Inside the Sanitation System: Mierle Ukeles, Urban Ecology, and the Social Circulation of Garbage

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In the contemporary developed world, garbage *en masse* only becomes visible when something goes wrong. To be sure there are examples of "homeless" garbage barges, shunted from port to port, and sanitation strikes, such as New York City's week-long 1968 work stoppage.[1] Such events temporarily bring trash into public visibility and consciousness, but these are aberrations that occur only against the backdrop of the comfortable invisibility of the garbage that we ceaselessly produce. Since most people do not live in conditions rife with garbage, what is cast off is both out of sight and out of mind. This essay seeks to reveal the hidden circulation of garbage in New York City. It focuses on garbage not as a technological problem, or even as a narrow environmental problem, but as a pervasive social process that connects us all. In this I follow Cynthia Deitering's suggestion that the 1980s saw "a shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste" (196) and that this shift caused us to "perceive [...] our own complicity in postindustrial ecosystems" (197).[2]

There is no better way to make garbage visible in the postindustrial ecosystem of New York City than to focus on the conceptual and process-based art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an artist who in her almost fifty-year career has persistently

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Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies 10/11 (Spring & Fall 2009)

grappled with many of the thorny issues raised by waste, sanitation, and maintenance labor. Ukeles's work is concerned with economic and social interconnections, with labor processes, and with granting service workers visibility and dignity. As the artist in residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation (DOS) since 1977 she has had ample opportunity to think seriously about trash. In this capacity she has created performance and process art that engages with both the poetics and the pragmatics of trash: aesthetically evocative work that also challenges us to reimagine the sanitation system.

In what follows I will trace what art critic Jeffrey Kastner has described as the "contextual expansion" of Ukeles's work, from home to museum to city. Ukeles's early work dealt with feminist questions of domestic economy and the essential and unacknowledged service and maintenance tasks performed by women; she then expanded her focus to include the broader service economy in a series of works that presented janitorial work as art and within the context of the art museum; lastly and most significantly, she has become concerned with the entire sanitation system, a truly vast and usually invisible sector of the service economy. I am interested in how Ukeles's work refutes the myth that garbage disappears and can be ignored by modern western metropolises; instead she offers a radical and ecological vision of interconnectedness. This urban ecological vision shows that we are all a part of something shared, that we are inextricably bound together through processes and relationships that, although we can only partially understand them, must be maintained and nurtured. Furthermore her work, in a surprisingly playful and artful way, shows us ways that our interconnections are currently radically asymmetrical; of course, levels of consumption differ, but more interesting is the way in which the labor of sanitation is stigmatized, rather than embraced as a necessary component of a consumer society.

Ukeles embraces the sanitation system and argues that the "restrictiveness" that it makes manifest can be a valuable source of community and creativity ("Sanitation Manifesto" 624). I understand Ukeles's work as valuable both poetically and pragmatically for the urban ecological vision it offers. Ukeles aims to map a complex and difficult to visualize system, that is nonetheless made up of local, human interactions and relationships. Before discussing Ukeles's work, it is worth exploring some other artistic and poetic projects that have involved trash. These projects, briefly sketched below, differ from Ukeles's work in that they treat trash as something located in a geographical and temporal elsewhere or as a static, aesthetic object, decontextualized from broader urban processes. They also cultivate a perspective that is outside the sanitation system, a perspective that Ukeles asserts is impossible.

