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Maintaining Hierarchies: The Perpetuation of Class and Labor Divisions in Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object

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MAINTAINING HIERARCHIES:
THE PERPETUATION OF CLASS AND LABOR DIVISIONS IN MIERLE LADERMAN
UKELES' *TRANSFER: MAINTENANCE OF THE ART OBJECT*

by

META GARY

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond, PhD

ABSTRACT

Mierle Laderman Ukeles' 1973 performance, *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object* posed a comparison between her own gendered household labor and the labor of a maintenance worker in a museum. The performance also addressed the hierarchies of maintenance work versus artistic work as well as invisible work versus public work, and is often interpreted as serving to equalize these boundaries. While hierarchies are questioned within this piece, this paper argues that the performance primarily serves to acknowledge and maintain the inevitability of these existing hierarchies within the art institution, rather than eliminate them.

INDEX WORDS: Maintenance Art, Domestic Labor, Hartford Wash, Institutional Critique, Housework, Wadsworth Antheneum, Wage Labor, Feminism

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2015

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all artists who attempt to disrupt the status quo.

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ARTICLE

Much of the scholarly discourse surrounding Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work of the 1970s identifies the artist's radical breaking down of class boundaries and labor hierarchies. Specifically, her incorporation of labor practices and of the working class is often heralded as a means of leveling class structure and elevating the work and the workers of the wage-earning class. Much like her contemporaries, Ukeles' art drew upon labor and everyday practices as source material for her performances. However, as an artist, her position in the institution prevented her from being able to truly dissolve class and labor hierarchies, and rather only re-instill their existence. In particular, the gender and class equivalency that Ukeles sought presents in her performance series of 1973, *Hartford Wash*, but is not without complication due to her privilege as an artist within the art institution. This privilege prevents her from equating her work with wage-earning labor because as an artist, she is able to choose to do this work, and in doing so, has the power to elevate the task of maintenance work.

Initially, Ukeles wanted to make her private and invisible housework public. As an artist, she sought to do this by combining her role as wife and mother with her role as a professional artist. To achieve this consolidation, she wrote the *Maintenance Art Manifesto* in 1969, which ultimately states that as an artist, everything she does is art. Ukeles wrote the manifesto because she was struggling to balance her two jobs as an artist and a mother. Domestic tasks, commonly considered the prerogative of women, kept her busy and took time away from her art-making. Conversely, while in her studio, she often wondered if she was spending enough time taking care of her child and

managing her household duties. In an interview with Tom Finkelpearl, in his book, *Dialogues in Public Art*, Ukeles describes her frustration in trying to navigate parenthood while establishing a professional artistic practice, stating: “there were no words in the culture that gave value for the work I was doing” (Ukeles in Finkelpearl 2001: 303). The non-waged domestic labor she was performing was happening in private and outside of the definitions of the artistic career she was trying to pursue. She sought a way to validate both.

Ukeles wrote her manifesto in four sections, each presenting a series of dichotomies that reflected her struggle to maintain the two halves of her life.¹ Throughout the manifesto, she refers to “maintenance” in reference to “development,”. She first defines this binary in terms of general systems of progress and maintenance, but narrows her scope throughout the manifesto to define development as creative artistic work, and maintenance, the work that makes the artistic development possible.

In section A of her manifesto, Ukeles introduces “The Death Instinct and the Life Instinct”, indicating that there is one direction of “follow(ing) one’s own path to death” by way of individuality and the avant-garde. It is this path that elicits “dynamic change” and though classified as the “death” instinct, is presented as quite full of life and progress. By contrast, the “Life Instinct”, which is cyclical, requires maintenance and preserves equilibrium. Here, the life instinct refers to its most necessary elements as it upholds “survival systems and operations.” In this contrast between the life and death, arguably one of the most fundamental dichotomies imaginable, Ukeles establishes an opposition that she continues to detail in the remaining three sections of her manifesto.²

In section B of her manifesto, Ukeles sets up a similar dichotomy consisting of “Development and Maintenance.” Development is “pure individual distinction; the new; change; progress...”, while maintenance entails, “keep[ing] the dust off the pure individual creation; preserv[ing] the new; sustain[ing] the change...”. Ukeles clearly indicates that the two classifications have a hierarchy where one exists purely to support the other. Victoria Rogers, in “Maintaining Development: Redefining the Relationship,” observes that Ukeles presents the two categories as “simultaneously oppositional and dependent...Development is primary while maintenance is secondary and derivative. The predictability of maintenance systems precludes them from initiating change and progress” (2010:11). Rather, it is development’s perpetual initiation of change and progress that requires the support of maintenance’s perpetual consistency. Ukeles presents them as oppositional in order to illustrate her personal need to combine the two, and because of their defined opposition, had not previously been able to simultaneously achieve both. As presented in her definitions in the Manifesto, Development, through its “pure individual creation” historically and broadly includes art, but in a reversal, Ukeles aligns her art with the Maintenance side, thus seeking a merging of the two opposites and a disruption of the existing and accepted division. It is in her attempt to merge the binary that Ukeles compares the hierarchical value of maintenance work to the level of development, in this case art, and allows the two to briefly hover side by side while revealing development’s dependence upon maintenance. Of this ranking, Patricia Phillips observes in “Maintenance Activity: Creating a Climate for Change” that “it is this very support that allows the practice of art making to appear as the ultimate expression of individual freedom”(1995:172). In other

words, the visible, more valued work exists as an isolated, celebrated entity only because the invisible, undervalued work allows it to do so, a condition that Ukeles powerfully and wittily questions in this second section of the manifesto: “after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?” By redefining maintenance work as art work, Ukeles exposes concealed support systems that had previously been separated from the art, or development, that they supported.

