

EXHIBITION GUIDE

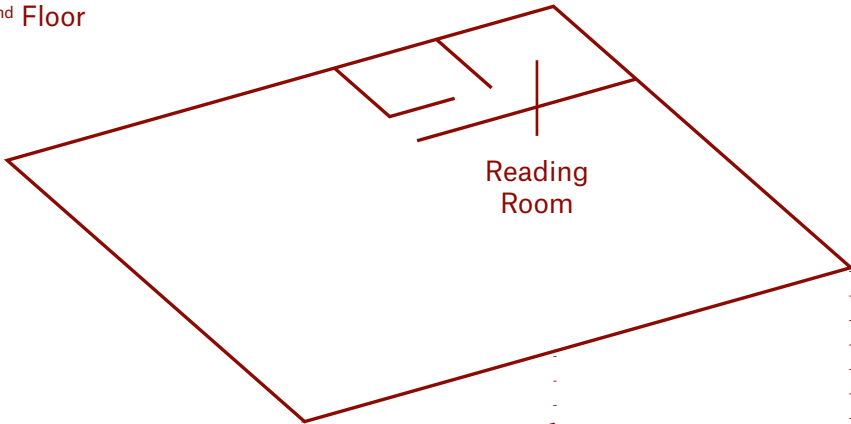
Mierle Laderman Ukeles Maintenance Art Works 1969 – 1980

28 September – 17 November 2013

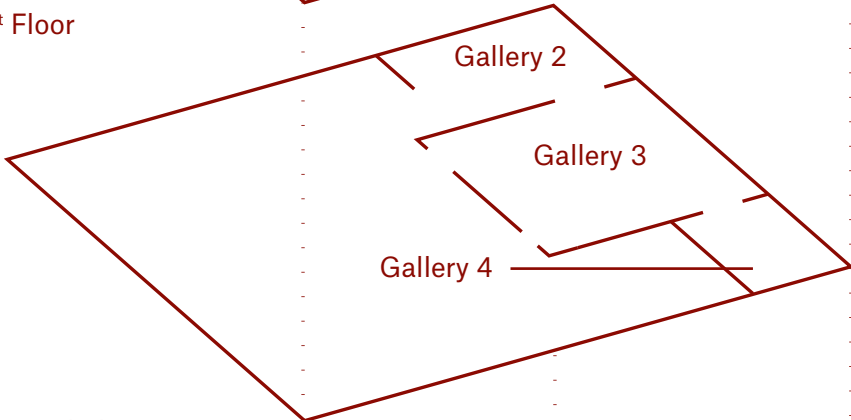


GALLERY PLAN

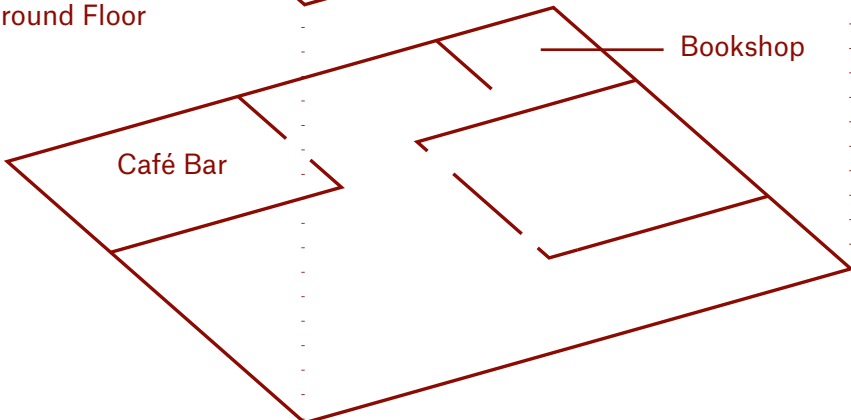
2nd Floor



1st Floor



Ground Floor



INTRODUCTION

“I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I ‘do’ Art. Now I will simply do these everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.” (Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, 1969).