The Aesthetics of Trash: Outside the Sanitation System

Our popular associations with garbage tend to ensure that it remains positioned elsewhere. Think of an image of garbage or waste that you've encountered recently, perhaps in a newspaper or on the news. I suspect that most people envision a scene from the developing world: perhaps a shantytown in Brazil built on an open-air garbage dump; perhaps a small mountain of trash alongside

a traffic-clogged street in Lagos, Nigeria, a burgeoning mega-city; or perhaps you picture an oddly beautiful image, like Edward Burtynsky's photographs of ship-breaking in Bangladesh. Such potent and poignant images link garbage and waste to destitution, dehumanization, and a state of marginal or proto-civilization. Images like these, which circulate widely, locate garbage far from developed western cities. Gay Hawkins notes that modern, western cities are characterized by "the relative absence of waste in public" and that this invisibility "has become fundamental to the maintenance of [...] distinctly modern ways of being" (Hawkins 348). More famously, Stallybrass and White have argued that bourgeois identity was formed by the impossible and continued repression of the "low," with particularly salient manifestations being garbage and the sanitation systems designed to whisk it safely out of sight.

Garbage is evocative metaphorically, as it raises important aesthetic questions about the movement of material objects and the shifting of meaning: What happens to the things that we cast off? Who becomes responsible for them? How does something valuable become worthless trash; and is this irreversible? How do things fragment and decay? There is a rich tradition of poets and artists who have set out to explore these questions, imagining themselves as reworking and reinvigorating the castoff fragments of urban modernity, as working with its garbage. Most artists who use garbage have tended to treat it in personal terms, as an aesthetic resource and not as an ecological process and problem. Reviewing some of this work helps show what is particular and unique about Ukeles's approach to these issues.

Charles Baudelaire in *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) famously equated the lyric poet with the drunken rag picker; both make their living off of what the city leaves behind. Walt Whitman's "This Compost" (1867) asks, "how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?" (368) given all the impurities we have placed in it. Whitman responds by asserting that society is a vast compost heap that is able to purify the carcasses of the "drunkards," "gluttons," and other "diseas'd corpses" (370). Much more recently, A. R. Ammons in his book-length poem, *Garbage* (1992), declared: "garbage has to be the poem of our time because/ garbage is spiritual, believable enough / to get our attention, getting in the way, piling / up" (18). For Ammons it is not just that things wear out, but language, too; he stated, "The garbage heap of used-up language is thrown at the feet of poets, and it is their job to make or revamp a language that will fly again" (qtd. in Vendler 41). In *Garbage* Ammons imagines poetry digging into a collective, linguistic landfill, to get "the mind back into vital relationship with / communication channels" (108-9). From dead, fetid, decomposing words, Ammons hopes to make or remake something new and vital.

Countless visual artists have also worked with castoff and broken objects, from the Surrealists with their found objects to Joseph Cornell's box assemblages. For example, Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines* from the 1950s and '60s–hybrids of painting and sculpture–are centrally about collecting and re-endowing trash with value: personal, aesthetic, and economic. In *Monogram* (1955), Rauschenberg uses a stuffed goat, a tire, and other materials found on the streets

Fig. 1. Chris Jordan. *Crushed Cars #2, Tacoma.* 2004. Photograph. Image courtesy of Chris Jordan Photographic Arts.

of New York City. While he rescues these few items from obsolescence, this work is not primarily concerned with the material life and afterlife of garbage. Nor does it address the system of sanitation that binds us all socially and environmentally.

In general, art and writing that takes garbage as its subject or object tends to be quite far removed from the actual material life and afterlife of garbage and rarely does it have much to say about garbage on a larger scale, or about the system of sanitation that binds us all. In other words, they leave us no closer to understanding garbage as a social and environmental product and process. Rather, for these artists and poets, thinking about garbage is an occasion for entertaining aesthetic and formal questions. Robert Stam in "Hybridity and the Aesthetics of Garbage: The Case of Brazilian Cinema" suggests that various twentieth-century avant-gardes were concerned with the redemption of trash, with turning it back into something of value. For instance, the formalist notion of defamiliarization; the surrealist found object; Brecht's concept of refunctioning; and the Situationist strategy of détournement all hinge on discovering something new in something old. Most art that deals with trash as concept and material ends up aestheticizing it: what might be environmentalism or a catalyst of progressive social policy ends up as formal beauty.

