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Future Perfect

Maintenance Art
Mierle Laderman Ukeles
May 03 - May 03
by Dorothy Santos



Mierle Laderman Ukeles produces environmentally sustainable art. The emergence of words such as *green* and *eco-friendly* in our contemporary lexicon is probably due in part to Ukeles' manifesto on maintenance art in the 1970s. Her recent lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute on May 3, 2010, included a discussion of ideas such as gesture, viewer participation, and intentionality. Ukeles' lecture established her as not only an artist, but an archaeologist, ethnographer, and excavator of culture.

In her talk, Ukeles drew comparisons between sanitation workers, who occupy a very male-dominated field, and homemakers, who are generally female. This comparison was the beginning of her art practice, which she coined Maintenance Art. It also served as a marker for the evolution of feminist art at large. Ukeles' Maintenance Art forces the viewer to broaden his or her scope of perception and understanding to a universal spectrum. The artworks Ukeles highlighted during her lecture provided the viewer with an intimate look into how she approached the granular notions of "self" and "other," extending to the greater symbiotic relationships between the two on a universal scale.

In her work *Touch Sanitation* (1979-1981), she shook the hands of thousands of sanitation workers and thanked them for their service to New York City. Documenting the workers' initial animosity, then curiosity, and eventual acceptance of her work, she showed the progression from this particular piece to other more participatory works. *Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers in the New Service Economy* (1988) consists of an archway fashioned from a collection of gloves and steel pillars donated by New York City agencies.

Photo from *Touch Sanitation*, 1979-81. New York City-wide performance in all 59 community districts, with 8,500 NYC sanitation workers. Courtesy of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, and the Bronx Museum, New York.

In this piece, the audience was able to see the foresight of her work, as well as its continued service as a catalyst for change in the current environmental and political climate.

Ukeles' lecture convinced me that she was well ahead of her time in the late '70s. She didn't plead with her audience that evening for change. My suspicion is that she already knows how to effect change herself and that involves sharing her observations of a city with others. Her works' contemplation of the repercussions of our collective daily gestures beckons us to be more conscious and aware of our actions. In her practice, she asks the viewer to engage, to participate, and to present an offering, highlighting the intentionality of her work. The artist's engagement with her community and acute sensibility to encourage cultural and environmental evolution emphasizes the continued relevance of her work.