

Covid-19 Impact Project

Reflection by Kaegan Sparks, PhD Candidate, Art History, The Graduate Center, CUNY

When Covid struck last March, I was preparing to embark on my dissertation, provisionally titled “Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Politics of Social Reproduction, 1969–present.” Although library and archive closures over the ensuing year have stalled the practical dimensions of my research, the pandemic has reframed and underscored my project’s core concerns in ways I couldn’t have anticipated. My study applies the socialist-feminist framework of reproductive labor to the art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who made her most important performance works in collaboration with New York City’s Department of Sanitation just after the municipal government’s 1970s fiscal crisis. A half-century after this work began, the pandemic and its extended effects have renewed attention to the indispensability of reproductive labor—from the amplified demands of household maintenance and childcare during lockdown, to new rhetorics that suddenly valorize “essential workers.” The most relevant development of the past year for me, personally, has been a new investment in community organizing through mutual aid work. I pivoted much of my energy from theorizing reproductive labor to participating in it directly in a broad, public context.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, For → forever..., 2020. Sponsored by Queens Museum, Times Square Arts, and MTA Arts & Design

Last summer hand-written thank you notes to service workers appeared across digital ad displays in subway stations and in Times Square. Their upbeat message – “Dear Service Worker, Thank you for keeping NYC alive!”—seemed to echo dozens of window signs and corporate ads over the past year that offered lip service to “essential workers” who were erstwhile invisible to most city-dwellers. This tribute was, in fact, designed by the artist who is the subject of my monographic dissertation, reviving a phrase that she had personally recited to each of New York’s 8,500 sanitation workers

over eleven months in 1979–80. Ukeles’s signature public performance, *Touch Sanitation*, involved shadowing the collection routes of city garbage collectors in order to ceremonially shake each of their hands and thank them for keeping the city alive. The phrase had particular gravity for New Yorkers who had just endured the effects of the city’s near-bankruptcy, caricatured in popular memory by the *Daily News*’s infamous 1975 headline: “FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD.”

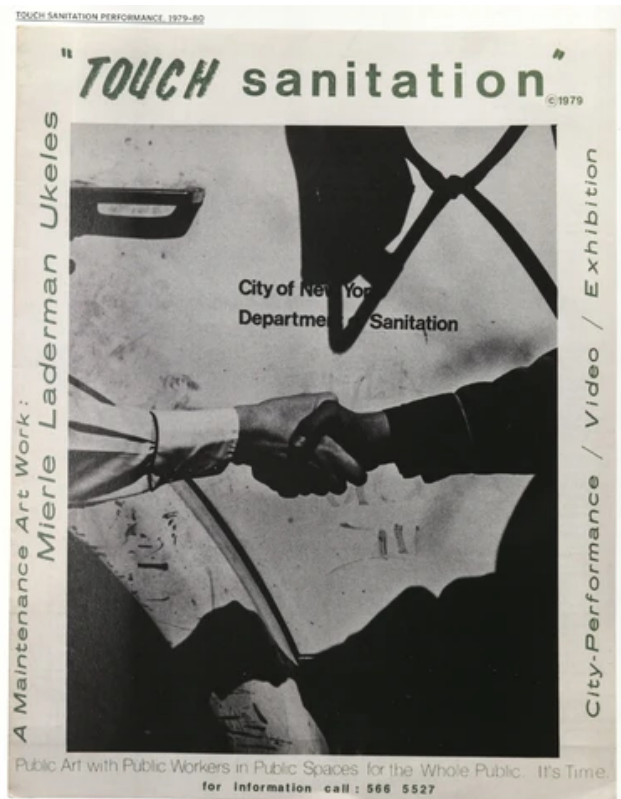


Striking garbage collectors, 1975 (Photo: New York Daily News Archive/Getty Images)
Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation*, 1979–80

Among the byproducts of this crisis, which resulted in massive cuts to welfare programs and inaugurated a new era of austerity, were wildcat strikes by the city’s sanitation workers. Protesting the projected layoffs of tens of thousands of public workers to save the city’s budget, garbage collectors walked off the job en masse, leaving enormous amounts of putrid trash to fester in the streets at the peak of summer. Combined with an even longer organized sanitation strike just seven years prior, these events had made the necessity of waste disposal, which the general public typically takes for granted—or worse, disparages—glaringly palpable to the senses. During the 1970s, the precarity of social welfare in New York was writ large in daily experience: Infrastructure was crumbling; daycares, senior centers, and mental health facilities were shuttered; CUNY abandoned free tuition; an arson epidemic, exacerbated by defunded fire departments, decimated the Bronx; and a mass electric blackout left most of the city powerless for 25 hours at the peak of summer. During this period of palpable instability, the problem of making reproductive systems like sanitation *apprehensible*, or as Ukeles describes, “flush[ing] them up to consciousness,” preoccupied the young artist.