It is, of course, easy to locate formal beauty in garbage and detritus. Alice Austen's photograph of a man with his rag cart from 1896 now seems picturesque and quaint; any scent of politics or actual trash has long since been leached out. Austen's photograph may remind us of contemporary images of the devel-

oping world, thus reinforcing the dangerous idea that this geographical elsewhere corresponds to an earlier point in a universal developmental chronology. Even photos that originally had an explicit advocacy agenda, such as the work of Jacob Riis, can now strike us as beautiful, in a melancholy sort of way. For more recent artists, the formal appeal and challenge of garbage would seem to be that it lends itself so admirably to abstraction. Chris Jordan's series of photographs, entitled "Intolerable Beauty: Portraits of American Mass Consumption" is a case in point. He photographs accretions of trash such as this mountain of flattened cars, *Crushed Cars #2, Tacoma* (2004) (Figure 1). This image clarifies another risk of visually representing waste: namely that trash becomes merely another version of the sublime. Garbage, like many of our most pressing environmental problems, tends to outstrip our perceptual capacities. Yet, I would argue, that a photograph such as *Crushed Cars* does not help us understand the problem of garbage, so much as it recuperates garbage under the aesthetic umbrella of the sublime.

Recently, Patricia Yaeger has suggested that "postmodern detritus has unexpectedly taken on the sublimity that was once associated with nature" (327). Yaeger argues that rubbish breaks down the long-standing, if troubled, distinction between nature and culture. For instance, she notes that in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, the Fresh Kills landfill is a sublime landscape in much the way that Mont Blanc was for British Romantics. Yaeger offers two provocative reasons why garbage is compelling and important. Detritus, as "the opposite of the commodified object" (335), offers a way of critiquing, or, as she puts it, haunting consumer culture. Second, she asserts that the relentless particularity of trash is a way of rebelling against Enlightenment dialectics, predicated on equivalences (336). While I am convinced by Yaeger's articulation of "rubbish ecology" as the "art of saving and savoring debris" (329), I would argue that for a rubbish ecology to be effective, in terms of changing attitudes and behaviors, it must avoid the aesthetics of sublimity. The sublime is an aesthetic of vastness and incomprehensibility that fosters feelings of helplessness.

We need work that does not render garbage sublime, but that translates waste into human and therefore comprehensible terms. Lev Manovich, a theorist of new media, argues that art that deals with visualizing incomprehensibly vast assemblages of data must aspire towards a sort of anti-sublimity. Manovich's explanation of data visualization art strikes me as a useful model for creative interventions that engage with rubbish: "data visualization art is concerned with the anti-sublime [...] [and aims] to map such phenomena into a representation whose scale is comparable to the scales of human perception and cognition." I argue that it is only through an aesthetic of anti-sublimity that mountains of garbage and the endless circulation of castoff commodities can be understood in human terms, as having a social life. Such an anti-sublime aesthetic forces the individual human back into the picture and makes it impossible to occupy a disinterested vantage point outside the production and circulation of trash; Ukeles's work, as we will see, denies the viewer any such outside perspective, placing him or her inside the sanitation system.

Maintenance Art

Mierle Ukeles began making art during the 1960s in a post-minimalist vein. She received a degree in international relations from Barnard College in New York City, but attended art school over the summers at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In the late 1960s, as a master's student at New York University's InterRelated Arts Program, she began making large, inflatable sculptures that formed temporary, portable environments. But two things drastically changed the direction of her career. First, Ukeles experienced numerous problems in "maintaining" her large, inflatable sculptures, which had a tendency to break and deform. Second, she had her first of three children, recalling, "I sort of became an inflatable myself" (Finkelpearl 301). As soon as she was visibly pregnant, Ukeles remembers that her sculpture teacher said, "'Well, I guess now you can't be an artist'" (302).