The work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles (born 1939 in Denver, USA) considers the everyday routines of life. In 1969, following the birth of her first child, Ukeles wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* as a challenge to the oppositions between art and life, nature and culture, and public and private. Her work highlights otherwise overlooked aspects of social production and questions the hierarchies of different forms of work, such as housework and low-wage labour, topics that are still very relevant today. Ukeles is interested in how artists could empower people to act as agents of change and stimulate positive community involvement. Since 1977, Ukeles has acted as artist in residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation and realised radical public art in a system which serves and is owned by the public.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art Works 1969–1980*, is the first comprehensive solo exhibition of the artist’s earlier work in the UK.

The exhibition is organised in collaboration with the Grazer Kunstverein and curated by Krist Gruijthuisen, director of the Grazer Kunstverein.

GALLERY TWO

As an artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles is interested in how artistic labour is just as subject to social, political and economic factors as any other sort of working – art is not, and cannot be, produced outside of these influences. Frustrated by the way her responsibilities as a mother and housewife were regarded as a distraction to her work as an artist, she sought to overlap the various activities in her life, drawing on the reality of her experience to test the boundaries of art.

Ukeles was trained in America in the 1960s, in an artistic climate which considered conceptual frameworks and the process of making art as important as the visual experience. Many works of Ukeles have originated in a performance, with the artist undertaking actions or tasks, which would then be documented through photography, text or film for presentation in a gallery setting. Other important influences for Ukeles were the political debates of civil rights activism and identity politics. In an atmosphere of departure, Ukeles and many other artists expanded their concerns towards the wider socio-political discussion, and engaged actively with real-world problems.

Ukeles *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969) was initially written as a proposal for an exhibition. It lays out an approach that emphasises maintenance – keeping things clean, working, and cared for – as a creative strategy. This approach is in contrast to the modernist tradition, which imagined the artist as an individual continually striving for originality, disregarding the many different influences that impact on an artists' work. As Ukeles wrote, "after the revolution, who is going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?".

Private Performances of Personal Maintenance as Art (1970-1973) puts the manifesto into practice, and presents documentation of daily household tasks as an art piece. *The Sorting of the Socks: Hommage to Mu Ch'i* (1973) is a tribute to the 13th Century Chinese painter and Zen monk, and references the practice common in Zen Buddhism of turning maintenance work, such as cooking and cleaning, into meditative activities with ritualised significance.

The Maintenance Art Questionnaire (1973-1976) was sent by Ukeles to artists and other people as a means of collecting their ideas and feelings about maintenance tasks. It was also distributed in exhibitions and during performances, and used as basis for oral interviews. One of these is *Interviewing Passersby on the Sidewalk about Their Maintenance Lives* (1974), for which Ukeles spoke with people sitting at a table in front of the A.I.R.

Gallery on Wooster Street in Soho, New York, an important artist-run gallery showing only women artists.

GALLERY THREE

Significantly, dusting an artwork is included by Ukeles in her *Private Performances*, alongside cleaning more everyday objects, showing how even pieces intended as being purely aesthetic still require mundane care. The body of work that she conducted in museums and galleries takes this further. While the works in Gallery 1 concentrate on Ukeles' private spaces, the works in Gallery 2 expand on the traditional spaces for the presentation of art, with the artist taking on the roles of museum guards or cleaning staff.

Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object (1973) and *Maintain Your Destiny* (1974) both deal with the question of transference – creating a new meaning through exchange. The first series, *Transfer*, describes how the creation of a Maintenance Art Work in a museum changes the status of the maintained object, by looking into who will be responsible to clean the vitrine. While it was previously cleaned by a maintenance worker, as an art work it will be cleaned by a conservator. For *Maintain Your Destiny: Earth Exchange: Ransom Piece*, made on 19 February 1974 at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, she exchanged jars of soil from her homes in America with soil taken from the museum's sculpture garden, digging with her hands to do so. Hinting at more ancient maintenance tasks, such as agriculture, or the burying of the dead, the work creates a connection between Ukeles' private life – her place of birth and present home – and professional career, creating a work for a museum.

The Keeping of the Keys: Maintenance as Security (1973) and *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside* (1973) were created at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut (USA), together with a third series, *Outside* (see image in this brochure). For these works, Ukeles took the role of maintenance workers and documented the activities with photographs and statements, which indicate some of the effects of this exchange for the organisation, especially for health and safety regulations. The works also include notes, addressed to the audience, to make them aware of the work.

