Mierle Laderman Ukeles:
A History of Feminist Art and
Social Change in the United States

by

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Introduction

In our current age, a time of fierce identity politics and a proliferation of self-expression suddenly widely available and distributable through the internet and the communities it allows us to create, a historical precedent exists to contextualize this time as another important moment in the United States’ cultural history: the feminist art movement of the 1970s. Lambasted by later critics, outraged (justifiably) that an art movement that posited itself as representing silenced voices could leave so many people out of the movement, feminist art is still an important movement to consider. In no way should second wave feminism be the end point of feminist art, since the limitations of the feminist art of the seventies are numerous, troubling, and disheartening. However, the art that accompanied and galvanized the second wave feminist movement is still an important historical aspect of the larger movement, still unfinished, towards equality for all gender identities.

For this thesis, I’ll be looking at the larger feminist art movement through the lens of one artist: Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Ukeles, born in 1939, came of age in a segregated society in which women and people of color were marginalized. She attended Barnard College, a women’s college in New York City, and Pratt Institute for graduate school. There is a somewhat typical narrative of the lives of women born in that time who became feminists, and Ukeles fits this narrative beautifully. She was resistant to marriage, worried that it would distract her from her artistic goals, but eventually accepted the offer of Jack Ukeles when she was assured that he would continue to support her career as an artist after their marriage. While
pregnant with their first child, Ukeles found herself commiserated by a well-intentioned male professor at Pratt, who assumed that her pregnancy signaled the end of her career and wanted to express his disappointment at that loss. Ukeles was confused, horrified, and utterly put off. She had never intended to give up her career as an artist. This experience was far too common for women in this era: male professionals and mentors would discourage or even block their female students or subordinates from advancing their careers once they decided to marry or have children. While men could start families without any expected changes or compromises in their careers, women were expected to either suspend their careers or give up the possibility of family.

Ukeles studied history and international relations in college, but was interested in art from a young age. She decided to pursue art after taking summer courses in her hometown of Denver, Colorado, and enrolled in the Pratt Institute. However, her work was deemed too sexually explicit by the administration of the art school—she was working on organic shapes of nylon stockings stuffed to bursting with cotton batting, combined and painted—and her favorite professor was fired for backing her. She left the school, confused and hurt. Luckily, Ukeles was not easily disheartened. Her mother, a refugee from Eastern Europe, encouraged her education and taught Ukeles to be tough and principled. Her father, a rabbi, encouraged social activism and instilled moral responsibility in both of his children. These traits would serve Ukeles well in her journey through feminist art.

Feminist art can be difficult to classify and define, because a major part of the movement was subverting the idea that all female artists shared some
inalienable trait or similarity. For centuries, female artists had been grouped together, often separate from male counterparts, on the basis of this assumption. This idea is absolutely absurd—female artists are as varied in their styles and mediums as male artists—but this assumption was used to dismiss female artists as leaders of movements, groundbreaking creators, and contemporaries of famous male artists. Feminist art wanted to communicate the depth and breadth of the female experience through art. Traditionally limited to the realm of crafts, female artists faced a world that genuinely believed them to be incapable of certain forms of art. A prime example of this, and one that will feature prominently in this thesis, is conceptual art. Women were assumed to be outside of this movement, despite clear evidence to the contrary. It was this exclusion that led to Ukeles’ first major performance piece.

Conceptual art was not a universal feminist art form. Feminist art forms were divided by location in a major way. West Coast feminist art had its own development and grew out of a specific group: a program at CalArts led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. West Coast feminist art is known for its cunt imagery, depicting abstracted and realistic genitalia, as well as its subversion of traditional craft forms from household goods to high art. East Coast feminist art was far more comfortable with conceptual work and generally included a wider variety of work in its movement. This division is interesting because of the fame and ubiquity of Chicago, who is often the first artist people identify when asked about feminist art. Judy Chicago was, in many ways, groundbreaking, and I do not mean to undermine her accomplishments and impact in any way. However, I will argue in
this thesis that Chicago was limited in her scope, and that in fact Ukeles is an artist far more representative of the larger movement of feminist art. While Chicago took on ambitious projects that gained her great fame, her work never progressed beyond the explicitly feminist ideas of the early feminist art movement. In contrast, Ukeles moved from explicitly feminist art, addressing the experiences and unacknowledged labor of mothers and caretakers, into a more inclusive, third-wave style art that addressed invisible labor regardless of who performed it, bringing her into conversations about race and class.

The decision to identify as a ‘feminist artist’ was a fraught and difficult one. Female artists were not inherently feminist, and some female artists were explicitly not feminists. Others took a more neutral approach. As with any identification, the individual’s sense of self is a crucial element, but in a historical setting, sometimes artists are labeled ‘feminist’ posthumously, or contribute to the feminist art movement without identifying themselves as feminists. In this thesis, I have tried to identify specifically whether the artists I address are self-identified feminists. I also rely heavily on the work of feminist art critic Lucy Lippard and feminist art historian Linda Nochlin. These women were writing and publishing from the earliest moments of feminist art, and both played absolutely integral roles in the development of the movement by creating a dialogue, communal history, and ideology, as well as criticism. Nochlin pioneered the study of female art history as a professor at Vassar and Lippard worked initially in the larger field of curation and criticism before becoming interested in feminist art specifically and focusing her energy, talent, and considerable influence in that realm. The critical and historical
essays written by these women guided my work significantly.

As with most contemporary history, I was able to draw from a marvelously deep well of sources. Ukeles created documentation of her works that are both works of art on their own and administrative archives of her practice. This includes documents like the Maintenance Work Questionnaire and other interactive elements of her installations. She also gave many interviews and communicated extensively with the participants in her community works, so a record of her correspondence and a strong personal voice exist to enrich this work. Her first major performance piece was at the Wadsworth Atheneum, so I was able to explore their archives, both those related to the initial exhibition and the installation decades later commemorating the groundbreaking work. This revealed a wealth of letters between Lippard and the curators, allowing me a front row view of Lippard’s methodology and attitude towards the show. While Ukeles does not appear much in the archive of the larger show, c. 7,500, she did correspond with the curators for later pieces, and contributed essays reflecting on her early work from the distance of several decades. These archives helped guide and shape my research.

I was also able to visit the Brooklyn Museum archives, but as I discovered, much of Ukeles’ archive had been misplaced. I felt that this error spoke strongly to Ukeles’ work and reception. Her work is difficult to chronicle and document, and her impact is so undervalued that an entire archive could be misplaced. The Davenport Grant and White Fellowship, awarded by the History Department, also allowed me to visit several galleries holding exhibitions on feminist art, including the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Tate Modern in London, which
helped contextualize feminist art and gave me a firsthand view of the limitations of the feminist art movement. These gallery spaces were overwhelmingly white and addressed very early, basic issues of feminist thought: sexualized media depiction, social constructs confining women to the domestic sphere, and exclusions from basic social functions. Ukeles was not featured in any of these exhibits.

Soon after I decided to write this thesis, the Queens Museum in New York City announced a comprehensive retrospective of Ukeles’ work. This exhibition united existing documentation from all of Ukeles’ projects, and included preliminary sketches and recordings of Ukeles, the photo documentation of her works, and the paper trail created by the work. The book published to accompany this exhibition was invaluable, as it combined critical and reflective essays with historical contextualization and primary sources. Other books published to accompany exhibits were also helpful, including Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, Nochlin’s *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, and Cornelia Butler’s *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. Studying art—both museum exhibitions and performance, community-based pieces—involves studying the entire construction of an idea from conception to realization. Art is, I believe, one of the richest primary sources we, as historians, have to work with. History is more than the study of events. It is the study of ideas, emotions, communities, aspirations, and self-perceptions, and I think that no medium better encompasses those historical moods and moments than art.
Chapter One: Female Labor, Female Art

To understand the history of female art, feminist art, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles in particular, it is integral to understand the historical context in which these movements developed. The history of women in the United States is largely a history of female labor. From the earliest days of this country, women have worked in the home, although this labor differed based on socio-economic status and individual needs. With the advent of industrialization, women became less responsible for producing everyday goods, which for many women was their primary duty—making soap, textiles, preserves, etc.—and female labor changed accordingly. Many women, young and single for the most part, began to work in factories, especially textile mills. As the twentieth century progressed, certain moments saw upswings in female labor—notably World War II—and the rise of second wave feminism sought to bring (mainly white, upper-class) women out of the domestic sphere and into the workforce. The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan, widely regarded as an impetus for second wave feminism, was published in 1963, and helped inspire a generation of middle and upper class white women to cast off the bondage of domesticity and place these burdens instead on black and brown women, who have consistently worked outside of the home at much higher rates due to economic need. This disconnect in second wave feminism, as women demanded to be recognized for their work, join the workforce at the same level as their male counterparts, and work outside of the home, while ignoring those women of color who had to take up the burden of their domestic labor, became an integral
part of the progression of the feminist movement. Though many female artists, activists, and thinkers addressed the racial divisions of second wave feminism, one artist addressed maintenance and domestic labor specifically: Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

Ukeles and other female artists of the second wave movement faced an uphill battle, as women had long been excluded from the art world and, in the logic of the patriarchy, were therefore assumed to be incapable of creating art. Linda Nochlin, pioneering feminist art critic, published an essay in 1971 entitled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”. This essay, published in a collection of essays about women and art and then reprinted in Artforum, examines the history of women in art to explain why there have been no great women artists in the vein of Michelangelo, Vincent van Gogh, and Jackson Pollack. The artists she used as an example represent the breadth of time and form required to fully understand art history. It is not sufficient to look at the turn of the sixteenth century to understand why there are no female contemporaries to Michelangelo, because this absence spans centuries, cultures, and artistic movements. These artists have no female equivalents in either fame or revolutionary practices. This is not to say that there are no female artists who revolutionized art or created groundbreaking work, nor is it to say that no female artists have been famous. It is the convergence of the two that create the concept of “Genius,” and it is with this concept that Nochlin in concerned. While women artists have existed, Nochlin argues, none have achieved this status of genius that combines fame, influence, and revolutionary practice.

Of course there are talented female artists from every era: as Nochlin writes, the
“feminist’s first reaction is to swallow the bait, hook, line and sinker, and to attempt to answer the question as it is put: that is, to dig up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history.”¹ These artists, Nochlin acknowledges, are extremely important, “both in adding to our knowledge of women’s achievements and of art history generally.”² This response, however, misses the opportunity to critically engage with the deeper issues. The feminist shifting of the standard by which “greatness” is measured to account for centuries of unequal conditions between men and women also avoids addressing the question head-on and therefore misses the opportunity to confront Nochlin’s challenge in a productive way.

Nochlin engages with her own question in a several parts. First, Nochlin dismisses the above responses to her question. The lack of great women artists in human cultural history is not a function of misunderstood standards of greatness or a lack of recognition (and, although the latter is certainly true, it does not answer her question), she argues, but because art is not open to women as is it to men.

“Things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas,” Nochlin argues, “are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class, and, above all, male.”³ The question she poses, therefore, goes beyond women artists and into the culture that only recognizes and allows for white, middle-class male talent. The issue of women artists, she writes, “is simply the top

³ Ibid, 150.
tenth of an iceberg of misinterpretation and misconception; beneath lies a vast dark bulk of shaky idées reçues about the nature of human abilities in general and of human excellence in particular, and the role that the social order plays in all of this.”

Women, as dictated by their roles in society, do not have the time to devote themselves fully to art: the expectations and obligations of their role prevents the sort of total devotion that genius requires. The male genius can devote himself to art, unhindered by expectations of marriage, family, social outings, maintaining the home, etc. The figure of the male artistic genius is as ancient as art itself, and, while only a few men become this figure, this archetype is set in humanity’s mind. In contrast, women who neglect to marry or have children and focus on their artistic careers instead have almost no predecessors. The image of female genius does not exist in the collective conscious of any culture, and breaking the societal norms to that extent has, historically, been nearly impossible. As Nochlin writes, women artists historically have only the “‘lady painter’” image: “a modest, proficient, self-demeaning level of amateurism” from one whose real attention was devoted to the “welfare of others—family and husband” and so for whom art never became a consuming pursuit. The opportunity for genius was forfeited to devote that energy to others.

There are some exceptions to this ‘lady painter’ image, and history does hold examples of women who rejected traditional female roles to pursue art. Nochlin delves deepest into the case of Rosa Bonheur, a French painter of animals and natural scene—an animalière—and the nineteenth century’s most famous

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female painter. However, Bonheur still spent her career apologizing for her unorthodox lifestyle. Rosa Bonheur often wore pants to facilitate her treks through farms and slaughterhouses for research, but was quick to state that this was an absolute necessity, and she would much prefer to be wearing a dress. Her short hair was also explained as functionally necessary for her profession. While Bonheur did not live as society dictated, she made clear that this was a professional requirement, not a personal decision.

