**Art & Ecology:**

**Perspectives and Issues**

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**Ecological Restoration**

**Mierle Ukeles, *Flow City***

**by Don Krug**

[[](http://greenmuseum.org/c/aen/Images/Ecology/flow.php)](http://greenmuseum.org/c/aen/Images/Ecology/flow.php)

The art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles is about the everyday routines of life. In 1969, after the birth of her first child, Ukeles wrote a *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* that questioned binary systems of opposition that articulate differences between art/life, nature/culture, and public/private. The manifesto proposed undoing boundaries that separate the maintenance of everyday life from the role of an artist in society. Ukeles was interested in how the concept of transference could be used by artists to empower people to act as agents of change to stimulate positive community involvement toward ecological sustainability.

In the 1960s, Ukeles completed an undergraduate degree in history and international studies from Barnard and studied visual arts at Pratt Institute in New York. Ukeles' work at this time was experimental, and visually and symbolically conveyed social unrest associated with events such as the women's movement and the Vietnam War. Ukeles became increasingly restless about the separation of the artist in society from everyday activities like child care, household work, and other routine labor practices that she felt should be reinterpreted within the contexts of personal and political aesthetic values. Ukeles stated, "Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials. . . . I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order.) I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now I will simply do these everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art." (Ukeles, 1969)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles' most recent work synthesizes art and life within the contexts of social, political, environmental, and feminist theory. Patricia Phillips (1995) points out, "The artist's own family dynamics and personal observations underlie the authenticity of her inherently public work, which seems a more effective way to respond to cataclysmic, unanticipated shifts. In fact, this by-play of private-public, the mixing and merging of formerly oppositional designations, has stimulated a wider reconsideration of institutional systems while supporting a process of feminization in the public realm, animating the popular slogan 'The personal is political.'" (p.169)

Ukeles' work is created through a process of participatory democracy that unites people in open dialogue about the characteristics of important community ecological issues. *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976) was a performance/project exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Ukeles collaborated with 300 hundred maintenance staff at a bank in Manhattan. She took Polaroid photographs of men and women doing routine jobs and asked them to discuss their labor as either art or work. Jobs were often discussed by the same person, at different times, in different ways. Later, she exhibited the workers' narrative statements alongside pictures of their daily chores. She asked viewers to challenge the social constructions of aesthetic and cultural values that define what work and art mean.

Similar forms of juxtaposition that challenge definitions of art as separated from life can be seen in other works by Ukeles such as *Cleaning the Mummy Case, Keeping of the Keys,* and *Wash.* Ukeles believes that positive social change can occur through the direct interaction of art and life. Art can create a climate for change. Ukeles writes, "Art can give us new air to breathe." (Phillips, 1995)

In 1976, Ukeles accepted an unsalaried position as artist-in-residence with the New York City Department of Sanitation. She proposed to do work that would incorporate dialogue, community participation around life-centered issues, and ecological sustainability. Ukeles focused her creative energies on a series of long term projects: *Touch Sanitation* (1978-1984); *Flow City* (1983-current); and *Fresh Kills Landfill and Sanitation Garage* (1989-present). These projects provided visitors with points of access to issues of urban waste management.

*Touch Sanitation* was Ukeles' first project as the city's new artist-in-residence. She drew attention to the maintenance of urban ecological systems in general and the use of pejorative language to represent "garbage men" in particular. Ukeles traveled sections of New York City to shake the hands of over 8500 sanitation employees or "sanmen" during a year-long performance. She documented her activities on a map, meticulously recording her conversations with the workers. Ukeles documented the workers' private stories, fears, castigations, and public humiliations in an attempt to change some of the negative vernacular words used in the public sphere of society. In this way, Ukeles used her art as an agent of change to challenge conventional language stereotypes.

*Flow City* is another example of how Ukeles addresses issues of positive social change through her art. At the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station, Ukeles constructed *Flow City* as a point of public access to the reconceptualization of urban ecological systems. Phillips (1995) writes, "Using the culture of sanitation work as an allegory of global environmental management, the project reflects Ukeles' commitment to bring citizens to a visceral, participatory experience of the scale and issues of solid-waste management in New York City. As always, the social, political, and environmental issues are inextricably connected." (p.185-187)

In New York, a marine transfer station is where garbage is loaded onto barges prior to being transported to and dumped in a landfill. Ukeles constructed this visitor center as a way for people to view the transference of used and recyclable material and the labor of everyday maintenance workers. She constructed a space with three separate views of city life and urban ecology. Facing east was a beautiful panoramic representation of the city; to the west was a picture of large barges filled with trash and urban waste; and to the south was a bank of video monitors. Scientists, ecologists, artists, and others were invited to contribute information for video displays to help educate people about ecological urban issues. These three perspectives provided a range of views for visitors to see and question everyday consumer choices and to learn more about the consequences of their lifestyle on creating a healthy environment in the future.

The artist used education as a powerful tool to engage community members in active learning processes. Community involvement and affirmation are at the heart of Ukeles' art work. Phillips (1995) states "By creating a point of access, Ukeles enables members of the public to make more incisive connections with the physical dimensions of their urban and natural worlds. Both the city and the river are seen as relational; *Flow City* serves as the suture that draws the extremes of the natural-culture dialectic into visible coexistence." (p.188)

**Questions**

* How does Ukeles use people's stories or oral history as an artistic method of inquiry?
* How does Ukeles question social categories that define as opposites such terms as personal and political, nature and culture, art and life?
* What are the advantages and disadvantages of questioning systems of opposition that are part of everyday language systems?
* Can the direct experiences of sanitation activities create a sense of responsibility and affirmation in community residents?
* What new forms of interpretation can the opportunity for observation provide in a sanitation visiting center?

**References**

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