

# Rupture and Repair

In Art, Judaism, and Society

Editors:

Emily D. Bilski, Avigdor Shinan



**The Adi Foundation**  
in Memory of Adi Dermer (Blumberg) z"l

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**Photography:** Avraham Hay: pp. (6), (22), (107), (109), (112), (115)  
Michael Jacobson: p. (71)

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The exhibition is presented at the Jerusalem Artists' House in cooperation with The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

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**Prepress:** Art Plus, Jerusalem

**Printing and binding:** Eli Meir Press, Petach Tikva

## Published by The Adi Foundation

**8 Harav Kook, Jerusalem, Israel**

**[www.adifoundation.co.il](http://www.adifoundation.co.il)**

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ISBN 978-965-91584-0-9

Printed in Israel, 2010

All translations of biblical verses are from the New Jewish Publication Society, Hebrew-English Tanakh 5765-2005

Measurements are given in centimeters, height x width

Special thanks to the members of the jury of The Adi Prize for Jewish Expression in Art and Design:

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## From Maintenance to Repair: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and *Birthing Tikkun Olam*

Fred Wasserman

*It's amazing. I feel people are just waiting to be asked, walking around with so much desire to be powerful in the world.<sup>1</sup>*

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Mierle Laderman Ukeles (b. 1939) is an American artist who for more than forty years has been creating public and environmental art. In the late 1960s, confronted with the perceived societal conflict between being an artist and a new mother, Ukeles radically shifted the paradigm with her landmark “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!” As an artist, she decided that the chores of motherhood and of running the daily household, as well as other maintenance activities—personal, professional, and what she called “earth maintenance”—were art. The acts of upkeep, in contrast to the blaze of individual artistic creativity, were placed front and center. “Maintenance art” had been born.

Four decades of public projects, performances, and environmental works have followed. Issues of gender, undervalued work, individual agency, and reclaiming the environment have been at the heart of Ukeles’ artistic practice. She has exhibited a core humanity and a concern for people, their lives, and the commonweal, often engaging others—workers, museum visitors, ordinary citizens—to participate in her works.

Since 1977, Ukeles has served as the official, unsalaried artist-in-residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY). The artist’s first major project was *Touch Sanitation* (fig. 1): over the course of eleven months in 1979–80, Ukeles traveled throughout the five boroughs of New York shaking the hands of 8,500 sanitation workers, while saying to each of them, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.” In her position with the DSNY, she has worked on numerous projects, including *Ballet Mécanique for Six Mechanical Sweepers* (1983); *Social Mirror* (1983), a 12.5-ton mirror-clad garbage truck that participated in the first New York City Art Parade; *Transfer Station Transformation* (1984), a multi-media installation that transformed a 65,000 square-foot DSNY facility into an artwork; and several proposals and projects (1989–present) for Staten Island’s 2,200-acre Fresh Kills landfill (once the largest in

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1 | Mierle Laderman Ukeles  
**Touch Sanitation**, 1978–80, with New  
York City Department of Sanitation

the world, now closed). At the same time, Ukeles has realized many environmental projects, installations, and public performances in locales around the United States and the world.<sup>2</sup>

In 2007, Ukeles was invited to participate in the inaugural exhibition that the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco was organizing for the opening of its new Daniel Libeskind-designed building. For *In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis* (June 8, 2008 – January 4, 2009), Ukeles, along with several other contemporary artists, was asked to read the first chapter of Genesis—the story of creation—and create a new work of art.<sup>3</sup> “I was invited to be in this show,” recalls Ukeles, the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. “I read the first chapter of Genesis. I was blown away. I was always drawn to the idea that humans are created in the image of the Divine. The gift that’s given to me is to be a creator. But it’s not just me. We *all* have that power. That’s what the text gives us.” And that is what Ukeles “gave” visitors to the exhibition.

After visiting the building site in San Francisco, and burrowing deeply into the text of Genesis, Ukeles ultimately decided to focus on the kabbalistic understanding of creation in her installation. In this tradition, God had to contract to make space for the creation of the world. In the process, as God filled perfect vessels with Divine light, the vessels shattered, and humans must work to put the pieces back together and make them whole—in effect, to repair the world (*tikkun olam*). This kabbalistic concept is condensed in the extended title of Ukeles’ installation: *Tsimtsum/Shevirat Ha-Kelim: Contraction/The Shattering of the Perfect Vessels → Birthing Tikkun Olam: As Above So Below/As Below So Above* (2008).