Bonheur, along with most other female artists who achieved success before the advent of the feminist art movement, had an artist father. This relationship allowed her to experiment and pursue art in a way that most women could not, and gave her societal permission to do so. This paternal condoning of her work, along with her constant explanations and excuses for why she did not follow societal expectations of womanhood, allowed her to pursue an artistic career and develop as a talented, in-demand, award-winning painter. Despite her commercial success, however, Bonheur was not ‘great’ in the sense that Nochlin and most other art historians and critics mean it—her work did not transform the genre, create a movement, or define an era. Bonheur was talented and successful, but she is no Michelangelo. Genius goes beyond contemporary success into the realm of eternal fame and permanent changes to how art is viewed and made, and Bonheur, with her faithful depictions of animals, did not change the art world significantly.

Bonheur was one of the only women artists who can be studied from this era, and as such is a model of the strength and sacrifices that define female artists.

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Bonheur, Nochlin writes, exemplifies “the voice of the feminine mystique with its potpourri of ambivalent narcissism and guilt, internalized, subtly dilutes and subverts that total inner confidence, that absolute certitude and self-determination, moral and esthetic, demanded by the highest and most innovative work in art.”

Bonheur could not overcome the societal constraints that demanded she apologize for her masculine clothing and refusal to marry or procreate. Nochlin argues that the guilt Bonheur felt for rejecting societal norms and the lessened confidence she felt as a female artist in a male world prevented her from being truly ‘great.’ The divided energies that plagued female artists drained them of the ability to develop their own genius.

Nochlin’s essay was meant to inflame and stir conversation, and at that, it was very successful. Nochlin also made clear in later interviews and works that the essay and the ideas expressed are not fully comprehensive, and her own views have shifted, specifically in regards to her point that feminists should not merely dig up examples of great female artists from history. At the same time as the essay’s publication, Nochlin was working on an exhibit with Ann Sutherland Harris, Women Artists: 1550-1950. This exhibit, and the research and archival digging that accompanied it, showcased talented women artists from the four centuries indicated in the title and illuminated many artists who were previously unknown, despite the quality and contemporaneity of their work. Nochlin’s 1994 essay “Starting From Scratch” gives her personal history of her involvement with feminist art history, and as she discusses her work on the exhibit with Harris and her groundbreaking essay, she reflects that the show meant “taking a position that directly contradicted” her

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Nochlin, “Women Artists, 175.”
stance in “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”.

This show, which involved “digging around in the basements and reserves of great European museums and provincial art galleries,” illuminated for Nochlin that “there had indeed been many wonderfully inventive, extremely competent, and above all unquestionably interesting women artists.”

Although these women may not have had international acclaim, they were often “cherished and admired” in their homelands. *Women Artists: 1550-1950* brought forward examples of talented women from essentially every art movement, moment, and medium through the 400 years it covered. These women could have been geniuses, Nochlin realized, in a different societal setting.

Nochlin is clearly a pivotal figure in feminist art history, and, like Ukeles, a one-woman history of the movement of feminist art. Nochlin was educated at Vassar College, where she later taught, and it was at Vassar in fall of 1969 that she pioneered a female art history class called “The Image of Women in the 19th and 20th Centuries.” Of the fourteen points she outlined in the syllabus to be covered, number twelve was simply “Women as artists.”

Most of the first semester of the course, disorganized and experimental by Nochlin’s own recollection, was devoted to women appearing in art: as angels, devils, nudes, prostitutes, the figure of the Virgin Mary, etc. This is significant for a number of reasons. At Vassar, Nochlin recalls, it was very obvious that women could be artists. The professors (largely) and students were female, the galleries exhibited art by female artists, and the

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library held books by and about female artists. However, when the class began, it was “the spadework of feminist art history,” as Nochlin recalls in her essay “Starting From Scratch.”\textsuperscript{11} “I was in many ways as ignorant as my students as far as bibliography or background was concerned,” writes Nochlin. “Everything had to be constructed from the beginning.”\textsuperscript{12} Artists like Frida Kahlo were unknown, even to the engaged feminists at Vassar, and Nochlin’s class opened the scholarship of feminist art history.

In the summer of 1971, Nochlin took her groundbreaking class to Stanford. While teaching, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro came up from Los Angeles, where they had just begun their Feminist Art Program at a California art school. West and East Coast feminist art differs, and part of this, Nochlin notes, may be that women artists in California were working with male professors and students, while the women at Vassar and other all-female colleges in the east were used to being surrounded by women. While West Coast feminist artists explored possibilities of working with and around only women, East Coast women wanted to expand the knowledge of female artists amongst themselves and the greater population and create a more equitable art world, with female artists showing at galleries and museums as much as male artists. Nochlin also addresses the different styles of feminist art that were emerging on the East versus West Coast, writing that she “strongly disagreed with [Chicago and Schapiro’s] assertion that there was an innate ‘feminine’ style, signified by centralised imagery or circular forms and

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
existing apart from history and the historically conditioned institutions of art,”¹³ but this issue will be addressed further in a later chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficient to note that Nochlin, Chicago, and Schapiro were in dialogue with one another, and the study of feminist art history that began with Nochlin quickly emigrated to the west coast feminists.

Looking deeper at Nochlin and Harris’s exhibit on women artists is helpful because it provides an overarching history of women in art, or rather, a history that reflects what was known about women artists at the start of the discipline of feminist art history. Nochlin had just begun her scholarship when the exhibit was created, and her work with Harris was an early foray into rewriting women back into art history. As they write in the preface to the exhibition catalogue, their “intention in assembling these works… is to make more widely known the achievements of some fine artists whose neglect can in part be attributed to their sex and to learn more about why and how women artists first emerged as rare exceptions in the sixteenth century and gradually became more numerous until they were a largely accepted part of the cultural scene.”¹⁴ Like any exhibit, this one was limited by availability of art for various reasons: poor or deteriorating conditions of pieces and concerns about their safety limiting the travel of certain pieces, private or public owners unwilling to lend their pieces to a traveling exhibit. However, sometimes access to work was limited by “a lack of support for the concept of the exhibition itself and hence an unwillingness to lend major works to the show.”¹⁵

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¹⁵ Ibid.
Despite this sometimes unwilling response, the *Women Artists* show was very successful, touring internationally and inspiring many similar exhibits around the country. As a result of the show, institutions stopped lending their pieces by female artists out as readily, due to an increased interest in the works among their own constituents. Clearly, this exhibit had touched upon a missing piece of culture.

If Nochlin and Harris were filling a historical void in 1971, Peggy Guggenheim sought in 1943 to fill a contemporary one. Her museum, Art of This Century, in New York City was host to many shows of modern art. Two exhibits specifically— *Exhibition by 31 Women* (1943) and *The Women* (1945)— dealt with female modern artists, and showed exclusively female work. Siobhan M. Conaty, in her 1997 essay “Art of This Century: A Transitional Space for Women” published in *American Women Artists, 1935-1970*, argued these exhibits were “rare” in that women were “singled out for such attention and appraisal.”

Although women were not “completely excluded” from New York exhibition spaces, all-female shows were a groundbreaking concept. Unlike the *Women Artist* exhibit in 1971, Guggenheim highlighted work that “illustrated women’s substantial contributions to the most advanced art movements of the day,” rather than looking backward at female artists in history, and as such was able to “[present] them in numbers that truly represented the female contribution to the
avant-garde.” Guggenheim meant for the show to be provocative, dispelling societal norms and the idea that women were not involved in the avant-garde. As Guggenheim wrote in the press release for the show Exhibition by 31 Women (1943), the exhibition “is testimony to the fact that the creative ability of women is by no means restricted to the decorative vein, as could be deduced from the history of art by women through the ages.” The works in the exhibit, featuring artists like Meret Oppenheim and Frida Kahlo, were selected by an all-male jury put together by Guggenheim, because naturally only men were expert enough to judge female art. It is important to note that Guggenheim was inspired to do the exhibit at advice from Marcel Duchamp, one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, while the two were living in Europe before World War II. Duchamp served on the jury deciding which artists and pieces to exhibit in Exhibition by 31 Women and would later inspire a young Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who would devote several pieces to grappling with her place in Duchamp’s legacy. Guggenheim, like Duchamp, is linked to female art history without participating as a feminist. Her contributions to the history of women in the art world stem from the provocative exhibits of all-female art, and it is unclear if she recognized “the magnitude of the issues at hand” as she put these two exhibits on. Nevertheless, in a vein that would echo again in Nochlin’s essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, Guggenheim’s shows “effectively demonstrated that the problem [of gender

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17 Conaty, “This Century,” 28.
18 Ibid, 27.
inequities in the art world] was more social than aesthetic.”19 Lucy Lippard, one of the most important curators and critics of the second half of the twentieth century, would later curate conceptual art shows featuring all women, and the emphasis of the show was that the work made by women fit so well into the overall movement of the time. Perhaps, as had long been believed, women did not have a specific style distinct from male artistic style, nor were women artists united in their styles or what they depicted. Instead, these exhibits showed that women were contemporaries with their better-known male counterparts, engaging in much the same cultural issues and forms as the male artists Guggenheim and Lippard also curated.

Naturally these exhibits stirred the consciousness of the female artists featured, who were not necessarily interested in defining themselves by their gender identity. While most of the artists featured went along with Guggenheim’s premise as an opportunity to show their work in a well-known gallery in an exhibit put on by influential members of the artistic community, the women were not, by any means, all self-identified feminists eager to define themselves in opposition to male artists, as feminist artists would become thirty years later. Rather, participation in the 1943 and 1945 exhibits hosted by Guggenheim was not an “aesthetic” decision but a “practical” one. Since these artists “simply were not getting the same representation of their male colleagues,” this show was “politically rather than artistically exciting.” As Conaty learned from her interviews with three artists featured in the exhibit, the three artists were fine with being part of an all-women’s show if it meant displaying their work with Guggenheim. “The fact that they were

female artists did not differentiate them from the male artists,” Conaty summarized. “It was just society’s rules of differentiation that were being applied from the outside. Indeed, it was the public, the critics, and the historians who searched for difference.”20 If gender is socially constructed, it follows that the same oppressive culture would insist on inherent differences and, in this case, an established hierarchy of skill and genius between the genders. Since women had been socialized to the domestic sphere, making crafts (instead of art) meant to decorate and feminize the home, society could not grapple with them as artists. The reviews of Guggenheim’s shows, like the reviews that would be published 30 years later about Ukeles’ Hartford Wash, endlessly commented on the gender of the artists. Conaty kindly refers to the “wry, sexist humor” of the reviews, but an Art News review of the 1945— by which time, Conaty writes, “the concept of an artist who happened to be a woman was no longer quite as startling” and so the “reviewers tended to asses the work on its own merits”— refers to the artists as the “weaker sex” and the “refreshingly unladylike” style and “masculine vigor”21 of the featured works. Clearly, the bar for open-minded reviews was astonishingly low.

A significant outcome of these exhibits and the tellingly sexist reviews was the effect they had on artist Buffie Johnson. Johnson was featured in the 1943 show Exhibition by 31 Women, and the reviews by dismissive male critics impacted her deeply. In a particularly unpleasant interaction, Johnson asked art critic James Stern to review the show, as she was “discouraged by the tone of the early reviews.” Stern refused, because “he had no time for thirty-one paintings by women,” and, he said,

20 Ibid, 37.
21 Ibid, 36.
“there had never been a first-rate woman artist and women should stick to having babies.” 22 This incident galvanized her to become a feminist that very year, and she began researching female artists in an effort to refute Stern’s disdainful response. What she found, she told Conaty in an interview, was a “‘long list of restrictions that had been a part of every woman’s artistic pursuit.’” 23 This article, clearly, was a direct forebearer to Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?.” Thirty years earlier, Johnson could not get her findings published. Nochlin’s essay, heralded as the first of its kind and the catalyst for the development of feminist art history, made many similar points about the “social and historical factors that complicated the position of women artists over time,” 24 preventing their development and thus excluding the possibility of a female genius. The “feminine emancipation of the last half-century,” wrote Johnson in 1943, meant that the female artists who previously would have been neglected and undeveloped could now develop, potentially, into geniuses. 25

Buffie Johnson was writing as an artist active in the time period before second wave feminism, and her writing corresponded with an era in which women artists did not define themselves as feminists. Johnson was unique in her early adoption of a feminist identity. Working as a female artist, apart from the brief window of the Works Progress Administration in which many women were hired by the government to create work, was a lonely, isolated experience. Female artists were reluctant to identify themselves as too distinct from their male counterparts

22 Conaty, “This Century,” 31.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
and tended to distance themselves from other female artists, with whom they may have felt competition for the limited spots allotted to female artists at galleries and museums. Grace Hartigan, a member of the New York School movement, painted under the name of “George Hartigan” until 1954, and, “fearful… of being ghettoized and stereotyped as a woman artist— i.e., as something lesser,” insisted “that she faced no discrimination and was, in effect, simply one of the boys.”