Section C of the manifesto highlights Ukeles frustration with the maintenance duties she needed to do in her home: “clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby’s diaper...stay young.” She conveys the drudgery of daily life as a wife, mother and maintenance worker through the list of repetitive tasks. This list follows a direct declaration of her perception of this work. “Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.) The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay.” In this third section of the manifesto, Ukeles conveys this work as unmistakably undesirable and also introduces a perceived equivalency between her own maintenance work and that of a wage-earning maintenance worker.

It is also of importance in this section that Ukeles specifically refers to this work as “maintenance work” as opposed to “domestic work” or “housework”, which implies a broad transcendence of its boundaries into life outside of the home, and to workers that are not necessarily involved with non-waged domestic labor. Artistically, this becomes relevant as she compares, in Section D of her manifesto, this type of work with contemporary art practices that also entail daily activities:

Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials.

Conceptual & Process art, especially, claim pure development and change, yet employ almost purely maintenance processes.

While Ukeles recognized that the art institution was highlighting the daily activities that many conceptual and process artists were claiming as avant-garde art, it was still excluding women's daily private life activities. Fluxus, for example, began in the early 1960s as an avant-garde movement, but quickly gained mainstream art world recognition and acceptance. The group formed under the direction of George Maciunas as a reaction to the capitalist-driven art market and was founded upon ideals of highlighting and celebrating ordinary or everyday mundane activities, as well as promoting the accessibility of art by incorporating it into life, or more specifically, by suggesting that there is not a clear division between art and life. Fluxus artists, as well as many artists emerging in the 1960s celebrated the small activities and objects of everyday life.

By the late 1960s, many artists also sought to align themselves with working class labor, and with the wage earners conducting the labor, in order to legitimize their art-making within the mainstream art institution. In her book, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, Julia Bryan-Wilson explores the divide and overlap

between art-making and “working” during this time period. She explains that the difficulty in describing artists as workers is because “under capitalism art also functions as the ‘outside,’ or other, to labor: a nonutilitarian, nonproductive activity against which mundane work is defined, a leisure-time pursuit of self-expression, or a utopian alternative to the deadening effects of capitalism”(2011:27). Historically creative labor is divided from “productive” labor, and the convergence of the two can therefore be complicated. Bryan-Wilson includes Marxist theorist Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez’s assessment of the labor and art divide that “the similarity between art and labor lies in their shared relationship to the human essence; that is, they are both creative activities by means of which man produces objects that express him, that speak for and about him. Therefore, there is no radical opposition between art and work” (2011:30). While this determination supports the philosophies of some of Ukeles’ labor-focused contemporaries, it presents a contradiction to the divisions Ukeles repeatedly explores in her manifesto. This suggested equivalence parallels the artist’s attempt to align her art with her domestic work, yet opposes the explicit divide she illustrates.

In 1969 the Art Workers Coalition formed with a goal of defining artistic work as legitimate labor, therefore defining the artist as a worker. In this attempted recategorization of artists as workers, the goals of the group primarily addressed seeking better professional relationships between artists and art institutions, as well as addressing the occupational concerns of not only artists, but art writers, gallerists, curators, collectors and other defined careers within the art institution. Though the AWC disbanded after only three years, it helped to bring awareness to the value of arts

professionals as recognized workers in the workforce in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³

One of the most prominent voices in the AWC, Carl Andre especially valorized working class manual labor through his use of raw building materials as well as the manual process of placing them, but also consciously maintained a level of artistic separation from that process. For example, in laying a row of bricks on the floor in his 1966 piece *Equivalent VIII*, he intentionally placed the bricks not as a bricklayer would, secured by mortar, but rather simply placed next to each other on the floor without any adhesive. This merging of practices associated his artistic work with that of a wage-earning brick layer, without exactly replicating the actual work of the latter.

Like her “art worker” contemporaries of the late 1960s, Ukeles aligned herself similarly with the working class, however unlike Andre, the work she originally referenced was work that she was actually presently performing in the home. While Andre romanticised manual wage-earners and the beauty and purity of their processes and materials in an attempt to evoke their artistic validity and his own validity as a worker, Ukeles’ alignment was of a different nature. As evident in her discussion of maintenance work in her manifesto, rather than appreciating the work she performed on a daily basis, she found maintenance work taxing and dull, and did not romanticize it at all. As a wife and mother, the majority of her day was spent on unpaid daily maintenance of her home and family. While her male artist counterparts were able to adopt manual work by choice and heroize it, the maintenance labor that Ukeles was performing in the home was out of necessity, rather than performed by artistic choice. Although Andre, for example, did in fact work as a manual laborer on the railroad, that

work was not simultaneous with his career as an artist, rather his artistic career replaced his railroad career. Ukeles' ongoing invisible gendered domestic work however, did occur simultaneously with her artistic work.

