to be paid. It never occurred to me to set up PR in advance; it was even a reprehensible thing to do. Even documentation--I was just lucky that the people who invited me to do the performances had wonderful photographers who took pictures. They took them, they handed me the negatives, and I don't even know the names of most of the photographers. I probably explained to the documentor generally what this performance was about but then I never spoke to them after that. I never felt that I wanted to push them to have any kind of interpretation of my work, they were just one among the people on the street to who came across the work and what they saw, they saw.

Now that seems like a different time. I think that there's an urgency that artists feel to work in the public domain that they want to go out and do something, and they just go out and do it. I think that's terrific.

NS: Also, there's so much documentation now especially with public art interventions. It's also being shared on the internet, widening the audience, not just the audience that happens to walk by and see it...

MU: I was a senior sculpture critic at Yale this last year and there was one wonderful sculpture student who does performance work, and he says he refuses to document anything. Because he feels people get so wrapped up in the documentation of it. I found that really interesting and I wonder what will happen.

NS: Yes there is that aspect of a work losing its immediacy if you can just save it on your hard drive.

MU: Right.

NS: So the CJM asked you to respond to Genesis. How did you go about responding to the origin of the universe?

MU: Now I like the first chapter of Genesis, and I also like the second chapter of Genesis which is the re-telling of the same story but in a different way, which is kind of weird. The notion is right up the alley of an artist because it deals with the creation of the world. I wish my budget were as big as the creation budget!

I grew up in Colorado, very big sky, big mountains. So I have a natural tendency to work on a very big scale. Now a group show in a museum has to come into the of reality of a budget and a certain limited space. But as an offer to an artist to be involved in the notion of pure creation--I just fell for this hook, line and sinker. I also love the text. In my own immediate family, all of them read the Torah in various synagogues or prayer services. There's a great love of the text of the Bible text that we all share in our family. So I felt that this was an opportunity to really get into the text. But I have to tell you, they finally turned on the sound work, which is the Torah chanting, but I had gotten used to [seeing] it without the Torah chanting--it's a very high space and I think it looks pretty cool, it looks like an installation. But when they turned on the sound work I said to Dara [Solomon], "This is really Jewish." As an artist it's not so cool; it's like when people know a little too much about you. This is really close to home. It's not like me: sanitation, me with the workers of the world. I said to myself, you're gonna screw your whole career. You're gonna get kicked right out of the "cool" art world. This is definitely too Jewish. There's a whole personal ballgame going on for me there.

I made a piece for LA MOCA in 1997--I did a piece called *Unburning Freedom Hall* in an old industrial building where you didn't have to worry about a floor load. I'm used to being around a lot of tonnage, a lot of trucks, so I walked into this building and I thought, "oh my god, I could bring a lot of material here." I made a piece with one million pounds of crushed glass, that's 540 tons, and it was brought in with 28 trailers. I set up a recycling facility inside of the museum and created this surrounding of crushed glass with a peace table in the middle which was stained glass of cobalt blue, suspended from the ceiling. Now I spent a long time on this installation and I stayed in LA, away from my family. On the Sabbath one night, I'm walking home from the synagogue and I said to myself, "What are you doing? Why do you get involved in so much stuff? 540 tons, trucks, all this crushed glass?" I was

halfway through making the piece and a story which I have known a really long time just popped out of me. And I'm going to tell you the story right now. This is the story: In the beginning, the Divine is everywhere. The Divine is everything. And the world is manifested as endless perfect vessels. Then in an act of Love, the Divine made a decision to constrict the Divine. To create an emptiness so that there would be room for others. So, some sources say, out of loneliness, the Divine constricted the Divine and released a space for the world to be created. And out of this act of Love, a blazing fire burst out and the vessels couldn't hold this fiery light; the light shot out and the vessels were shattered. This cataclysm, this trauma, an act of love and this contraction, it's actually like a birth story. The vessels shattered, they couldn't hold the light. And pieces of these holy vessels are lying around all over the world. And it's our job in the world to bring the vessels back to wholeness, to perfection again. But it's us, not the Divine--out of our power to recreate, to reinvent, to restore, to heal--we can bring those vessels back to wholeness again.

Now I didn't set about making the piece for LA MOCA to manifest this story but the story was in me and I think it was fueling a lot of what I did there, even though [the piece] was about racial hatred and about building peace in a city. It was about fire being the result of hatred, but of fire actually being the agent that could bring crushed glass back to wholeness. So on the one hand you had these mounds of glass, shattered glass, and individuals participating in completing the work in what I called unburnings. Over the period of this exhibition I got almost 2000 of these, made by people all over LA. And I said to myself you're really working out this story. Now I'm actually dealing with creation, and here's the story back again, not showing up halfway through the piece, but now let's actually deal with it. This story absolutely wipes me out, I love this story.

NS: So this collecting of the broken vessels, is that what tikkun olam is?

MU: Yes, *tikkun* means to heal, to mend, or to repair, and *olam* means the world. To repair the world, the whole entire world. We have that power; we can do that, and I believe that. I believe we can destroy it and maybe we are doing that, but we also have the power, like the original Creator, to heal. And to make whole. So what am I doing with this piece? I tell this story, that's on a six-foot high panel in the space--

NS: With text?