Even Eva Hesse, whose beautiful, provocative, organic statues and paintings fascinated Lucy Lippard, “struggled uncomfortably with feminist as opposed to mainstream formalist readings of her work.” Lippard read Hesse’s work as “proto-feminist” but Hesse herself, working in the late 1960s, did not identify as a part of the feminist art movement— although, as she died in 1970, it is impossible to know if she would have become a part of the movement had she lived long enough.

Georgia O’Keefe and Lee Krasner, two female artists whose work was inspired, genius, and foundational in multiple art movements that followed their work, were both known (to some extent) through the lens of their famous husbands— Alfred Stieglitz and Jackson Pollock, both famous, successful artists in a time when male artists were much better known and acclaimed. As Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard observe, the work of female modernists was “not defined as that of an innovator” but rather “as a facilitator of the work of the male artists who followed her.” Examples include Krasner, O’Keefe, Helen Frankenthaler (classified by art critic Clement Greenberg “not as the innovative leader of a new school of painting,

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but as a precursor” of male Abstract Expressionists and male members of the Washington Color school, despite the fact that her work was “canonical” in Greenberg’s own words29), and Louise Bourgeois. These artists, not united by a common identity as feminists or even as publically female artists who addressed their gender in their work, created groundbreaking works alone— in dialogue with their male counterparts, even making artistic achievements that would bring their male peers renown, but still not considered a part of the movement and the community of male artists who composed this movement. These female artists were simply credited as the inspiration of the male ‘genius’ that followed them.

The response to the historical isolation of female artists is an aspect of the feminist movement that is rarely addressed explicitly. While the feminist art movement was a way for female artists to come together in community through their shared goals and ideals, it was also the first time many female artists had experienced artistic community at all. Working with other women was a markedly different experience than working in a male-dominated space. Feminist art went beyond grouping women by their gender, regardless of their art form, and created a “self-conscious and universalizing female voice in art” that was “self-conscious in articulating female experience from an informed social and political position, and universalizing in defining one’s experience as applicable to the experience of other women: ‘the personal is political.’”30 This mantra, used by the feminist movement as a whole, was particularly influential in feminist art in that it “connected-- for the first time, in a conscious way— the agendas of social politics and art.” This

29 Ibid.
movement was distinct from earlier female artists’ work in its “deliberate grounding of their art in their socialized experience as women and— the corollary of that position— in their acceptance of women’s experience as different from men’s but equally valid.” This is not to say that earlier work did not engage with political issues or serve as a way to manifest the self in art. Rather, the conception of “self” had changed— now, being a woman was a personal and political state, not just a negligible biological and biographical detail. This identification is the crux of the feminist art movement.  

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Chapter Two: Hartford Wash

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is unique and significant because of her work at the convergence of several artistic movements: performance, conceptual, and feminist\(^\text{33}\) art. Conceptual art, nascent in the 1960s and emergent in the 1970s, developed as artists sought a response to the commodification of the art world. Conceptual art was intentionally difficult to monetize, own, or sell. The definition most helpful for understanding conceptual art as it will be used in this chapter comes from *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of British Art*, in which conceptual art is described as “art which is derived from a concept so formulated that the construction of the work requires no further decision to be taken…. As soon as the creative act was deemed to be located in the prior concept, rather than in the physical realization, artists could content themselves with formulating that concept and leaving the realization to others, or to natural forces.”\(^\text{34}\) In summation, conceptual art is about ideas. The artist wants to communicate a specific idea, and the work exists to bring the viewer to the realization of that idea. Beyond this realization taking place in the brain of the viewer, conceptual art has no other set formal elements. The concept communicated is the only thing that matters, and this concept can be communicated in pictures, words, sculpture, action, or any medium deemed most effective.

Feminist art is similarly difficult to define, although the parameters are

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\(^{33}\) Feminist art is not always considered a movement, but rather a revolutionary form. For the purposes of this argument, I will be treating feminist art as a movement, but please note this is not a universal definition.


http://ezproxy.wesleyan.edu:7790/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/thba/conceptual_art/0?institutionId=3788
clearer: feminist art explored what it meant to be a woman and an artist, whether that meant living in a female body, working with mediums that were traditionally the realm of women like textiles and ceramics, or performing the labor typically associated with women. The aim of this exploration was to “promote a gender balance within art and culture.” Just like conceptual art, this definition encompasses a large body of work. This chapter will bring together the two forms of art by examining the work of conceptual feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Ukeles was not the first feminist artist, nor was she the first conceptual artist— nor, it should be noted, is she particularly well known in either sphere. Feminist work and conceptual work— specifically in the form of performance art— formed a strong connection, and many female artists worked in conceptual art. In fact, the first performance work by Mierle Laderman Ukeles that will be studied in this chapter came about directly as a result of an all-female conceptual art show. This chapter will attempt to understand what made Ukeles’ work unique and how her work was situated in the larger world of both feminist and conceptual work.

Lucy Lippard, art critic and curator, bears the honor of bringing together conceptual and feminist art. Between 1969 to 1973— a period in which she went from self-identifying as a “critic and curator” to a “politically engaged ‘socialist feminist’” – Lippard went from organizing conceptual art shows to curating an all-female art show, before becoming more explicitly feminist in her curatorial endeavors in the late 1970s. By 1973, as she first began to explore female art, Lippard had

organized several major exhibitions of conceptual work worldwide, including Seattle, Vancouver, and Buenos Aires. These shows were named for the populations of the cities where they took place—for example, the Seattle show was called 557,087, which was the population in 1969 when the show went up. Lippard’s shows exhibited the work of many soon-to-be-well-known conceptual artists (though the category of ‘conceptual’ was new at the time) including Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, and Vito Acconci. These shows were meant to explore this new art form, and as a result they defied standard museum practices. The works were often scattered around the city, not housed only in the gallery. Many of the works changed or deteriorated over time, instead of being preserved in their original forms. The pieces were also not always immediately obvious as works of art—they took the form of scattered wood, stripes painted on the exterior of a building, or even just pieces of paper.

While many of the best-known artists were male, female artists certainly participated in conceptual art and were featured in the shows. However, a pervasive idea existed...
that women did not create conceptual art, as Lippard recalls in later interviews and in her own writings. In response, in 1973 Lippard combined conceptual and feminist art in a national show. The show was a feminist, all-female show, titled c. 7,500.

Valencia, California is the home to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). CalArts is significant in the history of feminist art because it was the home institution of artists and teachers Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. Chicago and Schapiro created and ran the Feminist Art Program (FAP) at CalArts from 1971, when Chicago moved from Fresno, CA, where she had begun working on the concept, to 1973, when the program moved to Los Angeles.\(^{37}\) This feminist art program included art history as well as sculpture, painting, and performance art, but developed very differently from East Coast feminist art.\(^{38}\) Valencia, as an epicenter of the Southern California and West Coast feminist art movement, was intriguing to Lippard, so she started her show there and, following the precedent set by her earlier conceptual shows, titled it after the population of the city.

c. 7,500 was Lippard’s first foray into purely feminist art curation, and the convergence of East and West Coast feminist art at this show highlighted two divergent forms of feminist theory—the craft and textile oriented work of West Coast feminists and the more esoteric, conceptual work of East Coast feminist artists—which would only grow farther apart as the discipline developed. Judy Chicago, perhaps the most prominent and well-known feminist artist of the era, was skeptical of conceptual art and of Lippard’s show. However, in a step across the boundaries of the two approaches, Chicago reportedly “liked the show very much.” In

\(^{38}\) This concept will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three.
a letter written by Lippard following the opening of c. 7,500, Lippard writes that Chicago has “been very opposed to ‘Conceptual art’ as ‘unfemale’ fundamentally and had to change her mind, she admitted!”39 Though the two movements would continue to develop differently, this acknowledgement from such an influential and foundational feminist artist highlights the importance of Lippard’s show.

Lippard’s show was meant to be easy to display and ship. Artists were informed that their work should be kept small or compactable enough to be mailed from gallery to gallery, and the catalogue of the show would be comprised of handwritten notecards by each artist. This ease of display and low-cost, low-impact exhibit was part of what prompted the Hartford Atheneum to agree to host the show. With a reputation for modern art patronage under director A. Everett “Chick” Austin in the 1940s, the museum was once again expanding into the uncharted territory of conceptual art. More practically, however, the museum had space and time for a small, inexpensive exhibit that Lippard promised to put up herself in the early months of summer 1973. Conceptual art’s appeal, for Lippard and many others, was the accessibility and reach of the form. Unlike traditional art forms like sculpture or painting, which required serious resources to ship, store, and exhibit, hence limiting their spread, conceptual art was easily mailed between artists and galleries, even overseas. Conceptual art offered a form to bring together artists and curators who otherwise might not have worked together, and created community and unity between different artists who practiced the medium. As the world of conceptual art was relatively small and new, ideas and artworks were exchanged freely and a movement was formed. It was this fluid environment that allowed artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles

the ability to work with other female conceptual artists and find a space to work and a curator to display her projects in the changing art world which, previously, was unsure what to do with Ukeles’ work and ideas.

Mierle Laderman was born in Denver, Colorado, but moved to New York City for her undergraduate studies at Barnard College. After marrying city planner Jack Ukeles and the birth of their first child, the couple moved to Philadelphia for a year for Jack’s work. It was in Philadelphia, where, in contrast to her involvement with the New York art scene, Ukeles instead spent most of her day caring for her baby alone in their home, that Ukeles sat down to write “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!”.

Patricia C. Phillips, the guest curator for the Queens Museum’s 2016 retrospective of Ukeles titled *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Work*, quotes Ukeles in her essay “Making Necessity Art: Collisions of Maintenance and Freedom” that accompanied the exhibition. Ukeles described the original Manifesto as “‘a structure that is actually a sculpture though it looks like a text.’”

The original version was a melange of handwritten sections, boldly spaced typography, and the occasional typo. Like the ideas she puts forth in the manifesto, this work of philosophical and artistic thought is meant to stand on its own as a piece— situating her manifesto both within a context of written artistic manifestos and conceptual art that blurs the line between text and art. Easily reproduced and published yet an artistic creation of text and form on its own, the Manifesto was an early foray into conceptual art. As a result, this groundbreaking work was not recognized initially as the important philosophical and artistic piece of writing it would later be known as. Ukeles needed the fertile ground

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of the burgeoning feminist conceptual art movement to take her piece and grow it into a manifesto that spoke for the female artist of the 1970’s and beyond.

The manifesto is separated into two pieces: Ideas and The Maintenance Art Exhibition: “Care”. In the first section, the reader gets a glimpse into Ukeles’ crisis as artist and mother. First, she outlines the distinction between the “Death Instinct” and “Life Instinct”— death is avant-garde and individual, life is the “perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species”— and the two “basic systems: Development and Maintenance.” Like Death and Life, Development and Maintenance are situated opposite one another: Development is about “pure individual creation,” while Maintenance exists to “keep the dust off the pure individual creation.”

Maintenance, Ukeles writes, “is a drag; it takes all the fucking time.” Moreover, “the culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay.” The manifesto then describes Art:

“Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art.” This idea introduces the possibility of her work as a mother conflating with her work as an artist to create “Conceptual & Process art,”

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which “claim pure development and change, yet employ almost purely maintenance processes.”

With the links between maintenance and avant-garde conceptual art established, Ukeles begins her proposal for the exhibition “CARE.” In this proposed exhibit, Ukeles would combine her four identities—artist, woman, wife, mother—in a museum, and “do these maintenance everyday things… as Art.” Ukeles proposed in her exhibit to “live in the museum” and, in the public space of the museum, do the chores she would “customarily do at home with [her] husband and [her] baby, for the duration of the exhibition.” In this exhibit, recontextualized in the museum setting, her chores—“sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls”—would become works of art—“floor paintings, dust works, soap-sculpture, wall-paintings.” In summary, she writes in all caps, “MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK.”

Ukeles’ manifesto gained traction showly, produced by a little-known artist and espousing radical new ideas of art, so Ukeles began sending it to museums and influential members of the art world, like theorist and critic Jack Burnham. Burnham used portions of it in a piece he published in Artforum in 1971, entitled “Problems of Criticism, IX”. Lippard, beginning to feel the stirrings of feminist organizing in the art world, was initially unsure if Ukeles was real or a construction invented by Burnham. After reaching out to Burnham, Lippard contacted Ukeles and the two met for the first time in a New York City playground in 1971, accompanied by their young children. As Lippard remembers it, in the essay she wrote to accompany the exhibition book for the Queens Museum retrospective, “it was two moms in the

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42 Ukeles, Manifesto, 4.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
playground chatting about art that would shake up the art world for decades to come.” Lippard was drawn to conceptual art as an art critic and writer, and as the “burgeoning” feminist art movement began “tackling domesticity,” Ukeles was three years deep into Maintenance Art thinking—a natural convergence that would capture the moment of feminist art.

