

Graz

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

GRAZER KUNSTVEREIN

Palais Trauttmansdorff, Burggasse 4

March 19–May 12

Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation*, 1977–80, is an unparalleled colossus of artistic ambition. For this epic undertaking, Ukeles systematically and personally shook the hand of each of New York City's 8,600 sanitation workers, saying, "Thank you for keeping New York alive." The extensive documentation of *Touch Sanitation*, comprised of a slide projection, texts, videos, and letters, is on view as part of the artist's first European survey.

Representing the trajectory of the artist's interests until 1980, the exhibition begins with her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, in which she soberly asks, "After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" It then moves to projects such as the meticulous registration of the work of motherhood and the execution of menial tasks in a museum, all of which are represented through textual and photographic documentation. Seeing these works offers a great deal of insight into the thinking that led up to *Touch Sanitation*, while underlining a significant difference between the two.

Unlike Ukeles's early work, which is predicated upon a neo-avant-garde impulse to collapse the so-called boundaries between art and life, *Touch Sanitation* seeks not to aestheticize the everyday but rather to exploit aesthetic license in order to orchestrate an encounter that might otherwise never have taken place. It is for this reason that the project not only escapes the charming utopianism of what preceded it but also makes it one of the most genuinely heroic works of its time. This heroism becomes all the more clear when you read the correspondence with pleasantly stunned sanitation officials and the grateful accounts of individual workers, which ultimately invest the entire project with a pathos that is as heartbreaking as it is illuminating.

Sharp, Chris. "Critics' Picks: Graz." *Artforum*. April 9, 2013.
<http://artforum.com/?pn=picks§ion=eu#picks40069>



View of "Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art Works 1969–1980," 2013.

— Chris Sharp