This story is physically and symbolically manifest in Ukeles’ installation. Visitors enter a large open space and are enveloped in a suggestively mystical world of light and darkness, reflections and shadows (figs. 2-3). On two sides, Libeskind’s angled white walls soar upward to a cathedral-like height of over fifty feet, while the space is bisected on one side by a black veil hanging from a truss. Two lines of two-sided hand mirrors (with folded covenants adhered to the backs) are suspended on chains in front of the white wall at the left and in front of the black veil on the right. The eye is drawn upwards to a spot-lit glass goblet with a shattered rim that sits high on a shelf in the corner, at



2 | Above: **Birthing Tikkun Olam**, installation view, June 2008, Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco



3 | Below: Looking through the veil from the writing area after most of the mirrors have been exchanged for covenants, December 2008



4 | View of glass goblet on shelf

the convergence of Libeskind's angled walls (one leaning towards the visitor, the other canting away), the most unique—and for the artist, the most powerful—corner in the gallery (fig. 4). One is surrounded by voices, both male and female, chanting the text of Genesis Chapter 1 in both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi cantillation traditions, sounds that heighten the immersive, spiritual experience.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the mystical, physical, and aural environment, text plays a crucial role in Ukeles' installation: engaging visitors to commit to acts of *tikkun olam*. The entry to her space is framed by the texts that she is “trying to enact” in her piece—Genesis 1,

Day 1—the creation of heaven and earth, light and darkness—and Genesis 1, Day 6, the creation of humanity in the image of God.<sup>5</sup> On a large text panel, Ukeles tells her version of the kabbalistic story of creation, which echoes the incantatory chanting in its poetic language, phrasing, and emotional tenor. On another large panel, Ukeles’ “Invitation to Participate” is personal, direct, urgent and in first-person, establishing the artist-visitor relationship that is the essence of *Birthing Tikkun Olam*:

Dear Visitor, Dear Person,

Welcome! Come in. Make yourself at home. Look in the mirror. Please. Please find yourself in the mirror. Who do you see?

Genesis 1 Day 6 tells you that the image reflecting back at you is a likeness of the Eternal Creator of the world. The image that you see is sacred. You are unique in all of creation. Yes, you. Genesis 1 Day 1 tells you that your whole being is filled with sparks from the original first light of creation. From the very beginning, you have the power of the Eternal Creator in you and you have the power to bring light out of the chaos of darkness.

Yet, sacred Being is not enough. There is *Tikkun* work to be done. *Tikkun* is Hebrew for “heal,” and even “transform.” “*Tikkun* work” means that you can heal, restore, re-invent, re-create, even transform something in the world that is degraded, broken, hearts that are shattered.

My artwork is incomplete. I need you! I left the core of this space empty; its vacancy beckons you to take your place within it, to inhabit it. I invite you to participate in making it whole. How? I ask that you take up the unfinished work of my art by creating your own project of *Tikkun*. You come up with it. You decide. You commit. That comes out of your enormous freedom to create, not mine. You can expand this artwork, so that it becomes alive out in the world . . .

Ukeles goes on to explain that visitors can participate in two ways. They can immediately go behind the black veil, sit down at a writing table, reflect privately, and complete an agreement to perform a *tikkun* project (“in words and/or drawing”); displayed in “special Book[s] of Agreements,” these commitments would become part of the artwork and available for other visitors to peruse (fig. 5). Alternatively, as in many of her works, Ukeles created ritual events—three Days of Transfer and Exchange—during which participants could complete one of the covenants secured to the backs of the hanging mirrors; in exchange, they would be given a mirror to take out into the world (“the side with your image will light your way as you create your *Tikkun*, while the second side captures the sacred images of Others”), while their covenant replaced the mirror in the artwork. By accepting the mirror, participants would agree to take on their role as a “covenantal partner” with the artist.<sup>6</sup>



5 | Writing area with visitor looking at a Book of Agreements, additional agreements on bookshelf at right, December 2008

Ukeles' text makes her dependence on the visitor to complete her work explicit ("I need you. I cannot do this myself"). It also acknowledges the resistance people may have to making a commitment ("I believe you can do this. I ask you to try") while at the same time creating a common emotional ground with her audience: "By joining me in this journey, your light will be known here, and then, through your action, it will radiate out in the world . . . All of this scares me. Does it scare you too? Yet here we are together IN THE BEGINNING. Yours in trust, Mierle Laderman Ukeles."