MU: Yes, where you come in. I'm only focusing on Day One, which is the creation of Light, and Day Six, the creation of humans in the image of the

Divine. From the very beginning of creation look how humans are described, you can't get a better job description than that. And I think that is the gift of Genesis from the very beginning, that you have the power to heal and you are sacred, as sacred as the Divine, and like the Divine, you all have power.

NS: This isn't a message that you hear too much either. You don't hear about how we are empowered to fix things but you're hearing more about how we messed up.

MU: We screw up. I'm really happy you said that because I feel so strongly that you have to say to people, you have the power to choose, you have the freedom. Nobody gives that to you--you come that way. I think the message many people get (and I think a lot of people grow up like that), is "You have really screwed up, you screwed up the whole world." And what that does is it shuts people down. It makes them feel paralyzed.

NS: And it doesn't provide them with the empowerment to feel that they can fix what's gone wrong.

MU: Right. That's not saying that everything is great, but that if you want to talk about Genesis, from the very minute that the Bible opens up its mouth, the message is "You are like the Divine, and this is a beautiful world." It kills me that the text says at the end of the sixth day, God looks around and sees what God made and says, "This is very good." You don't hear that either, that the world is very good, we have a beautiful, beautiful world. Now the light that's created on Day One is not the sun and the moon, those are created on Day Four so what is this light?

NS: I've always wondered that myself...

MU: People write about it as the "supernal" light.

NS: It sounds like "eternal" and "super" put together.

MU: (laughs) Maybe. So I think it means it's the original light of the Divine, of this drama where that fiery light breaks out. In Kabbalistic writings they talk about it alot. That the light is in the darkness, that the light is taken out of this sort of chaos of the darkness. And that is the original light of creation, the light that is in each piece that we have to repair. And each of the morsels on the ground stand for every human being that ever lived. That light is in you, that divine light. So that's what I'm setting up from the beginning.

You come in and you see the story which is a pretty spare story, but it's this very dramatic story of birth. And next to it is a letter that I am writing to the person who enters into this space, "Dear person, dear visitor." I've done that for many years where I directly address the audience. Now I have these lines of individual hand mirrors, 189 of them that are suspended from 17 feet on these chains. I invite people, "Look at yourself, find yourself in the mirror, Who do you see? You are sacred. And you have the power of the Divine and like the Eternal Creator you are a creator." Now that's my position as an artist which gets me into a lot of trouble... There are many artists who welcome people into the work as creators and a lot of art historians and museum curators really hate that. They think that people who have the idea that everyone is a creator weaken art. If every Joe Schmoe Schmegeggi can make art....

NS: We lose that modernist idea of the "genius at work."

MU: Well and there's been a lot of genius art made which I love very much, so it's a legitimate thing to have an argument about. But I'm coming from a place where I believe that everyone is a creator, that it's an innate part of being a human being.

Now I have these chains on one hand, and I'm playing with Libeskind's architecture, so I benefit from this huge wall, 49 feet high or something, coming in toward you, creating this line of chains and the mirrors hang from the chains and float in the space. And on the other side there's this black veil, and behind the veil there's a sort of quiet writing area for people to either write or draw and I provide an agreement by the visitor to participate where I ask them to describe a *tikkun* project. If they participate in this work they say, "I am going to go out and do this healing project out in the world." I'm actually asking them to take this work out of the museum, it has to become alive out in the world.

The second part is on a certain number of days (because I have a limited number of mirrors) called "Days of Transfer and Exchange" I'm asking people to sign an individual covenant. A museum attendant will actually unlink a mirror and give it to the person and it will become their possession. In exchange, they will become a covenantal partner and say, "I commit to do this act of *tikkun* in the world." You know what I said to you about budgets, really I would love to have thousands of these mirrors and have a covenant with anyone throughout seven months. It's a very demanding thing for a museum, so we came down to reality. What will happen is that this artwork that you come in to see is actually in a flow and when you fill out your covenant it is hung in

the place of the mirror, and hopefully by the end of the exhibition all the mirrors will be out in the world, lighting the way. I have this image that the person will take this mirror and it will be their guiding light.

The notion that the art is incomplete, that it requires the other to enter and complete it because they're a creator--that's a sort of an ecological position to take, of interdependency. I put myself in a very vulnerable position of counting on others; it's something that we'll create together. When you talk about a modernist autonomous art that comes out of the notion of the "soul artist," the systems of maintenance of the artist are not spoken about. Don't even talk about it--it's not polite. I'm saying that I think that it'll be okay if I'm in this position of need.

Now as an early feminist being in a position of need put me into a rage. Being dependent was the most horrifying thing in the whole world. Now I'm not saying I'm dependent, I really can't handle that. I mean it's scary, because what if nobody will play with me? It's possible people could come in and say, "This is really stupid and I'm not doing this." Or, "Who cares?" and walk out, and this is what most people will do...