When Lippard began planning c. 7,500 in 1972, part of her motivation was to respond to a “persistent misperception… about the dearth of women Conceptual artists.” The exhibition was meant to be part of the number series, like its predecessors in Seattle and Vancouver, and this positioning within a larger series of

Photographs from c. 7,500 installed at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

46 Ibid.
47 Butler, “Conceptualism,” 60.
work allowed Lippard to “downplay… [and] diffuse the all-women nature of the project.” To Cornelia Butler, the author of a book about the series, this minimization was “arguably evidence of the newness of her personal feminism,” as well as an intentionally different form of curating: “the bold move away from a strong curatorial position,” Butler argues, “was in keeping with feminism’s critique of authority.”

The Wadsworth Atheneum was an early stop on the tour of c. 7,500, but Lippard already had an established rapport with many curators and administrators there. The archives, organized under Lippard’s name as guest curator, show a rich relationship and mutual respect. Correspondence between Lippard and the museum, as well as internal Wadsworth Atheneum memorandums, give a window into the attitudes around the exhibit. A letter from Lippard, sent January 31st, 1973 to an artistic director at the Atheneum, is intentionally casual about the gender of the artists. Lippard wanted, above all, to show that there were female contemporaries to the male conceptual artists gaining fame at the time, but did not want the show to be all about the artists’ gender. “All the artists, incidentally, are women, many of whom have never shown before,” she writes. “The work is interestingly different from the primarily male conceptual art I’ve had in other shows, but primarily it’s art.”

Curator Peter Marlow, in a memo reflecting on the meeting at which Lippard’s proposal was discussed, does not necessarily embrace Lippard’s intentionally casual attitude of the all-female show. “The idea of stressing the women-ness of it aroused certain of our Women’s Lib element,” he writes in a

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48 Ibid.
49 I could not find other evidence of this “Women’s Lib element” in the Wadsworth Atheneum archive or in any print material. As a result I assume it was not an official group but rather Marlow’s own turn of phrase.
memo, and while the exhibit is not taken on by the Atheneum purely on these
grounds, the appeal of feminist art in the early seventies was significant, politically
and socially. The general sentiment of the meeting seemed to be favorable, and, as
Marlow writes, “with a budget of $200 and an attitude of serendipity on our part,
maybe we shouldn’t get hung up on being too serious about weighing everything in
the way that one would a major endeavor.” With this casual attitude, c. 7,500 was
brought to Hartford on its nation-wide tour. The ‘Women’s Lib element’ mentioned
by Marlow in his memo does not seem to have influenced the decision one way or the
other. Instead, with a small room available during the summer season, the Atheneum
took advantage of a low-risk, low-cost opportunity to display a new form of work.
Less as political statement than ‘serendipity,’ contemporary feminist art secured a
display space in Connecticut.

For Ukeles, the Wadsworth Atheneum show presented her first opportunity to
put the manifesto’s Care proposal into practice. The exhibit c. 7,500 did not include a
proposal for Ukeles’ performance works, so Ukeles, encouraged by Lippard,
contacted gallery directors individually. Hartford, Connecticut, a few hours from New
York, was an ideal first location. Limited by the gallery setting, Ukeles had to find
ways to communicate her manifesto’s key points and make a compelling performance
piece in the given space. One way in which she did this was the manufacture of a
stamp with which to mark the invisible labor that had become art. The Maintenance
Art Work stamp was used to make things seem official: to mark questionnaires filled
out by visitors and artists about their own maintenance work and occasionally even
Ukeles herself. In the words of Patricia C. Phillips, curator of the Queens Museum
show, this stamp gave Ukeles’ work an air of authority. “It was in a similar spirit that Ukeles would hijack sets of keys from security personnel at the Wadsworth,” Phillips writes. “If the person with the keys held authority and power, the ‘keeper of the stamp’ also apparently wielded an affirmative if dubious status.”

Why was this status so dubious? Firstly, conceptual art was a new form of art, and this show was also the first to highlight female conceptual art—an underrecognized element of a genre not fully recognized on its own. Traditional women’s work in the house, unskilled and monotonous, was invisible and unpaid. Stamping a seal on a washed floor—a museum location for this invisible, unskilled domestic work—did not make for art in the traditional sense.

The Hartford Courant published a review of Ukeles’ performance on July 23, 1973. Titled “Maintenance Art Sure Looks Like Work” and written by Bruce Kauffman, the review was mainly perplexed about the performance and the genre of art itself. Ukeles scrubbed the floor of the

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Avery Court and said, as quoted in Kauffman’s review, told him that “‘it doesn’t look any different from the adjacent areas or even from the way it looked before.’”51

Without the mark of the ink proclaiming the area as Maintenance Art Work, the work would remain invisible, even to the artist who scrubbed the floor herself. In 1998, the Wadsworth Atheneum would revisit this groundbreaking performance piece in an exhibit called Matrix 137, part of a series that revisits earlier Atheneum exhibits.

“Ukeles’ work fuses and inverts concepts of high (art) and low (waste). Rather than claiming a space between art and life, as did many of the artists of her formative years, Ukeles entwines the two in an unprecedented manner… She combines a sculptor’s interest in materials, a mother’s interest in the well-being of her children, a practicing Jew’s observance of ritual, and a westerner’s frontier sense of scale,”52 the curator, Sherry Buckberrough, would write in a publication accompanying the exhibit in 1998.

The most powerful performance of the impact of this stamp was “Transfer: The Maintenance of The Art Object: Mummy Maintenance: With the Maintenance Man, the Maintenance Artist, and the Museum Conservator” performed on July 20, 1973, as part of Ukeles’ weekend-long performance at the Wadsworth Atheneum. This work highlighted more than any other the hierarchical, differently valued work that keeps a museum running—a small-scale, microcosmic example of the larger systems of power at work in the world. In this performance, Ukeles, a member of the custodial staff, and a highly qualified conservator—by museum policy, one of two

positions permitted to touch or clean a piece of art—each cleaned a glass case holding an ancient female Egyptian mummy. Ukeles “picked her out because she still had breasts,” she explained in a 2008 interview, and mummies represent life, death, and the conservation and maintenance of human waste—in this case, the human body after death. First in the performance, the janitor cleaned the glass case with a spray bottle of cleaner and a rag. While only the conservator could open the glass case or handle the mummy, the exterior of the case was maintained by the janitorial staff. Then, Ukeles took the spray cleaner from the custodian and sprayed the case before wiping it with a cloth diaper (her own touch and a consistent tool in her works, tying her labor always to motherhood). This cleaning completed, Ukeles stamped the case with her Maintenance ArtWork stamp. Immediately the jurisdiction of this work switched from the custodian to the conservator, who was “compelled to write a new condition report authenticating the vitrine as a work of art in its own right.”53 With this, Ukeles “handed the cleaning materials to the conservator, completing and consecrating the series of transfers through which the performance had rendered power, authority, value, institutional protocol, and human roles and responsibilities in the museum fluid and fugitive.”54

In the chart Ukeles drew to accompany and clarify this piece, she roughly sketched the actions of each participant and listed the result. For her task, she uses her own terminology for the newly clean case: “dust painting.” As Phillips writes, Ukeles had disrupted the traditional structure of power and responsibilities. Her action took the simple task of cleaning and made it an action requiring a special degree and high

54 Ibid.
pay grade to ‘maintain.’ She pointedly asks the question in this action of why we value some work more than others. The museum would not function without the daily custodial work, yet this work is invisible. However, a clean museum is as absolutely integral to the museum as the works of ‘art’ themselves—it is impossible to have one without the other.

Above, Ukeles’ hand drawn chart for the transfer mummy piece. Top right, Ukeles creates a “dust painting” on the mummy case. Bottom right, Ukeles with janitor (L) and conservator (R).

Ukeles did four performance pieces that weekend in Hartford in July—two on Friday and two on Sunday, observing the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday. “Transfer” was performed on Friday, along with “The Keeping of the Keys,” a piece in which Ukeles took the keys from the security guards at the Atheneum and locked and unlocked the doors of galleries, sometimes locking unsuspecting museumgoers in or out of galleries. On Sunday, she washed the floor of the Avery Court, an indoor courtyard with a classical marble sculpture in the middle of the high-ceilinged space,
surrounding walls exhibiting the modern art collection of the museum, and the steps 
of the museum—two performances called “Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside” 
and “Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside.” These performances, lasting four hours 
each, were physically exhausting to Ukeles, much like the labor of keeping house.

A limited amount of sources exist to illuminate contemporaneous reviews of 
the performances. The performances were written about independent of the 
larger exhibition of c. 7,500 in the Hartford Courant article published the day after the 
Sunday performances. The review was more perplexed than evaluative. In a telling 
look at dominant power structures of the era, the confused journalist assigned to 
review the piece asks Ukeles’ husband for an explanation. Jack Ukeles complies, 
explaining that his wife’s work “maintains that there is a real, definable relationship 
between the creative things you do and the little things you must do to 
maintain some semblance of order in daily living.”55 In this case, the “semblance of 
order” of a clean museum requires constant work on the part of the custodial staff, 
which Ukeles imitates and thereby disrupts the order of the “daily living” of the

55 Kauffman, “Work.”
museum—patrons are locked in galleries, curatorial staff cleans glass vitrines, a tall, dignified, trained New York artist scrubs the steps of a museum during museum hours. The Hartford Courant article ends with a begrudging, sarcastic comment on the piece and the current art world: “Like it or not,” Kauffman writes, “conceptual art seems to be quite the rage among a certain segment of those purported to be in the know.”

To return to Lippard, conceptual art was certainly the medium of the era for her. The East Coast-West Coast divide meant that conceptual and performance art was not inherently considered feminist art, which was more concerned with depictions of female imagery and sensibilities. Conceptual art was, the West Coast feminists worried, unable to accurately “express female concerns.” Further, performance art as defined in the modern artistic sense was evolving even as Lippard started her number shows and by 1973 was still in its earliest days. Performance art also defies definition—Rose Lee Goldberg, who authored the first history of performance art in 1979, wrote that the form “defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists.” The appeal of performance art, Goldberg argues, lies precisely in this ambivalent definition. Performance art came about because artists, frustrated with the limits of other art forms, wanted to create work that could not be easily classified or commodified. The authors of *Performance: Texts and Contexts*, define performance in eight points, the first two of which are especially relevant when examining Ukeles’ early performance work: “(1) an anti-

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56 Ibid.
57 Butler, “Conceptualism,” 65.
establishment, provocative, unconventional, often assaultive interventionist or performance stance; (2) opposition to culture’s commodification of art.”

In Ukeles’ performances at the Wadsworth Atheneum, she directly intervenes in the daily proceedings of an art museum by physically occupying or obstructing the museum space and making public the private labor of the custodial services and the private domestic labor of women in American society. Further, Ukeles’ work functions to decommodify art on multiple levels. Her performances did not have a separate admission ticket to the museum, unlike a theater performance. The performances were advertised in local New England area newspapers and in Wadsworth press releases, but were essentially just open to the public—both those within the museum who had purchased tickets, as well as Hartford residents who happened to pass the Wadsworth as Ukeles scrubbed the front steps. As Carlson notes in his critical introduction to performance art, in the early 1970s performance art was “created by and for a very limited artistic community.”

In 1973, that specific and limited community of artists was certainly not based in Hartford, Connecticut, so Ukeles performed there knowing full well that performance art did not have a pervasive presence in that area. Because performance art, unlike a painting or print, does not exist to be sold as an object, performances rarely leave any physical artifacts behind. Ukeles documented her work from the start, so photographs (mainly taken by her husband) do exist, but these photographs were not sold, nor were they meant to be. Photos of her performances could not be published in advance, so advertising for the

event was limited. The performances were not repeated or filmed. For those who were not present at the performances, they may as well not have happened. More than any explicit statement, this fact aligns Ukeles’ performance piece with the work of domestic housekeepers and professional custodial staff. Housekeeping and maintenance happens constantly—every single day in art museums and households, labor is performed by someone to keep the spaces functioning. However, like a tree falling in a forest, the crux of this labor is that it is utterly invisible. Maintenance labor only becomes visible when it is not being performed—dust piling up on glass mummy cases, diapers overflowing the trash cans, dishes filling the sink. In contrast, Ukeles performs the labor without a noticeable impact. The floor she scrubs is not noticeably cleaner, she states herself, and without photographs, no trace of this performance would exist. Performance art always troubles the reproducibility and documentation of work that allows for a concentrated study or deeper analysis by art historians, but such scholarship does exist. Performance is an integral part of art history, and many artists are famous for their performance pieces. However, even within this narrow frame, Ukeles is often neglected.

Feminism and performance art began to come together in the 1970s—in Southern California, a major portion of the performance art created there was related to “feminist concerns”61—as the “rise of the women’s movement proved a much more favorable climate for performance work created by women and concerned with their private and public experience as women.”62 Interestingly, performance art was widely accepted by the West Coast artists who founded the feminist art programs.