Ukeles' feminist position becomes most clear in two works, which directly address the artist's own family. *It's OK to Have a Babysitter* (1974) was created by the artist in Boston, while her children were at home in New York. "Some kinds of maintenance cancel out others. Keep your head together – 1000 times," wrote Ukeles, pointing to a merging of private and professional life,

and the precarious nature of unpaid, often female, labour. Given the fact that traditionally men were paid and controlled the money, it was an important request of the feminist movement to demand payment for housework, which aimed at a re-evaluation of gender roles in the family and the validation of family work. *Fall Time Variations I-III* (1974) is a Maintenance Work for an old tree, which is also merged with reflections about family structures.

Touch Sanitation (1977-80/2007) is one of Ukeles' most ambitious early projects and a milestone in the history of performance art. Taking almost a year, Ukeles met over 8500 employees of the New York Sanitation Department, shaking hands with each of them and saying "thank you for keeping New York City alive". That she should specify shaking hands with them is significant as besides being rarely present in the public imagination, despite the vital importance of their maintenance work, the workers may also have experienced being shunned as an underclass, even for being dirty. The work is represented with a large-scale photo series, ending with two images of the artist's hands.

GALLERY FOUR

Touch Sanitation marks the start of Ukeles' work with the New York City Department of Sanitation. Since 1977, Ukeles has acted as artist-in-residence of the organisation and has realised projects which aimed to support the workers and create awareness for the ecology of New York City. Gallery 4 shows a collection of the earliest documents from these works, including her initial proposal, press releases, letters, telexes and two videos.

The exhibition ends with a text from Ukeles, written in 2010, looking back at her work with sanitation people: "I don't run away – I keep coming back, just like they do."

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Mierle Laderman Ukeles (born 1939 in Denver, USA) took a seminal position in early conceptual and feminist art. Her work looked to highlight otherwise overlooked aspects of social production and questions the hierarchies of different forms of work, especially of housework and low-wage labour. Her early work was experimental, and visually and symbolically conveyed her own personal expression and turmoil as well as the social unrest surrounding events, such as the women's movement and the Vietnam War.

Ukeles completed an undergraduate degree in history and international relations at Barnard College and studied visual arts at Pratt Institute in New York in the 1960s. Since the 1970s, she has exhibited and performed widely, among others in *c.7500*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford / CT (1973), *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London (1980, both curated by Lucy Lippard), Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York (1998), *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, P.S. 1, New York (2007-2008) and the International Armory Art Fair, New York, 2007, *Maintenance Art Works 1969-1980*, Grazer Kunstverein (2013), *Maintenance Required*, The Kitchen, New York (2013, organised by the Whitney Independent Study Program), and the forthcoming 13th Istanbul Biennial. For many years, she has been realising landfill transformation commissions, among others the Freshkills Park in New York City and Danehy Park in Cambridge. *Unburning Freedom Hall*, a major installation, was exhibited at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 1997.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance - Outside*, 1973. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

MANIFESTO!

MAINTENANCE ART

Proposal for an exhibition "CARE"

MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES

© 1969

I. IDEAS

A. The Death Instinct and the Life Instinct:

The Death Instinct: separation; individuality; Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one's own path to death—do your own thing; dynamic change.

The Life Instinct: unification; the eternal return; the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species; survival systems and operations; equilibrium.

B. Two basic systems: Development and Maintenance. The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?

Development: pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing.

Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight;

FURTHER READING

Artist Placement Group (APG)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles was not alone in wanting to shift artistic practice from the confines of the studio to the workplace. In Britain in 1966, artists Barbara Steveni and John Latham founded the Artist Placement Group (APG). In what has been described by Observer journalist Peter Beaumont as “one of the most radical social experiments of the 1960s”, APG organised artists’ placements in commercial, industry, and governmental sectors. Like Ukeles, APG sought to reposition the role of the artist within a wider social context and simultaneously to give a voice to employees from within the workplace. In Barbara Steveni’s own words, APG’s purpose was “to place fine artists with suitable companies, in this way extending the opportunity and educational development of the younger artist and at the same time bringing his talents to bear on the dynamics of industrial society”.