Ukeles soon found herself uncomfortably split, devoting half her time to mothering and half her time to making art. Although she doubted the merit and legitimacy of both, she states that "the fury turned into an illumination, and, in one sitting, I wrote a manifesto" (304). In "Maintenance Art Manifesto" (1969), Ukeles made a number of radical arguments about art, individuality, and interconnectedness. She argued that the avant-garde in its various forms is, in fact, committed to what she calls "*The Death Instinct*," because it privileges "separation, individuality, [...] [the tendency] to follow one's own part to death" (918). She declared that the avant-garde is "phony" insofar as its valorization of autonomy obscures networks of support such as family and friends, materials and resources. It does not acknowledge, "who holds you up, and who supports you, and who's providing the food, and the raw materials, and who are the people who are taking them out of the earth, and what are *their* working conditions, and what are the pollution costs of moving materials all around the world, who's paying for what, and any fact of human life" (Finkelpearl 304).

Ukeles reverses the avant-garde values of autonomy, individualism, and isolationism, instead celebrating connectedness and mutual dependence. "*The Life Instinct*" she notes, is dedicated to "unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and maintenance of the species, survival systems and operation, equilibrium" ("Maintenance Art Manifesto" 918). In aligning the avant-garde with death and maintenance with life, Ukeles replaces the credo, "Make It New!" with the mantra of "Maintain It!" or "Keep it Working!"[3]

While Ukeles valorizes maintenance, she notes that these life-sustaining activities are culturally devalued:

> *Maintenance is a drag*; it takes all the fucking time, literally; the mind boggles and chafes at the boredom; the culture confers lousy status and minimum wages on maintenance jobs; housewives = no pay.
>
> Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby's diaper, finish the report, correct the typos, mend the fence, keep the customer happy, throw out the stinking garbage, watch out – don't put things in your nose, what shall I wear, I have no sox, pay your

> bills, don't litter, save string, wash your hair, change the sheets, go to the store. I'm out of perfume, say it again – he doesn't understand, seal it again – it leaks, go to work, this art is dusty, clear the table, call him again, flush the toilet, stay young. (918)

Ukeles's breathless rant captures the endless repetition of maintenance and the interconnected demands that were placed on her as parent, spouse, employee, and artist. In this passage she shifts, discordantly and uncomfortably, between these different roles. This awareness of the work of social production is prescient of environmental justice and other progressive environmental movements. As a punch line and way out of the bind she finds herself in, Ukeles declares, "Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art" (918).

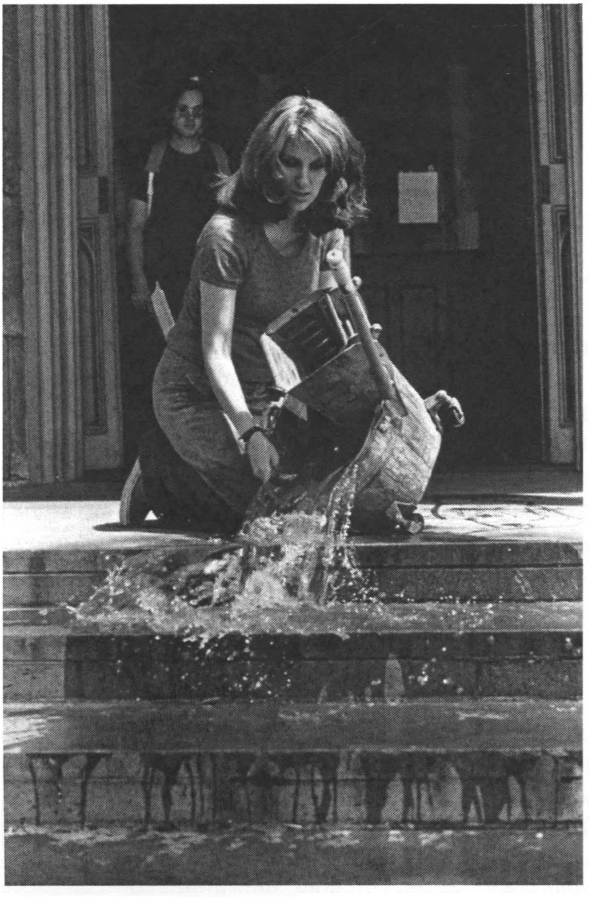

Fig. 2. Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside.* 1973. Photograph. Part of Maintenance Art Performance Series (1973-4). Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Image courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