Over the course of the seven months that the *In the Beginning* exhibition was on view, *Birthing Tikkun Olam* was in flow as mirrors were progressively replaced by covenants (figs. 6-7), or as Ukeles has said, "the people's intentionality replaced the mirrors." At the end, only a few mirrors remained along the top row and in the middle so that visitors could still see their own faces and be reminded that, per Genesis 1 Day 6, they are created in the image of the Divine (fig. 8).

*Birthing Tikkun Olam* acts as a trigger—it makes people want to participate. Ukeles created a safe space, perhaps even a sacred space, in which visitors could slow down, reflect, and make a personal commitment—small or large, simple or profound—to change the world. The response in San Francisco was extraordinary; by the time the exhibition closed, some 6,000 individuals had completed agreements that were gathered together into fourteen thick loose-leaf binders. And visitors were surrounded by more than 150 completed covenants that had replaced most of the original 189 mirrors. Notably, Ukeles had asked people to sign their "good name" to their agreements, and almost everyone had signed their full names (including middle names or initials),



6 | Above: The installation in flow after one Day of Transfer and Exchange, September 2008

7 | Below: Detail of covenants and mirrors hanging on chains, December 2008



8 | Installation view after all three Days of Transfer and Exchange, December 2008

printed their name, and written the date. As she intended, participants understood that this was a kind of legal document they were making with the artist.

A significant number of the agreements and covenants were profoundly moving and painfully revealing, some were light and humorous, others expected and banal. The participants reflected the diverse audience—Jewish, non-Jewish, Bay Area residents as well as domestic and international tourists—that visited the Contemporary Jewish Museum in its first few months in the new Libeskind building. Many school groups, teenagers, and children participated, and left charming drawings and child’s-eye takes on *tikkun olam*. There were also witty, colorful drawings on many of the covenants (participants in the Days of Transfer and Exchange were provided with art materials), as well as pencil drawings by other visitors who illustrated their agreements.

In both the covenants and agreements, visitor responses ranged from the very general to the very specific. They touched on a wide range of ongoing social and

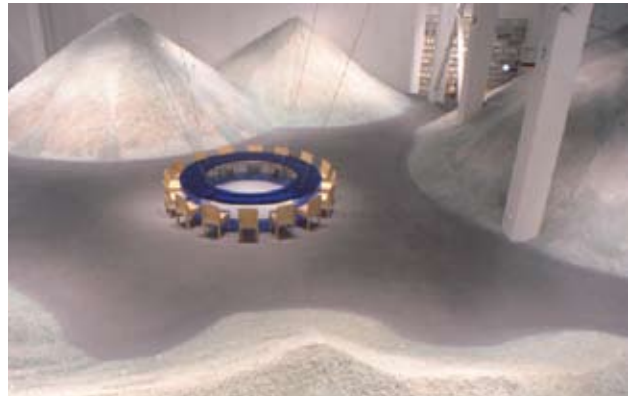
political issues: homelessness, poverty, the mentally ill, animal rights, peace, economic justice, and the need for greater access to health care. *Tikkun* projects related to the environment, sustainability, and recycling were particularly abundant. Some *tikkun* projects were topical such as working for the Obama campaign or fighting to defeat Proposition 8, a referendum designed to reverse same-sex marriage in California. Some participants committed to personal projects, clearly related to their own life experiences, for example, lecturing on facing mortality and surviving a bone marrow transplant or spreading the message that one can free oneself from addiction. Others wanted to foster local and global community, making their neighborhoods and the world safer and healthier. Strengthening the Jewish community, promoting Jewish values and traditions, and helping Holocaust survivors were also concerns. Interestingly, quite a few people pledged to be less judgmental and to have more respect for others.

While many committed to *tikkun* projects for social change and political action, perhaps most striking was the enormous number of visitors who committed to changing their own behavior and dealing with the pain and problems in their own families. Many were even stirred to be shockingly open about personal matters including divorces, estrangements, abuse, and mental illness. The frank, even confessional, tone of many responses, and the fact that people signed their full names (some even gave e-mail addresses) is striking. It seems to reveal both the cumulative effect of daytime talk-show culture and the ways in which the boundaries between public and private have increasingly blurred in the early twenty-first century as so many lives and opinions are widely disseminated through blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Yet what comes with this kind of democratization is a sense of agency and the belief—emphatically revealed in the agreements and covenants—that one’s individual actions matter and can make a difference in the world.