Artists were paid salaries equivalent to those of their fellow employees yet given the freedom to act on what was termed an “open brief”, the initial idea being that the artist would write a report on his or her experience, offering ideas and proposals for the host organisation’s consideration. Placements did not necessarily follow this model and output could take the form of anything from film or photography to poetry, collage, appropriated objects, or installation work; however, as Ian Breakwell put it, “in a placement the ‘artwork’ is not the end product but the whole process.”

In 1974 George Levantis began a placement at the shipping company Ocean Fleets, during which he sailed around the world on container ships for months at a time. He strove to become the crew’s “listening ear”, recording his fellow ship mates’ experiences and grievances and creating a series of performances, photographs, and installations, some of which are documented in a book entitled *Pieces of Sea Fall Through the Stars* (1978). During his placement at the Department of Health and Social Security in 1975, Ian Breakwell produced a series of controversial films on Broadmoor Special Hospital for the Criminally Insane; meanwhile Roger Coward, who was placed at the Department of the Environment in Birmingham, used film to enable residents to respond directly to the Department’s proposals. The group is recognised internationally as having served as a catalyst for many artist-in-residency programmes and community schemes and exists today as Organisation and Imagination (O + I), which describes itself as “an independent, international artist initiative, a network consultancy and research organisation”.

APG was subject to a large retrospective exhibition, *The Individual and the Organisation: Artist Placement Group 1966-79*, at Raven Row, London in 2012. In 2009, Arnolfini showed an exhibition about APG, together with Barbara Stevini, entitled *Beyond the Acid Free. APG Revisited*.

Feminist Perspectives

Ukeles' decision to exhibit "invisible" daily household tasks as art was taken at a time when feminists around the world were beginning to articulate the inequities inherent in the capitalist system of paid ('masculine') and unpaid ('feminine') labour. In 1972, Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa co-authored a publication entitled *Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, in which they posited the idea that, as the working class was produced and supported by women's work in the home, this unwaged work therefore underpinned the entire market economy. In the same year James, along with fellow members of the International Feminist Collective, launched the International Wages for Housework Campaign, which demanded that the State pay for unwaged work in the home and in the community. The collective's co-founder Silvia Federici summed up their motivation thus:

Think for a minute [of] the range of social services that the employer class would have to put into place if there hadn't been a woman all this time at home, making sure that the next morning this person could go to the workplace restored, for another day's work. [Imagine if] a woman had not done the washing, the cooking, [the taking] care of the kids, the consoling [of] the children and the husband; [or provided] emotional support and sexual services (which are very important part of the work expected of women) [...] Struggles that begin to reclaim the wealth [women produce in the home] are extremely important.

The question of whether caring constituted "work" or a "role" began to be hotly debated internationally. On 24 October 1975, 90% of women in Iceland took a "day off", in a bid to remind the nation of the powerful contribution they made to society and the low value that was placed upon it.

This period saw the emergence of numerous collectives, including: Black Women for Wages for Housework, Wages Due Lesbians, the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and, some years later, WinVisible (women with visible and invisible disabilities).

Sarah Knight

Photography Policy

Please feel free to take photographs of the exhibition for your own private use. Reproduction is not permitted. Please share your impressions of the exhibition via Facebook, Instagram or Twitter: #MierleLU @arnolfiniarts

Reading Room

If you would like to learn more about the exhibition, there are further resources and exhibition guides available in the Reading Room on the 2nd floor.

Bookshop

In the bookshop you can find a selection of publications for sale that relate to the current exhibitions.

Access

We aim to make all visitors welcome. There are parking spaces for people with disabilities outside our main entrance, access via Farr's Lane. Our galleries are wheelchair accessible.

Stay in Touch

To join our free mailing list send us an email to boxoffice@arnolfini.org.uk or visit arnolfini.org.uk. You can also follow Arnolfini on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter: @arnolfiniarts.

Large print versions of this guide are available at Box Office

Portable seating is available on request

Exhibition spaces open: Tuesday to Sunday and Bank Holidays, 11am – 6pm
Admission to exhibition spaces is free.

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The exhibition by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art Works 1969 – 1980*, is organised in collaboration with the Grazer Kunstverein and curated by Krist Gruijthuijsen, director of the Grazer Kunstverein.

Cover image: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation*, 1979–1980. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

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