As an addendum to "Maintenance Art Manifesto" Ukeles proposed an exhibition, to be titled "CARE" which "would zero in on maintenance, exhibit it" (919). Between 1973 and 1974 Ukeles made a number of maintenance art performance works. For a 1973 show at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, she focused on the usually invisible activities that support the museum. For *Washing Piece* (1973), she scrubbed the steps and entrance to the museum, sometimes working on her hands and knees (Figure 2). The photograph of Ukeles cleaning the museum steps offers a radical image of artistic labor, an argument that such repetitive tasks are creative and ought to be valued;[4] she termed

these "floor paintings" (Molesworth 78). For *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object* she declared her cleaning of a mummy's plastic case to be a "dust painting." Helen Molesworth writes, "In each performance Ukeles's role as 'artist' allowed her to reconfigure the value bestowed upon these otherwise unobtrusive maintenance operations, and to explore the ramifications of making maintenance labor visible in public" (79).

For Ukeles, Maintenance Art was a way to alter the equation through which we differentially bestow value and dignity onto different sorts of labor. Ukeles observed the ways in which this equation was gendered, with women's work systematically devalued, and classed, with the labor of the avant-garde artist worth more than the labor of a janitor. This differential valuing of labor is pervasive; managers and information workers are culturally as well as economically valorized, while service workers and support services (cleaning, child care, food preparation) are devalorized. In 1976 Ukeles completed a more ambitious work as her contribution to a show, "ART←→WORLD." This exhibit was housed at the Whitney Museum of American Art's downtown branch, a skyscraper at 55 Water Street. Ukeles found the skyscraper a fascinating social site: "In this sort of high-end commercial building, the maintenance people are supposed to be completely invisible. [...] Its maintenance mission is to create [...] an appearance of stasis, beyond time" (Finkelpearl 307). Ukeles exploded this illusion by foregrounding the maintenance activities of the building's three hundred workers. She wrote a letter to the workers inviting them to make a work of art with her. Ukeles recalls, "The piece was called *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day.* I asked them to select one hour of their regular work, and think of that work, that one hour, as art" (308). Ukeles then took Polaroid photos of workers working and asked the worker whether this activity was work or art. She would caption the photo accordingly and add them to the gallery walls.

In these two Maintenance Art works one sees several important features of Ukeles's later sanitation projects, including: an interest in making visible labor which is usually invisible to those who rely on it but do not do it themselves; an alliance of all service and maintenance workers, men and women alike; repetition; and an expansive sense of what counts as performance and art.

Sanitation Art & Urban Ecology

In a humorous and serendipitous twist, Ukeles's project for the "ART←→WORLD" show led to her ongoing involvement with the New York City Department of Sanitation. Ukeles notes that a review of the show by David Bourdon ended by joking that "perhaps the Sanitation Department could think of its work as performance art, and replace some of the budget, which had been cut, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts" (Finkelpearl 311). At the time New York City was in a deep fiscal crisis. Ukeles sent this review to the Sanitation commissioner and got a call, asking " 'How would you like to make art with 10,000 people?'" (311). With this Ukeles's art began to explore broader questions of feminism and domestic economy and of urban and ecological interconnectedness.

Fig. 3. Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Touch Sanitation Performance*. 1979-80. With NYC Department of Sanitation. Photograph: Marcia Bricker. Image courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Ukeles felt that the second wave of feminism (roughly from the late 1950s through the early 1970s) ended up limiting itself because it failed to see how the struggle for women's rights was part of something larger. She states that the feminist movement, "like the avant-garde [...] was unconnected" (310). For Ukeles, a particular missed opportunity was the potential to "connect with other people who did a similar kind of work" (310), to connect with others who engaged in maintenance labor. Both women who worked in the home and service workers were marginalized, underpaid, and disregarded. For Ukeles, the opportunity at the DOS was a way to bring the lessons of women's rights to broader contexts of interconnection: notably, sanitation and the role that maintenance labor plays in sustaining New York City.