Ukeles was not alone in her efforts to address the invisibility of gendered domestic life. In the early 1970s, the slogan, "The Personal is Political" began circulating in feminist discourse. The phrase was borrowed from the title of an essay published in 1970 by Carol Hanisch describing the relationship between women's treatment in the private domestic sphere and their public position in a social and political sphere. In the essay, Hanisch addresses women's work by defining "worker" as "anyone who has to work for a living as opposed to those who don't" and asserts simply that "all women are workers"(1970:4). In a similar vein, Heidi Hartman, in her 1979 essay, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*, further notes problems with private women's unpaid labor by discussing previous Marxist assertions that equate the feminist struggle with class struggle in the public labor force, but that neglect to address that domestic gender inequalities are firmly implanted in the home.⁴ The understanding, therefore, was that there were issues within the private home that reflected a broader, more universal public cultural imbalance.

In 1970 Redstockings published artist Pat Mainardi's "The Politics of Housework," an essay that detailed the ingrained gender imbalance in household duties and called for an effort towards gender democracy beginning with an equal sharing of housework. As Ukeles asserted in her manifesto of 1969, in her personal home experience, her role as a woman was to maintain the household through housework. Her manifesto rattles off a list of maintenance tasks that are part of her daily

responsibilities. For example, “wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby’s diaper...” all refer, in her personal experience, to women’s housework. The noted division she details reflects a gendered inequality between women’s work as a mother in the home and “real” work as an artist free from the responsibilities of raising a child and maintaining the home. Christine Wertheim, in her essay “After the Revolution, Who’s Going to Pick up the Garbage?” makes a similar observation, stating that “while male worker-revolutionaries tied the value of their work to the place of its performance—shop or home—female workers made no such elision”(2009:19), because female labor was confined almost exclusively to the home and was therefore less visible and less valued. Rogers addresses this traditionally gendered classification by observing that women are “consigned to activities of maintenance and reproduction in the home, while men have controlled the space beyond the home, the realm of labor and production” (2010:12). Because her experience seemed to lack the democratic division for which Mainardi advocated, Ukeles developed her central platform for creating Maintenance Art.

In order to address this dichotomy as well as to consolidate her own two jobs of mother and artist, Ukeles began documenting her work in the home and exhibiting the documentation as Maintenance Art. For example, in her 1973 piece *Maintenance Art: Personal Time Studies: Log*, Ukeles composed a time log over the course of four days to record her daily activities, including housework, childcare and art making. Another piece from her larger series, *Doing the Laundry*, also created in 1973, features a sequential photo progression of dark socks. *Sorting the Socks: Hommage to Mu Ch’i* consists of five black and white photographs that narrate Ukeles’ task of turning a

disorderly pile of socks into a row of seven pairs of neatly folded socks.⁵ While exhibiting the documentations of her various personal maintenance responsibilities, she decided that rather than only display written logged information or documentary photographs, she needed to also physically perform maintenance tasks within the exhibition space to further infiltrate the boundary that separated this invisible work from the public.

Although Ukeles' Maintenance Art originated out of literal documentation of her real daily domestic work, her career as an artist did not replace her responsibilities as a mother. Initially, therefore, there was not a choice to make, but rather a merging of the two out of necessity, as her manifesto states. Eventually, however, Ukeles noted the similarities between her invisible housework and the invisible workers who worked in public performing similar maintenance tasks. She developed a parallel between the two through the mutual invisibility of their respective forms of maintenance labor.⁶

Ukeles exhibited her personal domestic maintenance documentations as part of *c. 7500*, a touring exhibition of work by female artists curated by Lucy Lippard in 1973. At the exhibition's presentation at the Wadsworth Atheneum Art Museum in Hartford CT, she performed a four-part series of physical labor performances entitled *Hartford Wash*. In two public performances she scrubbed the public spaces. In *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside* (fig.1), Ukeles washed the floors on her hands and knees in the main entryway atrium inside the museum. Likewise, in *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (fig.2), she scrubbed the outdoor steps at the entrance of the museum. All of her maintenance performances took place during normal open museum hours while visitors attended the museum, so she worked amid the

public. She intentionally did not erect a sign, or provide on-site information indicating that she was an artist or that this work was artwork, so most visitors remained unaware that an art performance was even taking place. Therefore, because of the type of work she was performing, although literally visible, the work remained insignificant to those experiencing it. In *Maintenance as Security: Keeping of the Keys*, Ukeles used the security guard's keys to lock and unlock various museum doors throughout the day as she saw fit, disregarding the existing schedules of the museum and therefore disrupting standard administrative operations. The performance *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object* (fig. 3) (fig.4) incorporated the museum's maintenance worker and conservator. In this piece Ukeles staged a performance collaborating with one of the museum's maintenance workers and a museum conservator. The sequence of planned staged events in the performance were as follows:

1. The maintenance worker hands Ukeles a rag and a bottle of cleaning fluid.
2. Ukeles cleans the display case with the rag and the fluid. Then, she stamps both the case and the rag with a custom-made official "Maintenance Art" stamp, making the objects "art".
3. Ukeles hands the same stamped rag and bottle to the conservator (fig.5), because once the clean case becomes art, the janitor is no longer allowed to touch it. The conservator is now responsible for cleaning the case.

In this series of public maintenance performances, Ukeles attempts to bring maintenance work into the visible art realm. Rogers argues that "by lifting maintenance

up as a life-sustaining practice in its own right, Ukeles' work does away with the traditional hierarchical relationship that privileges development over maintenance”(2010:11). While Ukeles does question the hierarchy between development and maintenance, its existence is not absolved as Rogers suggests.

In Ukeles' series of performances at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the change of venue and reversal of time of day (intensive cleaning like this would typically happen after hours at the museum) brought not only the artist's domestic housewife duties from the private sphere out into public, but also represented Ukeles' attempt to parallel the work of the invisible maintenance staff within that very museum by making visible the invisible within the walls in which it actually took place. As Helen Molesworth describes in her essay, “Work Stoppages: Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Theory of Labor Value,” Ukeles' performance series posed “an equivalence between the devalued maintenance work” in art institutions and that of traditionally gendered housework by challenging the privacy of domestic labor and asserting that “maintenance of homes is homologous with the maintenance of institutions” (1977:21). In this assessment, the homology largely hinges on the invisibility of the two forms of labor.

Labor performed in private is not valued as highly as that which is performed in public. Women's domestic labor is work that is performed in the privacy of the home and is not viewed or acknowledged by anyone outside of the home. Likewise, within a private/public dichotomy also exists a visible and invisible work distinction. While gendered domestic labor is both private in the home and also invisible, the maintenance workers in the museum are working in public, outside of their private homes. Their work is performed after hours or behind closed doors, thus rendering it invisible to public

museum visitors and often other museum administration. Molesworth, in her essay “Cleaning Up in the 1970’s: The Work of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles”, describes the effect of segregating work to one side of the visible/invisible binary, stating that it is the “hidden nature of this labour that permits the myth that the public sphere can function as a site devoid of interest” (1999:117). In other words, just as Ukeles’ manifesto asserts that maintenance is required to support development, the invisibility of that maintenance is necessary to sustain the development’s image of successful self-reliance. When those invisible maintenance activities are brought into public visibility, the leveling disrupts the operational hierarchy that the invisible work was designed to maintain. Molesworth suggests, however that maintenance cannot be classified as purely private or public, but rather, “it is the realm of human activities that serves to bind the two,” and when revealed, the functioning of the public institution is interrupted (1999:117). Preserving a strict visible versus invisible division is therefore essential in sustaining a successful and productive art institution within the existing established definitions, and when those realms are reversed, as they were in Ukeles’ performances, it obstructs functionality. For example, in her two *Washing* performances, if the floors of the museum were always wet and soapy during operational hours, it would be hazardous to visitors. Likewise, if there were always maintenance workers scrubbing floors around the artwork or cleaning glass cases during business hours, they would cause a physical obstruction to art viewing. Quite literally then, the invisibility of this maintenance work is fundamentally necessary in order to maintain the visibility of the more privileged work-the art.

Ukeles' performance *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object* in the *Hartford Wash* series also illustrates the value placed on intellectual labor above manual labor, as well as the value of the people who perform that labor. As part of her performance proposal for *Transfer*, Ukeles created a hand-drawn chart (fig. 6) detailing the sequence of events and results that would take place in *Transfer*. The chart presents four columns: "Activity", "Person", "Task", "Result". The "Activity" column depicts a series of rough stick figure sketches, all virtually identical, that show a person that appears to be holding a rag or feather duster next to a rectangular box containing a thin, crudely-drawn rounded figure. The "Person" column lists the three people involved in the performance: "Maintenance Person", "Mierle Laderman Ukeles-Maintenance Artist" and "Museum Conservator". The third column, "Task" illustrates the sameness of the three people's roles within the performance. Maintenance Person reads "Clean the glass mummy case, (as usual)." The next row, the Maintenance Artist, is directed to "Clean the glass mummy case: ("dust painting"). (Stamp glass case as Original Maintenance Art) (Maintenance Person can no longer touch it)." Finally, the Conservator's task reads, "(Perform conservation condition examination: Artwork is dusty. Requires superficial cleaning.) Clean the glass mummy case." The last column, "Result" depicts the observed outcome from the previously listed tasks. When the Maintenance Worker "clean(s) the glass mummy case", the result is "A clean glass mummy case." The Maintenance Artist yields "A Maintenance Art Work", and the Conservator produces "A clean Maintenance Art Work." As Ukeles clearly conveys, the same action yields three different results.