62 Ibid.
Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, and Faith Wilding, all founders of the Los Angeles Feminist Art Program, were all “practitioners and theorists” of performance art. Judy Chicago explained in a 1989 interview: “Performance can be fueled by rage in a way painting and sculpture can’t. The women at Fresno [an early feminist art program, founded in 1970 and later to move to CalArts] did performances with almost no skills, but they were powerful performances because they came out of authentic feelings.”

While conceptual art was largely rejected by Southern California feminist artists, performance pieces were seen as an integral part of the feminist art movement. Early feminist art was concerned with the female form, and performance art allowed the female body to take the center stage—not just depicted, but wholly present; full of emotion and action. Performance art was “a social, political, and psychological thing about what it means to be a woman in this society, a particular woman, an artist,” as described by artist Eleanor Antin—an artist frequently exhibited in Lippard’s shows, including c. 7,500.

By the mid to late 1970s performance art was giving feminist artists a new medium to express themselves. However, in the early days of performance art, the form was so utterly masculine that no woman would approach it; “women artists,” suggests Lucy Lippard, found little appeal in the main line of body art through the late 1960s “when Bruce Nauman was ‘Thighing,’ Vito Acconci was masturbating, Dennis Oppenheim was sunbathing and burning, and Barry Le Va was slamming into walls.”

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63 Ibid.
64 Carlson, 162.
Lippard is referencing a 1971 piece by Vito Acconci titled “Seedbed,” in which he masturbated under a ramp while museum-goers walked above him. That same year, Chris Burden hired a marksman to shoot him with a rifle in a museum. These hyper-physical, utterly male works are among the most famous performance art pieces of all time. Both involve putting the male body at the center in its most masculine form—ejaculating is, arguably, the most male of bodily functions, and guns, war, and violence are pieces of a male-dominated world in which women rarely play the role of perpetrator or marksman—and allowing the male body to be the center of the action. In contrast, Ukeles’ work produced a result outside of her own body. While Ukeles’ body was integral to the action taking place, her body was not the central focus. Instead, her actions were the performance. At the end of the performances, artwork had been produced, but so had an actual clean mummy case, steps, and courtyard. In this way, Ukeles’ work is differentiated from that of other feminist performance artists. Yoko Ono and Yvonne Rainer, early performance artists, used the medium to express the physicality and embodied female experience, like miming the physical experience of walking down the street, like Rainer, or an Ono piece in which she allowed spectators to cut off pieces of her clothing, leaving her almost naked in the center of the gallery. These performances affected the viewers, and were stylized, choreographed, visually impactful performances. In contrast, Ukeles used her performance art to express female labor as a performance in its own right. There was nothing special about how Ukeles cleaned the floor, because what mattered was that her boring, repetitive action, exactly as it would be done in her own home, was art because she said it was art.
Other early and contemporary performance artists like Ono and Carolee Schneemann highlighted the physical and sexual aspects of embodied female experiences, like Ono’s clothes cutting piece and Schneeman’s *Interior Scroll* (1975), in which she pulls a rolled up piece of paper from her vagina and reads aloud from it.

The feminist artists working on *Womanhouse*, like Ukeles, performed household tasks as part of their performance. These performances, by artists like Faith Wilding, Sandra Orgel, and Chris Rush, involved repetitive household work “designed to demonstrate ‘the preoccupations imposed on women’ and to externalize ‘the highly negative inner responses they provoke.’”\(^{66}\) The discomfort of the female performers and their audience as they frantically ironed and scrubbed was meant to communicate the difficult situation housewives are put in both by external expectations and the effect these societal pressures have on how women judge their own value— the “personal and psychological statements”\(^{67}\) of womanhood. However, these pieces are different from Ukeles’ work because they took place in a home (although it was a home that was serving as a gallery) and were part of a larger exhibition. Viewers would come through the house to see the physical spaces the artists had created and

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\(^{67}\) Carlson, “Performance and identity,” 148.
the artists would be performing chores. Unlike Ukeles, these works were part of a larger exhibition, and were not demanding recognition as ‘art’ on their own. Ukeles’ performances in Hartford were purely about the act of labor, not part of a larger experience or exhibition about the female experience.

Moira Roth, in her study of 1970s female performance art, identified three “major orientations” in the genre: “performance related to women’s personal experience, to women’s collective past, and to exploring the strategies of specific feminist activism.” For Ukeles, the women at CalArts in Los Angeles were not an inspiration, despite the similarities in their work. Ukeles cited dancers Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, and Steve Paxton and conceptual artist Robert Morris as an influence in a 2008 interview about the exhibition, but purely as inspiration—she had, she recalls, no model for the type of work she began with the 1973 performance in Hartford. The inspiration she drew from Rainer, Hay, Paxton, and Morris was the “physical, very task-oriented work” that “wasn’t theatrical,” in that the performance did not depend on the audience, like a theater show, but was rather about the task and the work itself. Nobody needed to watch for the performance to take place.

In contrast to the performances at Womanhouse, Ukeles’ work could be seen or it could be ignored—her working was the work, as she stated in her manifesto, and her performance was not about the emotions she felt as she worked, but rather that the invisible labor that ran the museum was now being conducted in full view, in broad daylight, during museum hours, with no concern to the inconveniences it caused museum patrons or employees. In a New York Times article reflecting on Ukeles’

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68 Carlson, “Performance and identity,” 149.
work decades after it was performed, writer William Zimmer explains: “Her intention is to reveal the dignity of actions thought to be bereft of it. She does this by taking what might be seen as a leap of faith: considering thankless labor performed in a rote way as art because in carrying them out, they mimic the near-ritualistic ways in which artists work.”

If a museum is a location to witness the work of artists, why not also witness the way in which artists work—ritualistically, with everyday items, monotonously. For a female artist, this burden of an artist’s work is doubled: she performs the physical and creative labor of creating work while also performing the maintenance required to keep her home functioning and her children clothed and fed. The ritual of childcare and housekeeping, Ukeles argues with her performance, is not so far removed from the ritual of art, and the spectacle of art cannot exist without the labor of maintenance. Why not, she argues, make this labor of maintenance a spectacle in its own right.

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Chapter Three: West vs. East Coast Feminist Art

The year before Mierle Laderman Ukeles performed her first Maintenance Work at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Womanhouse opened in Los Angeles. Open only for a month, from January 30th to February 28th, 1972, the house—a seventeen-room mansion in Hollywood, abandoned, dilapidated, and soon to be demolished—was a project of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts. This project was the first created by the program, which was the first of its kind, making Womanhouse doubly groundbreaking. Judy Chicago had first formed the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College, before partnering with CalArt professor Miriam Schapiro to bring the program to the larger, better-funded, acclaimed art school just north of Los Angeles, in Valencia, California. Linda Nochlin, as discussed earlier, noted on her visit to California in 1971 that working with other female artists and under female art instructors was a novelty for Chicago and Schapiro’s students, which stood in contrast to her own (and typically East Coast) experience at a women’s college. Whereas Nochlin, Lucy Lippard, and Ukeles all studied at women’s colleges (Vassar, Smith, and Barnard), Chicago and Schapiro did their undergraduate and graduate work at coeducational universities. While the East Coast women had four years surrounded by female peers and under the tutelage of female professors at a time when women could realistically only teach in higher education at a single-gender school, Chicago and Schapiro did not share this gestational all-female experience. When the Feminist Art Program (FAP) was formed, a key tenet was providing a “psychological environment that gave them the
confidence to trust their own instincts and judgment” and that, to a large extent, meant separatism from the larger CalArts community and, explicitly or implicitly, from men as a whole. Harper, citing interviews with former students, noted a perceived “hostility to men” in the program—"students who were in relationships with men were often criticized; some were encouraged to repudiate their boyfriends or husbands,” Harper noted. Schapiro was married at the time to a male dean at CalArts and Chicago was married to a male sculptor (though neither took their husbands’ names). Chicago, recollecting the program, blamed the connection to male culture for weakening the culture of FAP, saying:

Since most of the women, including me, lived with men, when we left our group it was very easy to move back into our identification with men. One of the things that destroyed the FAP is that the students used to leave the safety of the program and reenter their bonds with men, and they were continually, every day, every hour, confronting where their loyalty and primary identification lay. There was continual pressure on them.

Though this was not true for all of the women of the FAP, the costs of isolating themselves from men during the long, difficult days of working on Womanhouse and other projects left them feeling alienated, resentful, and exhausted. Faith Wilding, a performance artist and student of the FAP, noted that the program “wouldn’t have made the gains” it did “without that drastic, radical dislocation of the status quo,” but also acknowledged the high costs of self-segregation.

The FAP originally consisted mainly of sharing ideas and consciousness raising. As Schapiro recollects, class started by sitting in a circle and discussing an

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agreed-upon question, with each student responding to the prompt and the rest of the students acknowledging her feelings and thoughts. This was the crux of the motto “the personal is the political” of the women’s liberation movement. This discussion segment also helped generate ideas for content for the art they created, and this practice helped bring to the surface the universal ideas and experiences of the women in the program—and by extension, those of all the modern, socially constructed woman. Further, the group acknowledgment of shared experiences gave the artists the courage to “bring material to the surface” in a society that relied on the suppression of female emotions and ideas.  

In 1987, noting that “it is a matter of pride that we set out to do something in 1971 and did it so well that we are still writing about it in 1987,” Schapiro reflected on the formation of the FAP and their first project, Womanhouse. “Consciousness raising was the general technique used at Fresno in order for women to identify their condition and status as women,” Schapiro noted, but the ideas, once generated, had no means of expression. She recalls that the artists “did not… have much skill or technique in implementing their ideas, nor did they know anything about the culture of art.” Schapiro saw this as a hindrance to the mission of the FAP and feminist art as a whole, and made it her mission to “show them how to emphasize their womanly focus within the setting of a universal culture.” Schapiro had already achieved fame as an artist outside of the feminist movement (or perhaps more accurately, before the movement really took off) as an artist working with traditionally female craft mediums like textiles. She

used her position at Cal Arts to cajole the administration into hiring Chicago and creating “a class for women artists only (unheard of at that time), to be team taught” by Schapiro and Chicago. The project Womanhouse was voted on and picked as the initial project almost immediately, and work began at once. The house selected had been abandoned for long enough to be in a state of total disrepair, meaning that the 23 women of the FAP were not only creating art, they were also performing repairs and fixing up an old mansion—the women “scraped walls, replaced windows, built partitions, sanded floors, made furniture, installed lights, and renovated the seventy-five-year-old dilapidated structure,” in the words of Schapiro.\(^77\) This immediately draws connections to the work of Ukeles. The CalArts women repaired and cleaned the house in order to transform it into an artistic space, and the exhibit was entirely dependent on the invisible labor they performed for months in preparation. Though the art was the focus of the space, the work to transform the space from abandoned mansion, a true gilded cage, into a gallery space was just as important. This foundational labor, time consuming yet invisible, evokes an Eva Hesse quote from 1965: “A woman is sidetracked by all her feminine roles from menstrual periods to cleaning house to remaining pretty and ‘young’ and having babies… She’s at a disadvantage from the beginning.”\(^78\) Womanhouse took the distractions Hesse discussed and turned them into part of the art process.

Each room in the mansion was transformed into an immersive art space, with some functioning also as performance spaces—including early work by the influential performance artist Faith Wilding, a member of the FAP. The art in the

\(^77\) Schapiro, “Recalling,” 25.
rooms was both sculptural and painterly, meant to communicate the artists’ “dreams and fantasies” developed freely in the emotionally and culturally loaded space of the home—where women “have been identified with for centuries,” where women “nourished and were nourished… fought and struggled.” The women of the FAP were taking back control of the home and making it a battleground to show their difficult emotions and the history of female oppression within the home. This meant incorporating materials “considered trivial” like dolls, makeup, silk stockings, sanitary products, toys, quilts, etc. The work in Womanhouse emphasized “domestic activities that had been devalued by society” like “traditional techniques such as quilting and needlework, raising such techniques to high art status.”

Though these crafts were long considered the domain of women, these women were not ‘artists’ and the crafts created were not ‘art’—instead, this highly skilled labor was viewed as fit for no more than home decoration. Judy Chicago would later focus on these art forms for her monumental piece The Dinner Party, but the use of these art forms in Womanhouse was one of the defining features of West Coast feminist art, which emphasized a reclaiming of these skills and a repurposing towards high art. Just like women of the feminist movement demanded recognition of the female experience, the West Coast artists demanded recognition of these ‘women’s forms’ of work as works of art.

