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Manifesto for Maintenance: A Conversation With Mierle Laderman Ukeles

by [Bartholomew Ryan](#) 03/20/09

Forty years ago the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles sat down and wrote the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!* It promoted 'maintenance' ("sustain the change; protect progress") as an important value in contrast to the excitement of avant-garde and industrial 'development'. One of the early lines in the manifesto reads, "The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning." In 1973, as part of *c.7500* Lucy Lippard's all-female traveling exhibition of conceptual artists, Ukeles performed four actions at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford Connecticut that were early important works of Institutional Critique. In 1977, Ukeles became the artist in residence at New York City's Department of Sanitation, a position she has held since. In recent years, Ukeles has been collaboratively developing plans for a park on the site of Staten Island's recently closed Fresh Kills Landfill. Here she chats about the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* with Bartholomew Ryan, whose work as an independent curator and critic has been informed recently by the history of the manifesto form

BR: Mierle, I'd like to chat about your manifesto. When did you write it?

MLU: In October 1969, in a cold fury, I sat down and I wrote the manifesto naming Maintenance Art. It arrived in one package though it was not the result of one simple idea as many people think, but of layers of causes which led up to this encapsulation. Art is often an encapsulation of a whole flow of things that end up in one formal thing, and the formal thing here was the manifesto document.

BR: What kind of work had you been doing?



MLU: I had a very privileged education, I majored in international relations; then I went to the Pratt Institute, and got kicked out for making what they said was pornographic art, which I thought was abstract art. They were

cheesecloth wrappings; I called them 'bindings', sort of energy pods, where I stuffed them up to the point of bursting with rags. When they had hernias? That was a failure. I wanted them to be to the point of explosion, totally bursting with energy. I thought that they were like images of energy captured, only the Dean and the Chairman at Pratt thought they were pornographic, and told the teacher that I was 'oversexed', and he had to stop me from doing them. I mean they looked more like organs than ...

BR: Than sexual organs ...

MLU: I think they looked more like digestive organs [laughing] I thought they were abstract. I didn't know what the hell these people were talking about. I was shocked, and my teacher Robert Richenberg was very supportive. And that is when they got hysterical, he ended up getting fired, I thought the whole school would march out because of academic freedom/ That lasted about fifteen minutes, then everybody wanted to keep their jobs, and keep their whatever, and the whole thing died away. Another experience, earlier, when I was a senior at Barnard, the President used to rant at us, "You can do anything, you can be anything!" And I believed her. I was this sap for freedom talk. This was the Sixties, the time of the civil rights movement; this is what was in the air, the notion that the world could be reinvented so that people were free, that it belonged to everybody. I mean, I didn't make this stuff up.

BR: In 1968 you had your first baby?

MLU: Right. Yes. And when people would meet me pushing my baby carriage, they didn't have any questions to ask me. They didn't say "How is it, to create life? How can you describe this amazing thing?" There really weren't questions. It was like I was mute, there was no language. This is 1968, there was no valuing of 'maintenance' in Western Culture. The trajectory was: make something new, always move forward. Capitalism is like that. The people who were taking care and keeping the wheels of society turning were mute, and I didn't like it! I felt when I was watching Richard Serra do these very simple things like throwing the lead, or Judd building things -- the language of Process Art and Minimalism, which I felt very in tune with -- I felt like "what are they doing?" They are lifting industrial processes and forgetting about the whole culture that they come out of. So Serra was this steel worker without the work, without the workers. And Judd was this carpenter without workers. They didn't have workers, they didn't have people, they had objects -- or they had results. And I felt that they were falling into the same trap as the rest of this damn culture, which couldn't see the whole structures or cultures of workers that made the kind of work that invented these processes and refined them.



They were skimming off the top. Meanwhile, I had spent four years, from 1963 to 1967, trying to make these inflatables that would be huge, and could float in the water and in the air. I just wanted to be able to make these big, inflatable environments stuffed with air that I could fold up and put in my pocket when I was done. I did

not want to have to take care of anything. But, there were all sorts of problems, and these things that were supposed to be symbols of freedom, they cracked. My bio then was 'move forward into the unknown' just like Harold Rosenberg had told me to. -- you know, like the Abstract Expressionists. You move forward, and take the whole culture with you. Actually, I still have that feeling.

BR: That's OK. [laughter]

MLU: Anyway, they cracked, they melted -- it was just a disaster. I spent four years on this stuff. The elements of the world, like gravity, came crashing in, so you had to take care of things, and I was trying to avoid taking care. So, I sat down and I said, "If I am the artist, and if I am the boss of my art, then I name Maintenance Art." And really, it was like a survival strategy, because I felt like "how do I keep going?" I am this maintenance worker, I am this artist -- I mean this is early feminism, very rigid, I literally was divided in two. Half of my week I was the mother, and the other half the artist. But, I thought to myself, "this is ridiculous, I am the one." It is the artist, not art history and not the critics and not anybody -- it is the artist that invents what is art, and that is why it is important to write a manifesto. It wasn't just, "How am I feeling today?" It was saying, "OK folks, we have hit a certain point here, and from now on art has changed. Why? Because I say so."

BR: Where were you when you wrote it?

MLU: We were living in Philadelphia for a year. I was sitting in a room on a chair where the seat had almost collapsed so you could just sit on the frame because I didn't fix it! [laughter].

BR: The manifesto opened a lot of doors, including an important exhibition, *c. 7,500*, curated by Lucy Lippard. In 1977 you joined the Department of Sanitation as an Artist In Residence, and you have been there since. Your past and present work is in conversation with many contexts in contemporary art. For instance, I find your having been at the DOS for this long rigorous, conceptually speaking -- this ongoing dedication through what I imagine are a myriad of logistical concerns.

MLU: You know, I saw On Kawara's show recently [at David Zwirner Gallery], and I think that he is dealing with maintenance more than most. That is what maintenance is, trying to listen to the hum of living. A feeling of being alive, breath to breath. The same way that the sanitation department sends out 1,600 trucks every day, it is like this repetitive thing that as much as you chafe at the boredom of the repetition is as important as the other parts. And I know that that has to be a part of culture. Because if isn't, then you don't have a culture that welcomes in everybody. And, I mean *everybody*.