Ukeles's first project with the Department of Sanitation, *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1979-80), was a work of performance and process art that despite its truly vast scale was genuinely humble. Taking an anthropological approach, she set out to learn about all aspects of the Department of Sanitation: visiting facilities, accompanying garbage men or "sanmen" on their routes, and talking to everyone she could. During her fieldwork, Ukeles personally experienced how invisible and vilified "sanmen" were. She recalls, "There was such a level of disconnection ratified by almost everybody that I met, I'm invisible, I don't count, I'm part of the garbage" (312). Implicitly they were like the garbage they handled and, if they were noticed at all, they were usually treated poorly. Even though sanitation workers are comparatively well-paid, they are treated as if they are *untouchables*, contaminated by the waste they handle.

In *Touch Sanitation Performance*, which consisted of several interrelated

pieces, Ukeles redressed this disconnection both literally and figuratively. In *Handshake Ritual*, she set out to shake hands with all of the over eight thousand sanitation workers (Figure 3). She spent one year visiting each section in each sanitation district, such that she crossed and recrossed New York City. In this piece she faced each sanitation worker and said, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." Ukeles acknowledged and thanked the sanitation workers for their integral role in maintaining the city. The handshake is, I think, the vitally important central gesture of this work. Not only is it a contemporary, ritualized way of connecting, but the word for hand is at the etymological root of maintenance. *Main* is hand in French and just about everything Ukeles sees as maintenance is work that people do with their hands. The handshake is, of course, a foundational moment of U.S. social relations. This performance redresses the fears of filth and class contagion that Stallybrass and White have explored in their work on sewers and slums. Instead of denying that we are all touched and partly determined by the lowly things we cast off, Ukeles's work valorizes this connectedness.

Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation Performance* and *Handshake Ritual* can also, I think, be seen as refuting the contemporary abstraction of handshakes. Under neoliberalism, the "handshake," rather than occurring between individuals, is often imagined as occurring between multi-national corporations or government entities as a way of cementing vast economic deals. Ukeles's sanitation art is premised on more intimate, face-to-face connections. Ukeles enjoins us to pay attention to connections that are close to home, but which we tend to forget. Somewhat more figuratively Ukeles's performances of repeated handshakes might be seen as a counter to Adam Smith's notion that capitalist markets are ruled by an "invisible hand." Ukeles's handshake ritual is a very different sort of exchange. The gesture of shaking hands with all 8,500 New York City sanitation workers becomes a sort of phenomenological refutation of the invisible hand of neoliberal economics, replacing abstract human relations with the dirty but human touch of the hand.

The photographs of *Handshake Ritual* actively solicit the viewer in constructing the meaning of the artwork and in creating an extended community. This posture towards the viewer is thus very different from that of most modern art. Typically, modern art addresses the viewer with a sort of challenge: understand me if you can. Ukeles's work addresses the viewer not with a challenge, but with an invitation: why don't you come and shake my hand. Ukeles's work seems to invite the viewer in as an equal partner, and, crucially as someone who helps to *make* the meaning, not merely *decipher* it. As artist, then, she is mediator not mystifier, and her art plays the role of transforming alienated social relations.