NS: It's hard to get people to really engage with an artwork...

MU: So what's gonna happen? Maybe I'm gonna be the biggest failure, dumbass artist out there. Well you know I put myself in this position before when I went out to all the firehouses and the bosses said, "No one'll do it," and they were wrong. A lot of people actually wanted to be involved.

NS: I was reading an interview that you did with Tom Finkelpearl, and you were talking about the work I Do Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day, about the workers in the skyscraper, and throughout the whole exhibit people were getting really into what they described as making maintenance art or doing maintenance work at a particular point in the day. It's so exciting to hear that everybody got really involved with it. Because that's not what I would have expected to happen.

MU: They did. There was lady, her name was Vanilla, cleaning in the middle of the night, very beautifully made up, and she said, "I've been waiting for you for weeks." It's not so hard, stuff that I've done with lots and lots of people, often I think people are just kind of waiting for an opportunity to be part of something.

NS: One thing I wanted to ask you about the Department of Sanitation and your Artist in Residency, how did you get in as an artist in residence, and do you think that all public bureaucracies and agencies should have their own artist in residence?

MU: Let me answer that one first. In 1983, I made a proposal to the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York that they initiate a program called PAIRS, Public Artists In Residence. Sanitation never paid me, I mean they provide me with office space in downtown Manhattan, phones, and when I have made certain projects they have provided in-kind labor, materials, and actually spent a shitload of money on a lot of my stuff. But they would always say to me, "Ukeles if we pay you we would have to cut a sweeper or a sanitation worker, you wouldn't want that would you?" Every two weeks I see people walking out of the office to go put their checks in the bank, and I don't feel so hot about it. It's been very difficult for me, because I've gotta go get grants and teach. So that's why I proposed that if [the money] would come out of the Mayor's executive budget and go to ten different public agencies, then the agency wouldn't feel that the money is taken out of their mouth. I also said that the artist should commit to two years of a residency and also commit to a learning period where they would really learn what the agency did. Also almost all public agencies have support staffs that involve shops, technicians, often people who themselves were artists or wanted to be an artist and they gave it up because they needed to go make a living, very highly skilled people. Being able to work with that level of person on a continuing basis, you could make phenomenal work. I am very committed, but now [PAIRS] went up to a certain point and then it didn't happen. Now I think that if a person would really fight for it, they could make it happen. There's this artist in residence program at NorCal Waste in San Francisco, do you know about it? It's a private recycling company. It's an artist in residence program, I think it lasts six months, you have a studio and all the recycled material that you want. It's very famous.

NS: Is it [Art at the Dump](#)?

MU: That's probably it. That came out of my residency. That was created by Jo Hanson, who passed away last year, a fabulous San Francisco artist. So it can happen. But I thought it would take over the whole country and it hasn't. But I think it's a very good idea.

How did I get to be the artist in residence? So that piece *I Make Maintenance Art...*, David Bourdon, an art critic, wrote a review of this show and he said (this is during the fiscal crisis in the mid-70's), if maintenance can be art, what

about the Sanitation Department whose budget was just cut? They could think of their work as performance art, and replace some of their cut budget with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. So he said it sort of tongue-in-cheek but I read that review and I thought--

NS: This is my next stop...

MU: Right, exactly. See, *I Make Maintenance Art...* that was 300 workers.. I sent a xerox of this review from the Village Voice to the commissioner of the Sanitation Department. I didn't know who that was; I didn't know where my garbage went...

NS: Don't you think it's funny that most people don't know where their food comes from or where their garbage goes?

MU: They're cut off. And the more cut off, the more alienated you are. If you grow up having to deal with and put your hands on this stuff coming or going, it's just more holistic. We're kind of isolated. Anyhow, I got a call from the Sanitation Department, "Hello, I'm calling on behalf of the Commissioner. How would you like to make art with 10,000 people?" So I said, "I'll be right over!" So I came and met the assistant to the Commissioner, her name was Frances. The fact is, that Frances' two parents were city workers. Even though she had a fancier job than her parents, she had a respect for maintenance work. It hit something in her, and she was interested in working with an artist that wanted to do something with repetitive service work. It was personal with her. If Frances hadn't been there I don't think this link would have happened. She brought me in,

I met the commissioner, and he said to me, "Talk to the guys. Nobody ever talks to them." The first things you hear, you don't realize how much influence they have on you. They took me on tours to learn the department, they took me all over the place. I spent a year and a half learning about it before I did "Touch Sanitation." So every day I arrived, schlepping all my crap with me, and this woman Gloria Johnson, said to me, "Why don't you put this stuff on this desk?" And that became my desk. I was like a squatter. And that's how it began. It just sort of developed. It wasn't like a program or a grant...

NS: I feel like artists have a lot to offer that a bureaucracy could benefit from, a different way of seeing things...

MU: If you're inclined yourself and you yourself are open too... I always feel

that if I'm in a situation when someone will ask me a question, even if it's kind of aggressive or tinged with a negative, but if they'll ask, then I feel that that's a door. Because a question is like an opening. And then you never know.

- *Natalie Stanchfield*