*Birthing Tikkun Olam* occupies an unusual place in Ukeles’ oeuvre at the same time that it is closely aligned with the longstanding concerns and strategies that have animated her artistic production. While Ukeles has created only a few works on Jewish themes, many of her installations, environmental projects, and performances seem to be informed by Jewish ethical concerns and the concept of *tikkun olam*.<sup>7</sup> The artist has also noted that while she sees her work as having emerged out of feminism and the 1960s’ social movements, the whole idea that “the artist can have the power to change the world is definitely tied to *tikkun olam*, there’s a direct link to the empowerment that comes with *tikkun olam*.”<sup>8</sup>

Ukeles’ large-scale environmental works—including for example her proposals and projects for the Fresh Kills landfill (1989–present) and Danehy Park in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1989–present), and an unrealized proposal for the Hiriya landfill in Israel (1998–99)—involve a physical and symbolic healing of the earth. In a major

9 | Mierle Laderman Ukeles,  
**Unburning Freedom Hall**, 1997  
Exhibited at Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles



installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, titled *Unburning Freedom Hall* (1997; fig. 9), Ukeles tried to address a history of racial tensions and riots through a series of “peace talks” and participatory “unburnings” intended to reverse the social rupture in the city. While working on the piece which used one million pounds of crushed glass and thematically involved the destructive and redemptive force of fire, she was reminded of the kabbalistic story of creation that she, in retrospect, feels fueled her work in Los Angeles.<sup>9</sup> When the Contemporary Jewish Museum invited Ukeles to address the seminal Hebrew text—Genesis 1, Chapter 1—Ukeles decided to finally grapple explicitly with the theme of *tikkun olam*.

In San Francisco, the artist drew on a deep study of the biblical text, rabbinic commentaries, and kabbalistic writings, her distinctive artistic voice, and a keen understanding of how participatory installation and performance works. The impact of *Birthing Tikkun Olam* grows out of the unique bond Ukeles forges with her audience and, in particular, the open-ended situation that is created. As she observes, the “artwork provides a receptive place to listen, not to tell you what to do.” Indeed, while the installation can be seen as a call to social action, Ukeles refuses “to fall in line with the liberal, leftist list of subjects that art should deal with. For art to be art,” she says, “you can’t tell people what to do. Once you tell them, it isn’t art.”

In taking this stance, Ukeles, as an artist, is creating a situation of interdependence as she places herself in the vulnerable position of asking others to complete her artwork, not knowing whether—or how—they will respond. It is a situation that conceptually resonates with her work on maintenance, garbage, and environmental reclamation. As she has noted, “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.”<sup>10</sup>

Another longtime practice of the artist and key element of *Birthing Tikkun Olam* is its emphasis on ritual and exchange. Much as in *Touch Sanitation*, with its ritualized



10 | Mierle Laderman Ukeles and “covenantal partner,” Day of Transfer and Exchange, Yeshiva University Museum, January 24, 2010

interaction—a handshake and thank-you—with sanitation workers, the Days of Transfer and Exchange involve a prescribed series of steps that culminate in the exchange of each participant’s covenant for a hand mirror. While at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, the ritual was conducted by museum staff, when Ukeles’ installation was shown at Yeshiva University Museum in New York in 2009–10, the artist created a ritual with specific choreographed movements, for herself and participants, as the transfer and exchange unfolded (fig. 10). Ukeles was, in part, inspired by “*poteach et yadecha*” [You open your hand] from King David’s Psalm 145:16 (part of the daily *Ashrei* prayer), and open-hand gestures that she has observed during prayer.

Ukeles’ “*tikkun* work” also relates to her ongoing emphasis on the importance of maintenance work and undervalued labor. Although she feels that healing/repairing is different than maintenance, the idea of *tikkun* as “work” suggests the importance she places on humanity’s need to not only maintain the world, but to actively repair—and re-create—God’s creation. For Ukeles, this is not an option but an imperative, even as the definition of “*tikkun* work” is left up to each individual participant.

The success of *Birthing Tikkun Olam* is ultimately in the liminal nature of its existence—material and immaterial, physical and metaphysical, in the museum and in the world. Here, “mixed media” means a truss, a black veil, chains, plastic mirrors, carabiners, hardware, floor strips, a glass goblet, the written text of Genesis, the artist’s texts, an amplifier, speakers, the chanted text of Genesis, a writing table, stools, paper, pencils, loose-leaf binders, and lighting. The artwork is also all of the *tikkun* projects created by visitors—the covenants, agreements, intentions, pledges, and hopes for a better world. While unquantifiable, these “media” extend the work into the spheres of personal growth, family dynamics, human relations, social action, and political change. As Ukeles observes, “Mystical meaning can rise up out of the most humble materials.”