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80 Ibid.
Shapiro and Chicago relied heavily on the practice of “consciousness raising” in the FAP. This process, discussed earlier as a means of generating ideas for art, followed the “circular” and “womb-like” discussion Schapiro touts in her 1972 discussion of the program, where the teachers were active participants, not leaders or guides. One former student described the experience of these consciousness-raising sessions as “soul searching, gut wrenching, tumultuous, cleansing, exhausting, exhilarating”; another as “personality reconstruction” that caused “post-traumatic shock syndrome”\(^82\). These views, differing in opinion, nevertheless reveal the powerful impact of this exercise as a classroom tool. Chicago’s classroom was “part consciousness-raising, part group therapy, and part studio art” and this class structure “took aim at the femininity that psychologically restrained her female students.”\(^83\) Every single recollection of working with Chicago, especially in the FAP, mentions the emotional toll and grueling nature of her course. Beyond the emotional trauma of questioning every aspect of life as a socialized female and rejecting the norms and

\(^{83}\)Ibid.
rules that had governed their entire lives, the female students were also contending with a professor who refused to accept their physical exhaustion or strain as a valid experience. The women, young students, were working full days to repair the house where Womanhouse was set, doing labor that they had no experience with such as replacing windows and rewiring electricity, on top of the expected studio work and, in most cases, the menial jobs as waitresses or librarians that they took to fund their work at the FAP. The physical exhaustion, emotional turmoil, and psychological labor of the FAP led to constant conflict, accusations of Chicago as power-hungry and controlling, and the alienation and damage of many participants. At the same time, the FAP was doing something new and revolutionary, and the women involved were also experiencing liberation for the first time, working with other female artists, and finally expressing themselves fully.

Judy Chicago is perhaps the most famous feminist artist of all time. When feminist art is discussed, she is inevitably cited. What is it about Chicago and her work that so captured the feminist art movement and made her the face of feminist art for generations to come? Likely, Chicago’s enduring legacy is a result of her magnitudinous project, The Dinner Party. This work was the first of its kind; referred to as “the most monumental work of the 1970s feminist art movement,” it has been “praised, damned, celebrated, and denounced since its debut in 1979.”

The Dinner Party consisted of 39 place settings at three long tables, arranged in a triangle. Each place setting has a ceramic plate in the shape of female genitalia and an embroidered napkin with the name of that particular ‘guest,’ each of which is an influential woman in history or legend. The tables are covered with elaborately

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embroidered table runners and each setting has flatware and a chalice. On the floor in the triangular space created by the tables are 999 names of other important women.

The project took about five years to create, and involved the work of four hundred volunteer artists. Now on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum since 2009, the work traveled the country in the eighties, being exhibited at various cultural institutions— not just art museums— to enormous crowds. Chicago’s work “embodied a kind of art that few Americans outside of activist or bohemian circles had seen before,” and further, “brought to the mainstream a feminist representation of woman as constituting a ‘sex class’ and as a group sharing not only female body parts, but also a history of oppression and a culture of resilience over time and place.”

While the Feminist Art Program could only deeply reach the 23 women who were part of the program and, less thoroughly but with still significant impact, the visitors to Womanhouse in the month it was open to the public, The Dinner Party traveled the country and was seen in major cities all over the nation.

85 Gerhard, Dinner Party, 2.
throughout the eighties, with a loss of popularity as third wave feminism developed, before going on permanent exhibition in 2007. While *Womanhouse* was created by 23 women who were already feminists and willing to commit to a university-run program that developed them as feminists and artists, the four hundred workers who made *The Dinner Party* were mostly older, established, married women who did not necessarily identify as feminists. Rather, these were women who were interested in the project and in the concept of feminism and who saw *The Dinner Party* project as a way to learn about feminist theory and use their skills for the greater good.

The studio of *The Dinner Party* was a move towards the mid-seventies ideal of “establishing women-centered institutions where [feminists] could enact feminist principles and lifestyles,” and represented the subgroup of radical feminists who wanted separation from men in order to “invent new groups of liberated women who could bring about a more fair and equitable society.”86 Unlike other feminist collectives, Chicago maintained absolute control of the project from start to finish, and it was understood that the volunteers who helped create *The Dinner Party* did so under her explicit instruction. Chicago was also responsible for the financing of this project, meaning that she gave talks wherever she was paid to do so, met with potential investors (mainly wealthy women with an interest in feminist art), and generally took a more administrative role in ensuring the project was completed. Since the project was always short on money, Chicago “offered volunteers payment in the form of a feminist experience.” By working on *The Dinner Party*, Chicago promised, the volunteers “would experience firsthand the techniques and benefits of feminism.” As Gerhard writes, women who did not join feminist groups or become

86 Gerhard, “Judy Chicago,” 601.
active in the movement for whatever reason felt like the studio was a place to ‘’do’’ feminism for a week or a month, to reap the benefits of [consciousness raising], to experience sisterhood directly by living and working with other women, and to participate in the larger sweep of history by contributing to Chicago’s monument to women.” Just like the FAP at Cal Arts, the studio environment was often tense, emotionally fraught, and contentious. Conflict was a constant, and as the figure of authority again, Chicago faced the brunt of (not unwarranted) complaints, since Chicago could be extremely demanding and push women into situations and experiences with which they were not always comfortable. That being said, however, Chicago was a force of personality who drew people in with her energy, revolutionary ideas, and strength. She spoke all over the country, winning converts and support for her work, and cementing her status as one of the most significant feminist artists of the era. Ukeles’ work dealt with the isolation and loneliness of individual female labor in the private home, but Chicago’s explored the radical possibility of feminist working communities and of art as collective female labor. Based only on this, it is easy to see why Chicago made a name for herself while Ukeles labored mostly unknown. Chicago was bringing feminist thinking to women through her lectures and art pieces, while Ukeles dwelt on the personal experience of women as caregivers, isolated but for their children. While Ukeles brought invisible labor into the museum setting, Chicago brought female imagery—also known as ‘central core imagery’ or, more directly, ‘cunt imagery’—into full view.

As always, it is useful to consult Lucy Lippard when discussing differences between East and West Coast feminist art. In her book *From the Center*, in an essay

87 Ibid, 603.
entitled “European and American Women’s Body Art,” she helpfully gives background to the concept of female imagery. Female imagery “arose on the West Coast through the ideas and programs of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro,” she writes. “The initial notion (central-core abstraction, boxes, spheres, ovals) emphasized body identification and biologically derived forms, primarily in painting and sculpture.”

However, this form “met strong resistance when it reached the East Coast, and in New York— the Minimal/Conceptual stronghold— these images were diffused into more deadpan styles and ‘avant-garde’ media.” Writing a few years after this East Coast resistance, Lippard notes that while “the results on the East and West coasts were somewhat different, the motivations were the same.”

88 Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ fits cleanly into this distinction— her work is conceptual with no discernable female imagery, especially in her performance

pieces. Ukeles’ work in Hartford uses household imagery and actions, with her recreation of the activities of the house done in the museum space—as Lippard describes the intentions of Womanhouse, which are relevant also in examining Ukeles, “women artists have organized, are shedding their shackles, proudly untying the apron strings—and, in some cases, keeping the apron on, flaunting it, turning it into art.”

This is just one of the overlaps between East and West Coast ideas, yet the depictions could not be more different. In examining the examples of Hartford Wash and Womanhouse, two of the works studied in this piece, the differences are striking. Firstly, Womanhouse was a physical space where viewers could go. Like Ukeles’ work, it puts into question the role of the museum—with an independent building and location, Womanhouse was not reliant on museum input or standards to develop and exhibit the work. Ukeles’ performance pieces also put the museum in a unique position, in which the invisible labor of the museum—dusting, mopping, locking and unlocking doors—was performed very visibly by an artist. However, Ukeles’ piece takes the labor of the home into the museum, while Womanhouse makes a museum out of a home. The house in which Womanhouse took place was an immersive space with a unifying theme, while museums are a separate space from daily life and house several exhibitions at once, which are generally unrelated to one another. Womanhouse collapsed these distinctions and made an art exhibit about the home in a home, creating a fusion of visual art, performance art, and consciousness raising about the history of female labor, emotions, suffering, and experience within the home. Womanhouse made the house a violently charged location, while Ukeles’ work took the rage, isolation, and

89 Ibid, 57.
monotony of the home into the public, presumably neutral space of the museum. *Womanhouse* was also a built space—the dilapidated mansion was repaired to the specifications of the female artists, who built up the house with their plan in mind, filled with significant objects and executed entirely to fulfill the mission. In contrast, Ukeles’ piece required almost no physical objects. She used diapers to mop and dust and created a stamp to designate which of her activities were to be considered art, but Ukeles’ work was most dependent on the significance of her actions, not any independent objects. Similarly, *Womanhouse* was photographed and described as an artifact and then destroyed, while Ukeles’ work lives on only in the photographs taken of her one-time performance, dependent entirely on time and place. While thousands of people toured *Womanhouse*, Ukeles’ performance piece was sparsely attended, with few, if any, intentional viewers—most of the spectators were museum visitors unaware in advance that her performance was taking place. Ukeles’ work stands in contrast even to the performances of *Womanhouse*, which included pieces by influential artist Faith Wilding. For Wilding’s performances, the audience entered the space to see the artist, who performed in a room she constructed herself for that performance. Ukeles is the odd one out in her performance, as the element of the room that is unusual and unexpected, yet is still virtually invisible. Given the intentionally low-impact nature of Ukeles’ work, it is not surprising that her work did not have the revolutionary energy of Chicago’s various projects. Further, though *Womanhouse* was situated in a specific location and could not travel, *The Dinner Party* was not site-specific at all, and in fact relied upon its ability to move around the nation to engage many different audiences. *The
Dinner Party and Womanhouse were therefore created with the audience in mind, while Ukeles’ work was more about the personal transformations of herself, the artist, regardless of the audience. This is true of almost all of Ukeles’ works, which are more about the ritual—the fact that something was done, not who witnessed it being done, is what matters. Because of the conceptual, non-imagery-based nature of her work, and because of the circulation and amount of viewers of Ukeles’ work versus Chicago’s and FAP’s, Ukeles could not possibly have gained the fame or notoriety of her West Coast contemporaries.

Another factor contributing to the cultural divide between the East and West Coasts was the state of the art world in the 1970s. New York had an established art scene and clear hierarchies and power structures. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, in an interview in 2008, explained that “the heavy-duty power of the art world was right here in New York,” and as a result, “this affected how feminist artists operated.” Instead of the “art manifestation” of the West Coast, led by Chicago and Schapiro in Los Angeles—a place Ukeles describes as a “backwater” or culturally insignificant at that time—the East Coast movement was “much more decentralised, more individualistic, more isolated.”90 Though the coasts were linked through networks like West-East Bag, a group founded in 1971 by Lippard, Chicago, and Schapiro, to serve “as a national liaison network of women artists” in part through its production of “bicoastal newsletters to link women and to encourage them to protest against gender discrimination by institutions,”91 the work developing on each coast followed a division between essentialism and theory.

Helen Molesworth has written on the divide between these two forms of feminist art in her essay “House Work and Art Work,” written in 2000 to reflect on 1990s art practice and that era’s “steady fascination with and revival of art from the 1970s.” Molesworth identifies a “bitter binary opposition” between “feminist work based in ‘theory,’ poststructuralism, or social constructionism, and work derived from the so-called principles of ‘essentialism.’” Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party is used as “exemplary” example of the essentialist approach, while Mary Kelly’s Post Partum Document (1979)—a work spanning the first several years of life of Kelly’s son, in which she records (without depicting either her son or herself) evidence of his daily life, including diapers, stories she reads to him, and charts of his growth and eating habits, all displayed scientifically and labeled like specimens—is Molesworth’s example of “theory-based feminist practice.”