Ultimately the extended community that Ukeles builds offers an ecological vision of the urban. Ukeles states: "I saw 'Touch Sanitation' as a portrait of New York City as a living entity" (Finkelpearl 314). While sociological and media studies tend to reduce and simplify their topics, Ukeles wanted, as she explained to the sanitation workers, "to 'picture' the entire mind-bending operation" (Finkelpearl 296). For Ukeles making art about sanitation is

Fig. 4. Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Social Mirror.* 1983. Photograph. Mirror-covered sanitation truck. Image courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

a way of making interconnection visible. In "Sanitation Manifesto!" (1984) she suggests that the sanitation system, fully and properly understood, illuminates ecological connections between people and place. She writes:

> We are, all of us whether we desire it or not, *in relation to* Sanitation, implicated, dependent – if we want the City, and ourselves, to last more than a few days. I am – along with every other citizen who lives, works, visits or passes through this space – a co-*producer* of Sanitation's work-product, as well as a *customer* of Sanitation's work. In addition, because this is a thoroughly *public* system, I-we-are all *co-owners* – we have a *right to a say* in all this. We are, each and all, bound to Sanitation, to restrictiveness. (624)

Importantly, for Ukeles, restrictiveness is not negative, but rather a condition that is productive, a spur to creativity. Ukeles suggests that although artists are free, they have an obligation to work within restrictive systems; she refers to this as "working freedom" (625).

Ukeles's *The Social Mirror* (1983) provides another image of inclusiveness and shows how we are implicated in the sanitation system (Figure 4). We see ourselves in the mirrored sides of the garbage truck, as part of a community. Indeed, the garbage truck moves throughout the entire city and therefore potentially mirrors everyone. Its ubiquity insists upon the consumer's implication in the work of sanitation.

In *Flow City* (1983-1995), Ukeles created public art that made garbage visible, not as static artifacts, but as a dynamic process. *Flow City* included a public

visitor center in a working marine waste transfer station. She writes that this was "the first ever permanent public-art environment planned as an organic part of an operating waste-management facility, site of transfer from truck to barge of three thousand tons of New York waste every day" ("A Journey: Earth/City/Flow" 13). Visitors could watch garbage being dumped onto barges and take in the views of the Hudson River and the New York City skyline. She also added video monitors that showed Fresh Kills and other images of garbage elsewhere. Today, most of New York City's garbage is shipped to landfills in other states, including Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ohio. *Flow City* is a novel suturing together of infrastructure and culture, which shows how New Yorkers, by virtue of the circulation of garbage, are connected within the city's sanitation system.

Ukeles's work as the Percent for Art artist of Fresh Kills is ongoing and thus difficult to analyze in any thorough way. Fresh Kills, an active landfill from the 1930s to 2001, occupies 2200 acres, an area almost three times the size of Central Park. Infamously it is the highest point for many miles and one of the largest manmade objects in the world. Fresh Kills is currently being restored and converted to a public park, an ecological process that will take thirty years. This effort is being led by James Corner's landscape architecture firm, Field Operations, with assistance from architects and environmental engineers. Although it is not yet certain what Ukeles's contributions to the new park will be, Field Operations also approaches the urban from an ecological point of view. What I find most compelling about the restoration of Fresh Kills is the faith that it can be transformed from a wasteland into a vibrant public space. This faith in transformation and rehabilitation is shared by both Ukeles and James Corner. Ukeles sees landfills as potentially invaluable sites for public parks and public art. Landfills, Ukeles writes, are "the city's largest remaining open spaces, not, like classic earthworks, splendid in desert isolation" ("A Journey: Earth/City/Flow" 12). The vast, manmade forms of landfills certainly recall the titanic scale of earthworks. But while works like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) or Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969-70) are famously almost impossible to see, Fresh Kills is a public art project that will be accessible to millions. Earthworks introduced a new, inhuman and geological time scale to art and Ukeles brings this longer time scale to her consideration of the urban fabric.[5] Fresh Kills will ultimately be a clean and vibrant place, produced not through casting out waste, but through reclaiming it.