Just as *Birthing Tikkun Olam* is both material and immaterial, it is at once intensely site-specific, positioned originally in a corner created by Libeskind’s angled walls and

ceiling, and not site-specific at all because its existence is only partially and temporarily in the gallery. As the fourteen thick binders of agreements and the more than 150 covenants make clear, Ukeles' piece doesn't end when the exhibition closes. It lives on in the actions of the thousands of people who have committed to a *tikkun* project.<sup>11</sup> If even only a fraction of them hold true to their pledges, then this artwork has the potential for enormous personal and social transformation. As Ukeles has noted, "The completion of the work isn't in here. It's bursting the boundary of the site of the work. The artwork is in the world."

#### Notes

I thank Allen Ellenzweig, Donna Harkavy, and Michael Sittenfeld for their generous editorial comments.

- 1 Unless indicated otherwise, all quotes by Mierle Laderman Ukeles are from an interview with the author on December 1, 2009.
- 2 For extensive information on Mierle Laderman Ukeles, see <http://www.feldmangallery.com>. Fresh Kills landfill was closed in March 2001, only to be temporarily reopened following the attacks of September 11, 2001 in order to receive the debris, including human remains, from the World Trade Center site. For Ukeles, who is the officially designated artist for Fresh Kills, this added a major new factor that would inevitably impact on how the future plans for the landfill site should be conceived.
- 3 See Connie Wolf, Fred Wasserman, and Dara Solomon, *In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis* (San Francisco: Contemporary Jewish Museum, 2008).
- 4 In a second version of *Birthing Tikkun Olam* that Ukeles created when *In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis* was adapted for presentation at Yeshiva University Museum in New York (November 22, 2009–February 28, 2010), the artist reimagined the piece for a more conventional white cube space by retaining the black veil and the writing area, and creating three diagonal lines of hanging mirrors; rather than a large open space in the center of the piece, the New York version had a more intimate zigzag arrangement that Ukeles envisioned as a processional movement through the installation.
- 5 In her texts of Genesis 1, Day 1 and Day 6, Ukeles added her own interpolations in a different color to make the text more egalitarian (i.e., [S/he] or [hu]man) and to challenge humanity's dominion over the earth (i.e., "They shall rule [be utterly responsible for]" or "fill the earth and master it [take care of it]").
- 6 For a discussion of the first Day of Transfer and Exchange, see Dan Schifrin, "Changing the World, One Mirror at a Time," *Voices from the Contemporary Jewish Museum*, August 6, 2008, <http://cjmvoices.blogspot.com/2008/08/changing-world-one-mirror-at-time.html>.
- 7 Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 44. Ukeles' Jewish-themed projects include two performances and an installation on the *mikvah* (ritual bath) (1977 and 1986), the video *Four Questions* (1988) (with Myriam Abramowicz, and Helène Aylon), an innovative spice container, "I am Talking to You," "A scent garden: 3 different deals from Nature," (2005 and a second, slightly differently titled, version in 2009) (with Steven N. Handel), and a number of projects on the land of Israel.
- 8 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, telephone interview with the author, December 14, 2009.
- 9 Natalie Stanchfield, "Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles," *ARTslant*, San Francisco, June 2008, [http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/ukeles/general%20press/2008\\_ukeles\\_artslant\\_stanchfield.pdf](http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/ukeles/general%20press/2008_ukeles_artslant_stanchfield.pdf).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 In April, 2010, one participant told Ukeles that "the mirror means so much to him that every Rosh Hashanah and Passover, he gathers his grandchildren and each one holds up the hand mirror that he has and proposes *tikkun* project for that time. It has become a tradition in his whole family!" (Mierle Laderman Ukeles, e-mail to the author, April 19, 2010).

#### Photo Credits

Fig. 1: Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; Fig. 2: Bruce Damonte. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, and the Contemporary Jewish Museum, from the exhibition *In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis*: Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco (June 8, 2008–January 4, 2009); Figs. 3, 5, 7, 8: Bruce Damonte. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; Fig. 4: Sibila Savage. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, and the Contemporary Jewish Museum, from the exhibition *In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis*: Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco (June 8, 2008–January 4, 2009); Fig. 6: Perretti & Park Pictures. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; Fig. 9: Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; Fig. 10: 85photo.com. Courtesy of Yeshiva University Museum, New York, from the exhibition *In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis*.