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93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
Kelly’s work looks clinical and scientific, and was groundbreaking when it was exhibited in museums in England and the United States because of this seemingly cold depiction of the intimacies of motherhood. Chicago’s work, with female genitalia imagery and explicit figuration of the female body, is representative of the type of essentialist work that progressed into theory-based art. As Faith Wilding, a former student of Chicago’s notes, the “crude” cunt images used by Chicago were “precursors for a new vocabulary for representing female sexuality and the body in art,” not the final resting place or definitive example of feminist art.\(^\text{95}\) Molesworth, when looking at *The Dinner Party* alongside *Post Partum Document*, also draws a connection to Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ work, *Maintenance Art Performances*, as well as Martha Rosler’s video piece *Domination and the Everyday* (1978). In these four works, Molesworth argues, we see the “stark contrast between Chicago’s cunt-based central core imagery and Kelly’s pointed refusal to represent the female body,” but we also see “all four artists [dealing] in varying degrees with putatively ‘private’ aspects of women’s lives and experience: motherhood, cleaning, cooking, and entertaining.”\(^\text{96}\) Though each of these four pieces represent a different aspect of female life, and each documents these experiences in very different ways, all four pieces are forms of feminist art—a movement that cannot and should not be defined as limited in its scope, but rather should encompass as wide a variety as possible of female experience and art. These pieces “directly engaged with the most ‘advanced’ artistic practices of the day—

\(^{95}\) Ibid, 74.
\(^{96}\) Ibid, 80.
Minimalism, Performance, and Conceptual art” as well as foregrounding the formation of Institutional Critique, an art movement that would focus on the museum itself as the subject. However, Molesworth argues, these works have been left out of the archives and study of Minimalism, Conceptual art, and Institutional Critique due to a “fundamental misrecognition of the terms and strategies they employed”—instead of being studied as minimalist, conceptual, or critical works that dealt with “domesticity or maintenance and its structural relation to the public sphere,” these works are instead classified only as pertaining to feminist issues, which precludes their inclusion in these other artistic movements with which they were fully engaged. Because of their depiction of hidden and invisible things like female genitalia and domestic work, they were excluded from studies of “other postwar art practices,” leaving feminist art in a limbo. Not unified into one movement or recognizable form, yet excluded from the movements they did relate to because of what experiences and images they depicted, feminist art was reduced, uneasily, to its own category. This tenuous categorization would prove incapable of encompassing the development of Ukeles in particular, and would lead to her departure from traditional feminist art into a new sphere of work. Ukeles left the sphere of the purely feminist artistic motivations that drove her early work and instead expanded into looking and undervalued, invisible labor of all sorts. This development of her artistic practice is why her work continues to be relevant today, as seen in the 2016 retrospective of her work at the Queens Museum, while

97 Minimalism is an artistic movement that revolved around “extremely simplified composition” of simple shapes, best encapsulated in the work of sculptor Carl Andre, whose work arranged industrial materials in “modular compositions.” http://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/minimalism
Chicago’s work has become more an artifact of an era that has ended.
Chapter Four: Touch Sanitation: The Continuation of Feminist Art Activism

Mierle Laderman Ukeles has continued her work to the present day, engaging further with issues of labor— who does it, why particular people are the ones expected to perform certain types of labor, and why we cannot see patterns of oppression and devaluation within these fields of labor. Ukeles has expanded her art beyond invisible female labor, and as a result is no longer exclusively a feminist artist.

After Hartford Wash, Ukeles did performance pieces at other institutions. At the gallery A.I.R., founded in 1972 and run exclusively by women, Ukeles scrubbed the street in front of the gallery for three hours. At Vassar, she performed several pieces around an old oak tree, including constructing a giant menstrual pad for gathering the fallen leaves of the oak—a comment on the supposed connection between women and nature. This work took place in 1974, meaning that Ukeles performed this piece while Linda Nochlin was still actively teaching at the college. Although Nochlin’s essays never address Ukeles directly, this is perhaps more a function of Nochlin generally avoiding conceptual art as a topic. Ukeles’ performances at Vassar were very gendered, including the piece Fall/Suite: The Trees Are Having Their Period: Making a 50-Foot Sanitary Napkin for a 100-Year-Old Tree mentioned above, a piece involving raking leaves to compost them as mulch to be used for the tree the following spring, and a performance entitled Children’s Piece: Time Stop: Mingling the Fallen Leaves with My Babies’ Hair-Cuttings in which she placed leaves from the old oak in envelopes with her children’s hair, to be opened at a later date. These pieces, like Kelly’s Post Partum
Document, make menstruation and the female body’s ability to create life a focal point of the work. This biologically-inspired work is conceptually related to the idea of the female body and its functions as a unifying feature of feminist art, as seen in the work of Judy Chicago’s central core imagery, but is very different in how it manifests: Ukeles’ performances pieces are documented photographically, but unlike Chicago’s physical works, Ukeles’ work is far more esoteric and fleeting. These works, however, do situate her amongst artists like Martha Rosler, a video artist who addressed female labor; Carolee Schneeman, who used performance work to reclaim her body as a sexed and sexualized space; and Eleanor Antin, who used her body as the raw material from which she made her work, all of whom are well known feminist artists who, unlike Ukeles, did not progress beyond the feminist art movement in the same way.

With Ukeles working in a rich environment of feminist performance art, what makes her unique? Why is Ukeles the focus of this work, while so many other artists were just as groundbreaking, provocative, and exciting? The fascinating part of Ukeles is how her work continued from the early feminist performance work into a larger focus on maintenance and invisible labor as a whole, which led her to address intersectional issues of class and race. Ukeles’ transition into work beyond feminist art came around the time of the fiscal crisis of New York City in 1976. The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York held an exhibit called Art<>World, inspired by, among others, the Jack Burnham essay “Systems Aesthetics” (the same Burnham that led to Lucy Lippard connecting with Ukeles in the late sixties). This exhibit, which took place in a Whitney extension in a
downtown office building, instead of the main Whitney building which housed only the museum, was part of the museum’s Independent Study Program, and it was the students of this program who organized *Art<>World.* It was the situation of the exhibit within this huge office building— the Whitney Museum Downtown— that ultimately inspired Ukeles’ work, *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day.* Ukeles worked in shifts— mirroring the three eight-hour shifts worked by the maintenance people to ensure 24-hour maintenance of the Whitney Museum Downtown building— to document the work of the maintenance people of the office building. After photographing employees at work, Ukeles would show them the Polaroid of their work and ask them to designate the work as either “Maintenance Work” or “Maintenance Art,” at which point she would affix the corresponding label to the bottom of the photograph. The designation of “Maintenance Work” or “Maintenance Art” was described to the employees of the building in a three-page letter that Ukeles circulated before the project began, in which she requested “each employee… choose a single hour of their regular work shift and think of the duties they performed within that period as Art.” This work was contingent on the human interactions Ukeles facilitated. The workers grew to trust Ukeles as she accompanied them on their shifts, and this trust and personal relationship led to another boundary crossing, when many of the workers came to the exhibit, visiting the museum as citizens and cultural consumers (not just as part of their daily work) for the first time to see their photographs in the exhibit.

The photographs were displayed corresponding to the shifts during which

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99 Ibid, 82.
they had been taken, which included one daytime and two nighttime shifts. The exhibition space was initially nearly empty, filling up with Polaroids as the piece continued. The space was minimal, comprising only the panels displaying the Polaroids and some accompanying paperwork describing the work.

Just as with Hartford Wash, David Bourdon’s newspaper review of Ukeles’ work in the Village Voice does not fully understand nor appreciate Ukeles’ work, instead making a few weak jokes: “Housepersons of the world, unite! If urinals and soup cans can be art, why not an ordinary activity like sweeping?” begins the article, before finishing with a facetious thought: “If the Department of Sanitation, for instance, could turn its regular work into a conceptual performance, the city might qualify for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.”

Ukeles had recently pioneered a new performance piece in the Whitney space called Maintaining NYC In Crisis: What Keeps NYC Alive? in which she had volunteers read aloud while pacing for three hours from the New York City mayor’s long

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budget, written in response to the fiscal crisis, listing jobs that could be eliminated to save money. This performance piece, an overall cacophony of mingled voices and pacing participants, could, if one performer were followed, give a “dire, yet partial, record of livelihoods that could potentially be lost at a time that must have felt like a collapse of civilization.” One such municipal service on the chopping block in this time of crisis was, of course, the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY). While Bourdon’s jokey proposal was not intended to set off an artistic partnership that would last for decades and impact thousands of people, it was his review that lit the spark for Ukeles’ newest idea. She wrote to the DSNY on October 5th, 1976, with a clear idea: “Perhaps you might be interested in having an artist-in-residence in the Sanitation Department.”

The partnership between Ukeles and the New York Department of Sanitation has lasted through several directors of the department, all of whom worked enthusiastically with Ukeles. Ukeles wrote her October 5th, 1976 letter to DSNY Commissioner Anthony Vaccarello, whose immediate positive response spawned the “remarkable four-decades-long convergence of art, culture, labor, and civic infrastructure.” As noted in the book published to accompany the 2016 Queens Museum retrospective of Ukeles’ art, “there is no user’s manual detailing how to successfully instate an artist in residence at a large municipal organization that, for most intents and purposes, would seem to have nothing to do with art or culture.” While Ukeles built relationships with workers and learned the nitty-

102 Ibid, 89.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid, 91.
gritty details of running such a huge, unwieldy, complex department, the commissioners—Vaccarello and his successor, Norman Steisel—were creating the framework to introduce a feminist maintenance artist into the structure of DSNY, which was then, as now, almost entirely male. Steisel introduced Ukeles in a December 18, 1978 memorandum to the heads of DSNY on every level, which describes her as “an independent artist, working on an initial grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, [who] is creating a series of multi-media and video art projects called, *Maintenance Art Works Meets the Department of Sanitation* on all phases of the Department.” Further, Steisel writes, Ukeles, “as the inventor of Maintenance Art… is interested in greatly improving the public’s understanding and appreciation of the complexities and difficulties of our work.”\(^{105}\)

Ukeles was attuned to the difficulties of working in DSNY, well aware of the rates of alcoholism, accidents, and absenteeism—“‘3 A’s of D.O.S. [Department of Sanitation]’” as well as “‘the barrage of insults and jokes endured’” which, combined with the physical challenges of the job, “‘[batters] the body and the soul.’”\(^{106}\)

It was the shame and degradation that the sanitation workers (“sanmen”) felt that inspired Ukeles’ first official project with DSNY. Entitled *Touch Sanitation*, the work was monumental in scale, and involved Ukeles shaking hands with each of the 8,500 New York City sanmen. This project would ultimately take 11 months to complete, but beyond the actual shaking of the hands, “the preliminary planning, listening tours, observation, research, and analysis required to imagine and implement the work would stand as key examples of late twentieth-century

\(^{105}\) Ibid, 90.

\(^{106}\) Ibid, 96.
Conceptual art.\textsuperscript{107} Ukeles spent months planning the execution of \textit{Touch Sanitation}, which involved performing ‘sweeps’ of New York to meet as many workers as possible on the job during a shift. When meeting the workers, Ukeles would shake their hand while saying, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive!”.\textsuperscript{108} At section offices visited on her sweeps, she gave “increasingly impassioned speeches to sanmen about sanitation, her artwork and their participation, the value of workers’ lives, and their vital, if unappreciated, contributions to the city.”\textsuperscript{109} These interactions were documented by photographers and videographers who accompanied Ukeles on her sweeps. When conversing with a sanman, Ukeles would sometimes record their conversations on a portable tape recorder she carried with her. Ukeles would also mimic the actions of the sanmen as they did their work, creating a type of choreography based on their labor. Just like her piece in the Whitney Downtown, Ukeles integrated herself into the labor of maintenance, accompanying the workers to understand their work while balancing the line between documenting, celebrating, and crossing the borders between citizen and sanman.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid, 97.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 99.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
The interesting part of Ukeles’ move from the individual labor of women to the larger structures of a municipal maintenance system is not that it happened, but rather that it did not happen more with other artists. Gender and labor are inextricably linked, but in the United States, so too is race and labor. A key aspect of second wave feminism was getting white women out of the house and into the workforce, which necessitated black and brown women leaving their homes and entering white homes to labor as housekeepers and nannies. Third wave feminism, in response, worked to liberate not just the white women who felt pressured to stay home with their children, but also the black and brown women whose labor outside the home, in the homes of others, made this movement possible. Third wave feminism is a movement that began after the 1970s feminist art movement, yet the seeds of third wave feminist intersectionality—the connection between race, gender, and labor, and how the constraints of one of these can multiply across the others—was planted long before the movement began in earnest. The seeds of this movement, demonstrated explicitly through racialized labor and gender norms and expectations, can be seen clearly in the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike of 1968.

In Steve Estes’s article “‘I am a Man!’: Race, Masculinity, and the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike” he discusses the role of black women in the strike. Black women, he writes, “offered vital support for the sanitation workers,” as they “worked double shifts out of necessity before and during the strike” to support their families while the men were without pay. The black women of Memphis “cooked and cleaned for white families during the day and performed these chores again for
their own families at night.” Estes is explicit about the connection to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and black female labor: “While white women were learning from Betty Friedan about the feminine mystique and the stifling seclusion of the domestic sphere, black female domestics left their own ‘domestic sphere’ only to enter another one in the white community.”110 This concept is not unique to the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike—black women working in the domestic sphere were well aware of the incongruities of second wave feminism preaching liberation for white women while using economic pressures and systemic racism to keep black women in low-paying, non-unionized domestic work—but what makes the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike particularly interesting is that the black women of Memphis united behind the slogan adopted by the male strikers: *I Am A Man*.

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The placards reading *I Am A Man* were held by protesters at the March 28th, 1968 march down Beale Street led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Beale Street is a major Memphis street for commerce and tourism, and the marchers were met by police forces. The peaceful march quickly turned violent, with looting and “violent police retaliation.” Although none of the 1300 striking sanitation workers were among the looters, the strike was emblematic of the divisions growing among black activists working for civil rights, the younger generation of which was moving away from the nonviolence preached by Dr. King, who would be assassinated a few days later. The definitions of manhood in the Civil Rights Movement were changing along with this generational divide, from the older black men who wanted to be treated as equals to white men to the young black men who viewed violent resistance as the answer to ongoing paternalism from whites towards black manhood. The sanitation workers’ slogan *I Am A Man* “was a direct response to the verbal and physical emasculation of black men,” but although the leaders of the Memphis Civil Rights campaign and Sanitation Workers Strike “believed that a nonviolent struggle against the paternalism of the city ‘fathers’ constituted the best way to fight” the emasculation they faced as black men, “by 1968 there was a strong, outspoken contingent of black men who saw nonviolence as obsolete.”