I began by claiming that Mierle Ukeles's art on and about sanitation provides an opportunity to think about what urban ecology might mean and what such an ecological perspective on the urban might offer. This ecological perspective lets or perhaps forces one to see the city as a complex, interrelated, and dynamic living system. It also encourages a view of the city as embedded within a larger economy, calling attention to asymmetrical divisions of labor and wealth. Her sanitation art projects seek to bestow dignity on a typically undervalorized sector of the economic labor market – the men and women who pick up our garbage. *Handshake Ritual*, according to Ukeles,

is "a portrait of New York City as a living entity" (Finkelpearl 314); this portrait of face-to-face interactions counters the myth that contemporary, developed cities are no longer sites of production and physical labor, but merely places of financial speculation and information exchange.

Ukeles's sanitation art is her attempt to be a "'sharer' in an ecological vision of the operating wholeness of urban society" ("Touch Sanitation" 106). In place of an outside vantage point that allows for total understanding or mastery, she hopes to participate in the ecological drama of urban public life. Indeed, Ukeles asserts that any outside vantage point is a fiction. Concerning "Touch Sanitation," Ukeles wrote that her intention was to show "that when you throw something out, there's no 'out'" (106). The clean and modern urban center is not apart from the garbage it casts off. Her projects help us place ourselves, conceptually and practically, within a larger system, within the system of sanitation, which for Ukeles binds the city together in a sort of ecological web. Ecological art forces us to see ourselves not "at the center of the universe, but embedded *within* it, living contingently within interdependent processes of existence" (Brookner 8).

For Ukeles this position within the sanitation system and within an ecological system is not one of powerlessness or entrapment. Certainly, it leads to a sense of humility and a realization that the urban system cannot be redesigned by fiat in the style of some of Robert Moses's or Le Corbusier's more wild imaginings. It also leads Ukeles to valorize maintenance over creativity; in "Maintenance Art Manifesto" she wrote "The sourball of every revolution: [...] who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" (918). At the risk of too glibly summarizing Ukeles's thought, she advocates not revolution, but evolution; in the place of sudden changes she advises maintenance.

But she very much believes that change is possible, from within the system in which we all find ourselves. She states, "I dreamed that I could make public art *grow* from inside a public infrastructure system outward to the public and that the growing would affect both the inside as well as the outside" (Finkelpearl 322). And elsewhere she proposed "that we flood with creativity our environmental infrastructure" ("A Journey: Earth/City/Flow" 14). In "Sanitation Manifesto!" Ukeles suggests that artists have a privilege and an obligation to work in restrictive environments, within the environmental infrastructure of the urban. The shared "restrictiveness" of the urban, according to Ukeles, brings us all together: "Out of these most humble circumstances, we can begin to erect a democratic symbol of commonality" (625). This commonality replaces the utopia of the modern, that casts its garbage outside the boundaries of its clean, urban, fantasy spaces, with an urban utopia that accounts for and shares in the important labor of cleaning up and maintaining. This is where one can hope that an ecological perspective on the urban will lead.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the New York Institute of Technology's second annual interdisciplinary conference, "New York: City in Motion." I would also like to thank Marvin Diogenes, Cheryl Greene, Donna Hunter, Andrea Lunsford, Gabrielle Moyer, and especially Naomi Greyser for reading and commenting on drafts of this essay.

[1] For a very thorough account of one well-known homeless garbage barge, see Benjamin Miller, *Fat of the Land: Garbage in New York: The Last Two Hundred Years* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2000), 1-14.

[2] Deitering traces the effects of this new attention to waste in John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, to which could certainly be added his more recent *Underworld*.

[3] Manifestos are, of course, a dearly beloved genre of various avant-gardes; there is thus an inescapable irony that Ukeles chose to assault the avant-garde notion of artistic creativity and radical individualism through a thoroughly avant-garde form.

[4] Of course, it also differs greatly from more popular images of the modern artist at work, such as Hans Namuth's famous photographs of Jackson Pollock. The water cascading out of Ukeles's bucket seems to play with the abstract expressionist dripping of paint and the idea of action painting.

[5] In "Sanitation Manifesto!" Ukeles writes, "Sanitation is the principal symbol of Time's passage and the mutable value of materiality in organized urban life" (624).

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