The visual representation of her piece in the form of a chart perhaps conveys the essence of Ukeles' piece *Transfer* even more than the performance itself, as the equivalence of the three tasks is literally spelled out. The visible parallel between both the initial sketches in the chart and the stacked presentation of the intentionally repeated phrase, "Clean the glass mummy case," make the identical tasks appear interchangeable among the people involved. However, this perceived overlap of duties that the chart presents is also strictly separated within the same chart by the presence of the final column, "Results." By indicating that equivalent actions produce different results, though she designates the participants by title, Ukeles' explanatory chart for *Transfer* illustrates the resulting illogic, yet inevitability, of instilling hierarchies based on occupational title. Further, since the occupations in question are producing tangible results, the chart also raises an awareness of the arguably absurd status conferred on the art object. Though the artist appears to carry out maintenance work, she also uses her privileged position as an artist to render the cleaning task more valuable. It becomes so valuable, in fact, that the maintenance worker is no longer allowed to perform his job, but is instead displaced by the artist performing the task.

As is so clearly evident from Ukeles' preliminary chart, the most overt dichotomies that she challenges in *Transfer* are those of specific job titles and labor privileging. Specifically, she calls attention to the hierarchy between the maintenance worker and the conservator in the art museum. The maintenance worker at the museum holds a lower position than the conservator. Ukeles illustrates this hierarchy by exposing the limitations in the maintenance worker's job descriptions and the specifications of the conservator's responsibilities. The maintenance worker is not allowed to touch any

artwork. The conservator does not maintain anything that is not artwork because not only is it not part of his job, but general maintenance is part of a job that is ranked beneath his own. Miwon Kwon, in her essay, "In Appreciation of Invisible Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the 'White Cube'", describes the perpetuation of this labor hierarchy which Ukeles exhibited:

Ironically, this essential work of maintenance and upkeep, which contributes to the authority of the institution (and the cultural status quo), is carried out in large part by those most likely to be oppressed and excluded by its operations. For the work of routine maintenance-hidden labor performed on a daily basis-is relegated to a particular class of people whose work is seldom recognized as such (Kwon 1977:17).

Here, Kwon references a similar sentiment to Ukeles' original manifesto. She notes that it is the dull and cyclical maintenance work that is essential to uphold the institution's functionality, yet while the institution is celebrated, the maintenance remains ignored in its "lousy status"(Ukeles).⁷ However, what Kwon fails to clarify here, is that the conservator's job is also technically invisible. The necessary distinction is that while the conservator's work is invisible to museum-going public, the work is visible and heralded within the art institution as integral to the presentation and conservation of the art object. The maintenance worker, on the other hand, performs duties that are invisible to both the public as well as the institution because the description of the work falls outside of the realm of institutional preservation. In this case, though both jobs are

typically performed behind closed doors, only one is disregarded as “lousy” and therefore rendered more invisible.

Ukeles’ decision to address the invisible work that made the art institution function was shared by many artists at the time. On a broader scale, the 1960s introduced a wave of artists seeking to criticize the art institution from within. Hans Haacke, for instance, created *Condensation Cube* in 1963, which commented on the impossibility of a completely contained and isolated system. The hermetically sealed clear box contained one centimeter of water that, based on atmospheric changes outside the box such as light, temperature and pressure, evaporates and condenses on the interior walls of the cube. The piece illustrated that there are often invisible elements outside of perceived walls such that the walls cannot contain a truly exclusive and controlled environment. For Haacke, the significance of *Condensation Cube* concerned the recognized separation of the art institution from society. Comparatively, Daniel Buren, in the mid-sixties began making his signature striped work that he installed in ways that drew attention to the architecture of the art institution building (along baseboards or stairs) rather than the pieces themselves. Likewise, his striped works were installed outside of the art buildings altogether, thus forcing a reinterpretation of art objects based on their context rather than their content, and questioning the privileging of art within institutional walls as well as the separation of the art institution from the society outside.

Ukeles’ Maintenance Art, like that of Haacke and Buren, concerns the invisible elements within the art institution. By publicly performing traditionally invisible maintenance tasks within the museum’s walls, Ukeles’ performances critique the

institution's lack of acknowledgement of this work as well as the workers who perform it. Through merging her art with the jobs of existing maintenance workers, she attempts to redefine the contextual definitions of art within the institutional walls and, like Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, question the notion that the institution can function insularly without perpetual invisible maintenance.