Dr. King’s role in the Memphis Sanitation Strike was a result of this divide between nonviolence and violence as tools of activism. King had a vested interest in proving the efficacy of nonviolent protest, but had also become interested in the connections between race and labor. One aspect in which his activism fell short, however, was

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111 Ibid, 153.
112 Ibid, 162.
his patriarchal view of women’s roles. King advocated for an end to the 
emasculating of black workers through low wages and racist treatment, but also 
“showed how paternalistic attempts to emasculate black men affected the status and 
role of black women” by forcing black women to work “in the white lady’s 
kitchen” to supplement the inhumanely low and unlivable wages of black men. 
Black women working outside of the home, King argued, prevented them from 
fulfilling their “‘true’ role as mothers” and, though his definition of black 
womanhood “did not include mandatory domestic servitude in white homes,” it did 
“accept domestic roles for black women in their own houses.”

In a movement for 
rights in which black women were often cast aside or placed below black men in the 
hierarchy of needs, concurrent with a feminist wave that instituted the female norm 
as a white, middle or upper class woman, black women were doubly marginalized 
within these movements. Why, then, did black women identify with the slogan \textit{I Am} 
\textit{A Man}? 

As Laurie B. Green writes in her essay “Race, Gender, and Labor in 1960s 
Memphis: ‘I AM A MAN’ and the Meaning of Freedom,” black women “embraced” 
the slogan, “both as strike supporters and as participants in their own strikes in 
Memphis’s sweatshops, laundries, and hospitals.” The black female identification 
with the slogan “became emblematic of a larger struggle among urban, working-
class African Americans in the mid-sixties over the meanings of race and gender, 
labor and freedom.”

Even though the slogan was explicitly gendered, it resonated

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 161.
\end{itemize}
with black women who saw the connection between racial justice and freedom. Green argues effectively that the black citizens of Memphis saw racism in their city as holdover “plantation mentality” that continued the oppression of black individuals, despite slavery being abolished and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As a part of this plantation mentality, women were expected both to care for white children and maintain white households while serving as caretakers for their own families. The subjugation and abuse of black men put further burden on black women to assist their husbands in supporting the family financially and through emotional and domestic labor. For black women, equal rights for black men would relieve some of their double burden, while the white female liberation of second wave feminism did not have clear advantages for black women.

Though there are many examples of gender and race coinciding in the Civil Rights Movement, the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike is relevant to this thesis precisely because it was catalyzed by the abuse and poor conditions of the sanitation men, which precipitated a larger strike that involved black women organizing for better working conditions for the men in their communities as well as themselves. This particular form of degraded labor was what would fascinate Ukeles not too long afterwards, and her interest in the topic is interesting in how it differs: Ukeles began by looking at the invisible labor of women, which led her to examining the invisible labor of the men of the New York City Department of Sanitation. Ukeles saw invisible, undervalued labor as her cause, and that interest led her from domestic women’s work to larger municipal city systems like the DSNY. In contrast, the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike accidentally connected

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115 Ibid, 467.
municipal labor and structural racism to undervalued, underpaid, and unprotected black and brown female domestic labor. The isolated female labor Ukeles critiques in her early work like “Hartford Wash” is emblematic of the narrow focus of feminist art of the 1970s: it does not address or include the struggles of black, brown, or other multiply marginalized women. Ukeles, with “Touch Sanitation,” was—perhaps unconsciously or inadvertently—expanding the narrow view of second wave feminism to include issues of labor and race that were visible in DSNY in a way that they were not in her earlier work or, for example, the work of Chicago and the other Womanhouse-era feminist artists.

Ukeles’ specifically addresses her connection to feminist art, institutional critique, and her own movement of maintenance art work. She cites the Civil Rights Movement as a formative cultural moment in her education, recalling that during her time at Barnard, before leaving Pratt after her work faced critiques of being overly sexual, the president of the college preached that the students could “‘do anything… be anything!’”. Ukeles took this advice to heart, recalling that she “was this sap for freedom talk. This was the Sixties, the time of the civil rights movement; this is what was in the air, the notion that the world could be reinvented so that people were free, that it belonged to everybody. I mean, I didn't make this stuff up.”116 Ukeles was certainly aware of the Civil Rights Movement, though it took place largely before she began her career as an artist— the Memphis strike, for example, took place the year before she wrote her manifesto, and Touch Sanitation was several years after that—but research on this project has failed to produce any

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direct quotations or writing linking Ukeles’ work with DSNY to her awareness of the Civil Rights Movement. Further, despite the racial makeup of the DSNY, which is currently largely black and brown, Ukeles’ photographs of the project show her interacting almost entirely with white men. The book published to accompany her retrospective at the Queens Museum has over thirty photographs taken throughout the course of *Touch Sanitation*, and in these photographs, all of which were exhibited at the retrospective, there are few black men pictured. In the photo below, one of the few featuring men of color, a black man’s face is obscured by a large blond head— the viewer sees only his ear, arm, and hand on his hip.

While it is impossible to determine how the individual workers may have self-identified, there is a clear distinction between the photographs of the Department of Sanitation workers in New York City in the 1980s and the Memphis sanitation workers of the 1960s. While the evidence does not show a clear connection between
the work of Ukeles at the DSNY and race, historical events show that sanitation work—like other degraded labor, such as housekeeping—was a job linked with the lower classes of society, which, in the South in particular, meant that it was a black or brown job. While Ukeles may not have intended her work at DSNY and with *Touch Sanitation* in particular to have racial implications, because of the connections between race and certain areas of labor, her work was in dialogue with the history surrounding sanitation work and race. It is entirely possible that Ukeles’ work, especially in the case of *Touch Sanitation*, was never meant to connect female labor and racially segregated labor, especially if the DSNY was mainly non-black men. However, when viewed in the context of third wave feminism and the rejection of the limits of second wave feminism, Ukeles work draws a powerful connection between oppressed groups and the labor they perform.

Ukeles’ work in *Touch Sanitation* also addresses the divide between contemporary art and the mainstream public. Ukeles’ early Maintenance Art pieces like *Hartford Wash* bring the outside world—the world of diapers, mopping, and dusting—into the museum, but her later work also attempts to take the museum to the outside. *Touch Sanitation* involved many months of conversations with the sanmen of New York, and Ukeles often asked them where they thought the piece should be exhibited. She consistently got two opposite answers from the sanmen, some of whom wanted a “‘real’ DSNY environment” and others who wanted the work shown in a “‘beautiful cultural space.’”¹¹⁷ As a result, she showed it in two locations: the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery (top) and a rundown warehouse dock building used by DSNY to transfer garbage to barges (bottom).

¹¹⁷ Phillips, “*Necessity Art,*” 123.
The project also received press coverage as it happened—a further crossing of the lines between the art world and the municipal city systems world, which rarely interact. The work was “covered extensively—sometimes with curiosity and skepticism—in newspapers and the popular press” throughout its progression, in different publications. “Of course,” Phillips notes, “critics and art publications also engaged the work while it was under way and, more frequently, following its completion… But the first flurry of writing on the work tended to approach it as a spectacle or novelty, often taking a bantering tone—Can you imagine? Can you believe this?—and paired with jaw-dropping headlines and incredulous commentary.”¹¹⁸ A search of newspaper archives reveals surprisingly few reviews from New York newspapers and a couple from papers outside of the city—the Chicago Tribune published a fairly in-depth discussion of her work and the Los Angeles Times kept tabs on her work across the span of

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 99.
several years—but two *New York Times* articles from the eighties provide a valuable window into the DSNY and Ukeles’ work. Colin Campbell’s 1981 article “Salute to Sanitationmen Aims To Counter Morale Problems” details Commissioner Norman Steisel’s efforts to raise spirits among “the city’s least appreciated workers” through a one-week celebration involving cooking at a midtown restaurant, receiving awards from the Mayor, and attending a rock show. Steisel’s organizer for the event, Marion Oppenheimer, told the reporter that the salute “will succeed if it does nothing more than tell the city, ‘Look, these are people too.’” The sanitation workers “gave Mr. Steisel the benefit of the doubt,” as the salute “shows they’re trying,” according to one employee. But the article, published in 1981, does not mention Ukeles. Though the 11 months of shaking hands took place from 1979-80, the public exhibition showing the work (as much as such a conceptual project can be exhibited) was not until 1984.

The exhibition of the project was a series of pieces in two locations, including artifacts from the sanmen collected by Ukeles, text, and sound installations. For one part of the exhibit Ukeles constructed a porch (photo on right), recalling a story a sanman told her about being

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120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
yelled at by a citizen for resting on her porch on a hot day. The woman yelled a slur at the man, angry that he would dirty her porch with his body, and this story impacted Ukeles so much that she wanted to create a way for him and other sanmen to wash off, metaphorically and literally, the slurs they were frequently called. The slurs included “Trash Hound,” “Garbage Man,” and “Can Man”\(^\text{122}\)—some of the kinder insults, according to one sanman.

Commissioner Steisel gave a speech on the occasion, stating: “Because they do dirty work, it does not mean they are dirty.”\(^\text{123}\) Ukeles concurred, explaining that the exhibit were meant to show that “the day of the garbage man, of linking the man with the waste that is not his, is over.”\(^\text{124}\) Ukeles wanted very much for viewers of the exhibition to realize that the garbage that tainted the sanitation workers socially was produced by the viewers themselves. In the *Chicago Tribune* piece about her work, Ukeles points out the misdirection of society’s disgust with the sanmen, since “we don’t call ourselves garbage people though we create garbage, yet we call the sanmen garbage men.”\(^\text{125}\)

The disconnects that Ukeles sought to rectify did not stop with the relationship between civilians and sanmen. Ukeles addressed the gendered nature of the work in a letter to the sanmen before she began *Touch Sanitation*, writing that she recognized what that they “do hard, heavy, physical work, traditional ‘men’s’ work. (No woman has passed the sanman’s or officer’s entrance exam. Yet.) At the

\(^{123}\) Ibid.
\(^{124}\) Ibid.
same time, you nurture, you ‘husband’ the City.”

In an interview with Tom Finkelpearl for his book on public art, Ukeles explains the alienation that sanmen felt:

In a sanitation garage, there are no women, but there are entire walls of photographs from raunchy pornographic magazines well beyond Playboy. It’s a very hard, ugly environment, very unforgiving, so that these men would fill up entire walls with images of women who were soft, yielding, and available… They would say things like this: ‘Do you know why everybody hates us? Because they think we’re their maids,’ or ‘because they think we’re their mother.’… I was supposed to automatically understand, of course they hate you because they think that you, the man, are a woman, that if you were a woman it would be natural to hate you for this. It was so split, Tom, so alienated, so sick.

Ukeles saw the gender confusion and distorted gender roles as part of the destructive nature of the work. To rid the world of gendered labor, in which maintenance labor is undervalued, where the work of women is equated with the work of racial minorities and is therefore shameful and degrading for white men to perform, Ukeles saw an opportunity to change the world for the better. Beyond thinking about the female experience as isolated from other forms of oppression, like her second-wave peers, Ukeles saw in her work a way to united oppressed, degraded, invisible work of all kinds, and so showed a variation of third-wave thinking through the creation of her own genre: Maintenance Art.

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Epilogue:

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is not a household name, nor will she likely ever be. Through the writing of this project, I have learned that she deserves to be, but as an engaged citizen and activist I also know the dangers of dwelling on the past instead of using history to move forward. From this work, there are multiple things I’ve learned about how to use Ukeles’ work and example to continue the fight for equality for all people.

Firstly, Ukeles demonstrates beautifully the power of education, especially when questioning everything taught. She thought critically about her education and this resulted in her leaving various academic institutions when they were not meeting her needs or when they were limiting her growth. She also was an early advocate of institutional critique, with her performances in Hartford illuminating how the power structures of the museum can and should be subverted. Though different in appearances, most power structures operate similarly. The larger issue of societal sexism is not much different from the mismatched recognition of custodial and curatorial labor in the museum, and the raced and classed implications of this labor. Maintenance labor may not be avant garde or exciting like art, but it is integral to life. If anything unifies Ukeles’ lifetime of work, it is this insistence on making visible the invisible labor that keeps society alive.

Ahead of her time, Ukeles also recognized the connections across communities and identities that would come to define third wave feminism and intersectionality as an approach to activism and scholarship. This early intersectionality was manifested through her work at the Department of Sanitation,
as a white woman bringing attention to denigrated labor done by men of all races but of low socioeconomic status. While Ukeles’ work is not nearly as well known or part of our shared cultural history as Chicago’s, her work accessed and empowered a wider group of people. These connections are integral to enacting successful social change, and Ukeles recognized that very early by art world standards.
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