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Mierle Laderman Ukeles at the SFAI: Monday, May 3rd

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Mierle Laderman Ukeles "Maintenance Art Performance Series", 1973-74
Courtesy of the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Take out the papers and the trash

*Or you don't get no spending cash
If you don't scrub the kitchen floor
You ain't gonna rock and roll no more*

from "Yakety Yak," words and music by Jerry Leiber
and Mike Stoller© 1958 by Tiger Music, inc.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles will be speaking at the San Francisco Art Institute on

Mon, May 3rd. She is an important bridge between the art of second-wave feminism and the current generation. Since the 1960's, she has uncovered connections between women and undervalued work.

In 1969, she wrote a manifesto entitled "*Maintenance Art—Proposal for an Exhibition*," which challenged the delegation of housework to women. In this seminal document of feminist art, Ukeles was attempting to demystify the image of the "housewife" as someone locked into an irretrievable system of dependency. She wanted to reinterpret the conventional housewife stereotypes, not in imagistic terms, but through a systemic style of creative action. as well as confront social and political changes within the society, which were in turn affecting her attitudes about art, Ukeles chose to "perform" housework as a maintenance system—a literal art of work existing in real time. By accepting the reality of her situation in maintaining the household, she discovered the reality of maintenance/housework as a means to the survival of personal freedom, art and all other social institutions. In other words, maintenance art was a necessary part of the human condition.

In the course of redefining her own domestic role, she caught the meaning of art as action, art as gesture, art as circumstance within an appointed system or any designated structure – eventually the museums, office buildings and streets of New York. This is surely a creative and unique take on the 50's theory of action painting but, instead of using a canvas and brushes, Ukeles used her body and the structures of civic life, our everyday life, as a platform for art, action, performance and education.

In *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976), Ukeles shifted her emphasis from the personal or individual scale to that of a large-scale system. For two months, she worked as part of a sanitation bureaucracy, cleaning floors and elevators in a lower-Manhattan office building along with 300 janitors and "cleaning women" during regular shifts. *Touch Sanitation*, (completed June 1980), involved more than 8,500 workers in the New York City Department of Sanitation. The performance itself lasted for eleven months. Her intention was "to face and shake hands" with each one of the 8,500 sanitation works while saying the words:

"Thank you for keeping New York City alive."

By shaking hands with a sanitation worker, or "san-man," she was demystifying another stereotype. There is a necessary task to be done and a necessary separation to be made between the task and those who perform it. Maintenance is a shared concern; there is both a private and public aspect to the work cycle. Waste products are not created by "garbage men," but by individuals who designate leftovers as trash. "Are we to assume," Ukeles has stated, "that those who dispose of trash—being all of us—are the 'garbage people'?"

Ukeles has further extended the notion that feminism and maintenance are intertwined; to overcome the stereotype remains a challenge. She has further advocated that maintenance is the "underbelly system" of urban life and culture—a work-a-day system that keeps people alive and things functioning, whether on a public or domestic level.

Somebody has to take out the trash.