Much like her contemporaries, Ukeles' attempt at revealing institutional structure becomes problematic because of her position as an artist. *Transfer* especially reveals the divide between her role as artist and the maintenance worker she displaces. With her shift in focus, Ukeles' artwork develops a rift between her invisible domestic responsibilities and her chosen work as an artist, as the museum work no longer merges the two parts of her life, but rather adopts other people's tasks as her own for the sake of art, allowing her to enact a job of a lower hierarchy while maintaining her separation from that lower status. Similarly to Andre, her art became more representative of manual laborer work than the documentation of manual labor that the artist had to do out of necessity. However, while Ukeles' performances do offer an analogy between gendered housework and undervalued invisible paid maintenance work, a clear equivalence does not emerge, as Molesworth suggests, but rather a temporary comparison made possible by Ukeles' artistic class privilege. In other words, it is her position as an artist, rather than a low-paid maintenance worker, that enables her to assert this comparison, and therefore the two positions cannot be homologous. They remain divided instead.

Similarly, Bryan-Wilson identifies some problems with Andre's alignment with the laborer. His artistic romanticization of the working class laborer, she observes, was

made possible by his previous ascension into the ranks of the art institution. Once a recognized artist, he had the freedom to align himself with his choice of class rankings, which questions the legitimacy of that alignment. In equating its cultural standing with that of the art industry, he stated that “the position of the artist in our society is exactly that of an assembly line worker in Detroit.” However, Bryan-Wilson notes that this statement draws an equivalency that “disregard(s) the distinct relations each has to free time and access to cultural capital”(2011:44). While his choice of materials may reference his past in the working class, and his perceived alignment with the working class while he was a working artist, the parallel between working class and artist cannot be made on equal levels here, especially not for an artist who holds an esteemed position within the art institution, as the difference in cultural privilege between the two is too pronounced. As Bryan-Wilson explains, Andre’s “class mobility—his decision to drop out of the middle class or reidentify with the workers—is itself an indication of class privilege” (2011:45). Though he was laboring as an artist, his labor entailed a freedom to act within multiple echelons of society, whereas the working class people with whom he aligned himself did not have the liberty of similar status mobility. A similar issue arises for Ukeles when the artist makes a move from work related directly to her domestic responsibilities in the home to her more public performances of maintenance art.

As an artist and housewife, Ukeles possesses a level of freedom that a wage-worker may not. For example, the sole purpose of the maintenance that she performs does not appear to be in order to financially support her family, or even to financially support her art-making. The maintenance workers, on the other hand, are performing

the work as their jobs, which is presumably not related to professional art-making in any way. In a 1996 interview, Ukeles acknowledged this disconnection:

Now the feminist movement failed to a large degree because it never understood...the power to connect with other people who did a similar kind of work...for example, the millions of women of color who were already working. They had always worked, because they had no choice. They always had to balance several lives; they didn't want to starve to death. Those women never felt connected to the angst of identification that asks work outside to provide the answer to: Who am I? What do I want to become? It was a privileged, thus limited discourse in the feminist movement. (Ukeles in Finkelppearl 2001:310)

The impetus to combine her art with her housework developed from a class freedom and privilege to ask the questions "Who am I?" or "What do I want to become?", and this freedom was lacking from the workers with whom she aligned herself. Nevertheless, though the analogy she asserted is not entirely congruent, gendered domestic work and low-class work do in fact share the element of invisibility, whether in private or public, and whether one has financial class privilege or not.

The maintenance worker, a title which Ukeles claimed as her own during this performance, involved unpaid labor that she was required to perform in her home, whereas the maintenance worker in the museum is paid to work and his work is separated from his life. In "Wage Labor and Capital," Marx states that a wage worker "does not even reckon labor as part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life...life

begins for him where this activity ceases, at the table, at the tavern, in bed”(1891:Ch. 2 para. 8). In this way, the maintenance worker is ostensibly able to divorce the act of maintenance with the living of life.⁸ In Ukeles’ manifesto, the maintenance becomes intertwined as the mother’s work, and therefore the mother’s life blends with the maintenance work done in the home, however the manifestation of the manifesto in her performances, seems to draw contrary conclusions.

Like the conservator, in Ukeles’ performance, the artist is also placed above the maintenance worker, as the artist is in a position of power to transform the maintenance worker’s job into a more important one that requires the conservator’s care. More so, according to Ukeles’ original manifesto, the artist, as the creator of development, is inherently placed in a role superior to that of the maintenance worker, whose job it is to support and maintain the artist’s development. While the two hierarchies may be leveled briefly, as she positions them together in order to compare them, the boundary separating the two effectively remains in tact. It is not exclusively maintenance that is being elevated, but rather maintenance performed *as art*. Therefore, the artist’s privileged position is fundamentally integral for the piece to even exist.

Transfer, and the entire *Hartford Wash* series, complicates the artist/maintenance worker relationship because Ukeles, as an artist, is also a self-proclaimed maintenance worker, as indicated in her manifesto. While the concept behind Maintenance Art is to combine maintenance work with art or to redefine maintenance work as art, as she accomplished with her early personal domestic documentation, her relationship to maintenance in the *Hartford Wash* series becomes strictly artistic, since she is not performing work that she would normally do in her unpaid domestic job. While

she is in fact performing maintenance duties, she is once again doing so at the sacrifice of her domestic tasks, since she is performing the tasks outside a realm of her own maintenance responsibility. She is taking over the job of someone who is already assigned—and paid—to perform those public maintenance responsibilities. If Ukeles developed Maintenance Art so that she could take care of her household and motherly responsibilities while simultaneously creating art, who was taking care of those responsibilities while she spent two days performing “maintenance duties” in a public museum?