Our current crisis has had similar effects. Last spring's drastic economic slowdown and lifestyle changes renewed public attention to the low- or unpaid work necessary for renewing the conditions of social and material life. One of the key issues my study on Ukeles grapples with is the limits of recognition politics—what do we make of art that symbolically acknowledges some of society's most degraded work, precisely at the moment that this work, and the social infrastructures it supports, are most jeopardized? Are visibility and respect enough in the face of deep structural iniquities and the maldistribution of resources? Last May in New York, GEICO-sponsored jets sky-typed "We salute our first responders" over the city, and my homebound, upper-middle-class neighbors enthusiastically banged pots each evening in support. Meanwhile, New York's nurses wore garbage bags as makeshift PPE, and countless other venerated "essential workers" were forced to risk virus exposure because they could not afford to quarantine.

This type of cutting contradiction emerges in Ukeles's work as well. Some have critiqued *Touch Sanitation*—represented mostly through photographs of the young, smiling Ukeles dressed in workers' coveralls, posing with a multiracial group of working class men—as a type of artwashing, lending the city government a conveniently optimistic guise just as it was slashing welfare and instituting neoliberal anti-labor policies in the late seventies. While this skepticism is valid, I argue that on the whole, Ukeles's oeuvre counters some of the worst tendencies of visibility politics. Ukeles offers reproductive labor as a through-line for translating the personal, everyday experience of gender-based oppression to a broader materialist analysis. Ukeles's work demonstrates analogies between the struggles of often-siloed groups by bringing housewives and "sanmen," or garbage collectors, under the common rubric of "maintenance." It offers a potentially powerful act of representation by demonstrating often elusive interdependencies among domestic, civic, and ecological systems, and in so doing, suggesting unexpected shades of solidarity.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Documentation of Touch Sanitation, 1979–80

It is precisely this sort of systemic, anti-individualist perspective that was for me urgently demanded by the conditions of the pandemic. I started mutual aid work almost compulsively in March of last year, while personally grappling with Covid's sudden, world-historical sense of emergency—a contagion, I hoped, that might finally make our social entanglements inescapable to consciousness, a disruption that might suspend our fixation on breakneck growth and reorient us toward the patient work of sustaining ourselves and one other. In the wake of Bernie Sanders's electrifying appeals to fight for someone you don't know, I interacted with neighbors on a direct, personal level about their most pressing fears—eviction, food insecurity, the health of themselves and others. The borough of Queens is one of the most ethnically diverse places in the world, home to a large proportion of undocumented immigrants whose service work keeps New York running—busboys, food truck workers, nannies, taxi drivers—and the particular vulnerability of this population made Queens the epicenter of New York's outbreak in March–May of last year. Cooperating with other new organizers I knew only

from a Zoom screen, I helped form the mutual aid network Queens Care Collective. We developed a sustainable food delivery program for more than one hundred households across the borough every week, among other projects focused on housing security, political education, and more.

This work is relentless—we are experiencing a moment of barbarous hunger in the U.S., exacerbated by insufficient government action to abate the pandemic’s fallout—but it is also enlivening. The past year has allowed me to shift time and energy that was previously consumed by commuting and ambient stress around academic productivity to building relationships in my local community. For me the year has been hallmarked by work that is hands-on and immediate, rather than cerebral and long-term: I spend up to twenty hours a week doing coordinating food deliveries, fundraising, and conducting other ongoing, nitty-gritty maintenance tasks required to keep Queens Care Collective functioning. The group is almost entirely comprised people new to community organizing who were strangers to each other before Covid. I am stunned and proud of how we were able to hit the ground running and sustain this difficult and uncompensated work over such a trying year.



Community fridges that Queens Care Collective helps to stock regularly

I remain curious and compelled by parallels between the type of reproductive work that I study, and have identified with as a politicizing force in my own life—work that is invisible, feminized, and often skipped over in favor of more sensational, public, or “productive” endeavors—and what Civil Rights activist Ella Baker called “spade work,” or the unglamorous, tedious tasks of community organizing that prepare the way for future political action. Especially in comparison with more dramatic strategies like protests and publicized speeches, Baker admitted that spade work is “usually more exhausting than the immediate returns seem to warrant.” Social reproduction theory

(the theoretical basis of my dissertation) argues that “ground-zero” socializing work like teaching and childcare is a terrain of struggle—not just to correct for the structural devaluation of these activities, but to emphasize their revolutionary potential. Because it is rooted in interpersonal care work that sets examples for how we engage with society, reproductive labor can perpetuate dominant ideologies or it can help remake them, from the ground up. Though it’s far from guaranteed, I hold on to the potential of mutual aid work to “grow new solidarities” at the micro level, as activist Dean Spade puts it, to rupture that diehard American fallacy of self-reliance, with all its attendant cultural baggage of isolation and shame. Mutual aid’s focus on building the capacity for political change resonates with the social reproduction lens, in which survival work serves as a hinge between the restitution of preexisting social relations and building a new world.

(Parts of this reflection have been drawn from my recent presentation, “‘After the Revolution’: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Post-Crisis City,” at the 2021 College Art Association Annual Conference, as well as from two recently published essays: “Dirty Pictures: The Art of Picking Up 85,000 Tons of Trash,” *Lux Magazine*, issue 1, February 2021; and “Mutual Understanding: Kaegan Sparks reviews recent literature on mutual aid,” *Artforum.com*, March 2, 2021.)