When Ukeles acts as artist, her maintenance work is separated from her life because she is not truly completing necessary maintenance, but rather performing maintenance duties done by other professional maintenance workers, who are in turn, not performing that work. “Maintenance” becomes her art, but it is no longer her maintenance. Her work here is as an art laborer, not as a maintenance laborer, as the work she performs becomes a symbolic theatrical performance, which also happens to accomplish some cleaning. By bringing her labor activities into the museum, her actions lose the authenticity of maintenance work because she is performing maintenance tasks that are not actually her job, whereas when she was exhibiting photographs and recorded logs from inside her home and parts of her personal daily life, she was in fact acting in dual roles as artist and maintenance worker. Performing maintenance work in the museum, from a practical standpoint, still leaves her life divided between maintenance worker and artist, where artist still ranks as a higher position.

The artist/maintenance worker division also represents a broader division of intellectual work valued over manual work. Molesworth notes this artistic intellectual

hierarchy by recognizing that *Transfer* “highlights the division of labor that supports the aura of the artist's signature, an aura the museum is dependent on for its legitimacy (and which it in turn legitimates)”(1999:88). In *Transfer*, the artist's signature is indicated by the Maintenance Art stamp, which only the artist can apply. However, that institutionally sanctioned intellectual privilege of signing the work (in this case, stamping the work) is called into question when it follows the maintenance worker doing the same work and not stamping it. Here, it is the “aura” of the artist, rather than the physical work of the artist, that makes the artist an intellectual laborer. Andrea Neustein, in her essay, “Maintenance, Renewal, Decay, Death, Air, Time, Dust and the Gallery”, draws a parallel between Ukeles' Maintenance Art and Hans Haacke's piece *Germania*, at the 1993 Venice Biennale, in which the artist tore out the marble floors of the space in a symbolic undoing of the laying of the floors by the Third Reich. Neustein argues that “if a contractor had decided a cement floor would be aesthetically preferable, or an engineer had removed it for reasons of leveling, then maybe the floor would truly be destroyed. However, by rendering the act of its destruction visible as an artwork, Haacke fixes the floor's symbolic power for posterity”(2010:27). In this case, as in Ukeles' work in *Transfer*, the maintenance act is recontextualized because it is being performed by an artist. Although she is, in fact making “a clean glass mummy case”, as her chart indicates of the maintenance worker, she is also making “a Maintenance Art Work”. By performing the a lower ranked worker's work, her own intellectual work is not diminished because her privileged position as an artist allows her to move freely through lower hierarchies and align them with her intellectual artistic practice. Though perhaps more cognitive awareness is brought to the existence of domestic work and

public maintenance workers, both her gendered housework and the maintenance worker's work in the institution remain invisible, and therefore, the hierarchical boundary placing the manual maintenance worker below the intellectual artist still remains quite intact.

While Ukeles' performances did not completely absolve hierarchies, she did bring awareness to their existence by exposing them so explicitly. While some of her contemporaries incorporated the concept of wage labor in an effort to level hierarchies by romanticizing wage labor processes into art, Ukeles work ultimately reinforces them by clearly indicating the divide. As Wertheim concludes, in reference to gendered labor divisions, "though many social or immaterial tasks might now count as work, it still depends on who performs the task as much as where it is done"(2009:19). Ukeles began her work addressing this element in terms of a gendered divide in bringing her personal invisible work into the public. In shifting her focus to maintenance workers and general underacknowledged and undervalued laborers rather than women specifically, similar hierarchical imbalances apply. When she asserts herself as an artist, however, her own ranking elevates her above the maintenance worker. In this case, "who performs the task" is the pivotal element in her performances, as clearly illustrated in her explanatory chart.

As a working artist, Ukeles' critical commentary is coming from within the art institution, which is a position of privilege within that institution. Andrea Fraser's 2005 essay, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," questions the effectiveness of criticizing the institution from within. She offers a definition of art's parameters by stating that "art is art when it exists for discourses and practices that

recognize it as art, value and evaluate it as art, and consume it as art”(4) whether it exists within a museum or is otherwise traditionally contextually framed. Therefore, Fraser insists, the institution of art is inescapable and any artist creating work is inherently institutionalized. “Who performs the task” in this case not only sets up and reinforces the hierarchies, but also inherently prevents them from ever being dissolved. This inescapable scope of the art world onto artists would then impose an intrinsic referral of institutional privileging, which Ukeles would also carry into her performances in the museum.

In the context of artist activists in the 1960s and 70s, who were trying to achieve validation as productive laborers, Ukeles’ commentary diverged slightly in her gendered approach and integration of invisible housework. Rather than romanticized, the work is portrayed as undesirable and menial. Ultimately, however, similar problems arise with the attempt at working class alignment. Like Carl Andre’s idealized, yet contrived incorporation of working class labor into art, Ukeles’ alignments question the artist’s celebrated position over the wage laborer, yet simultaneously reestablish them as necessary and unchangeable. Similarly, her alignment with feminism in the late 1960s and 70s also lost some of its relevance, as she aligned herself with class and labor visibility- an analogy that was not purely homologous to gender struggle at the time.

Additionally, she is not able to clearly align motherhood with being an artist, because in order to perform this performance series, she is not performing her household duties and she is not caring for her child during the duration of the art performance. Despite the assertion she delivered in her manifesto, that as an artist, she can combine her art and her housework, the *Hartford Wash* series divorces her from her

housework and places her in an artificial performance acting out the jobs of other workers, none of which are necessary duties to maintain her own family or home. Inherent in her choice to turn wage-earners' work into her art, is a manifestation of the artistic labor versus maintenance labor hierarchy, as she has the power within her position to decide what to define as art and by necessity in doing so, distances it from her household responsibilities.

Ultimately, the *Hartford Wash* series, and specifically the piece *Transfer* does not completely break down institutional hierarchical levels, but rather emphasizes their unwavering existence by starkly spelling out their divide. Ukeles cannot wholly align herself with the wage-earning maintenance workers, because she herself has the freedom to be able to choose to perform their work, and only because of this freedom, is she able to elevate the maintenance worker's job (not the maintenance worker, but rather the actual task by making the task "art"). Therefore, the maintenance work she performs is no longer maintenance work. It is primarily art with a secondary element of vaguely functional maintenance. By using her position as an artist to blatantly expose the privileging of artist work over maintenance work within the institution, she also highlights a seemingly arbitrary fetishization of the artist's position simply in her ability to successfully do so. Through this uncovering, she briefly delivered visibility to the invisible. However, even within the confines of this singular performance, art, as Ukeles asserts in her manifesto, remains primary development, which is, and always will be, supported by hidden maintenance.



Figure 1 Ukeles performing *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside*, 1973



Figure 2 Ukeles performing *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, 1973



Figure 3 Ukeles performing *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object*, 1973



Figure 4 Maintenance Worker, Artist, Conservator from *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object*, 1973



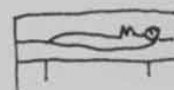
Figure 5 Ukeles gives cleaning supplies to the conservator in *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object*, 1973

Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object © 1973


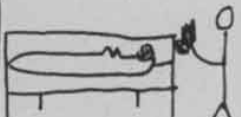
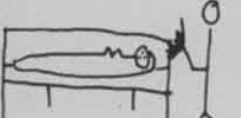
Museum Maintenance Rules: only the conservator is empowered to touch the art object, handle it, clean it.

1. Selection of the Art Object in the Museum:

Mummy (female figure) in glass case.



2. Activity: 3 people → same task → Museum → 3 powers

Activity	Person	Task	Result
	Maintenance Person	Clean the glass mummy case, (as usual).	A clean glass mummy case
	Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Maintenance Artist	Clean the glass mummy case: ("dust painting"). (Stamp glass case as Original Maintenance Art) (Maintenance Person can no longer touch it.)	A Maintenance Art Work
	Museum Conservator	(Perform conservation condition examination: Art Work is "Dusty. Requires superficial cleaning.) Clean the glass mummy case	A clean Maintenance Art Work

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Figure 6 Chart for *Transfer: Maintenance of the Art Object*, 1973

NOTES

1 The manifesto is posed as an introduction to a proposal for an unrealized performance piece called *CARE*, in which Ukeles planned to publicly perform a series of maintenance duties presented alongside a series of interviews with a variety of workers.

2 Julia Bryan-Wilson notes that this section is “in dialogue with Hannah Arendt’s categorizations of ‘labor’ and ‘work” In *The Human Condition*. (2011:166)

3 It is important to note here that while the AWC sought to define art workers, not only artists, as workers, the non-art staff that worked within the physical art institutions, such as the janitorial or engineering staffs in museums and galleries still remained outside of the purview of the defined art institution, and were not considered “art workers”. This is relevant to Ukeles performances of 1973 at the Wadsworth Atheneum, discussed below.

4 Hartman does note the transference of those imbalanced domestic duties into public spheres by acknowledging that “the services women render men and which exonerate men from having to perform many unpleasant tasks’ (like cleaning toilets) occur outside as well as inside the family setting”(Hartman 1979:11).

5 Mu Ch’i or Muqi Fachang was a thirteenth-century Chinese painter and Chan Buddhist monk. His dark ink painting, *Six Persimmons*, portrays a row of six persimmons against an empty background.

6 (Rogers 2010:12)

7 Kwon makes a similar assertion in her book, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, when she states that Ukeles “forced menial domestic tasks...to the level of aesthetic contemplation...and revealed the extent to which the museum...is structurally dependent on the hidden and devalued labor of daily maintenance” (2004:19).

8 For Marx, wage labor interferes with the possibility of fully living life because one is renting out a portion of one’s time to another.

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