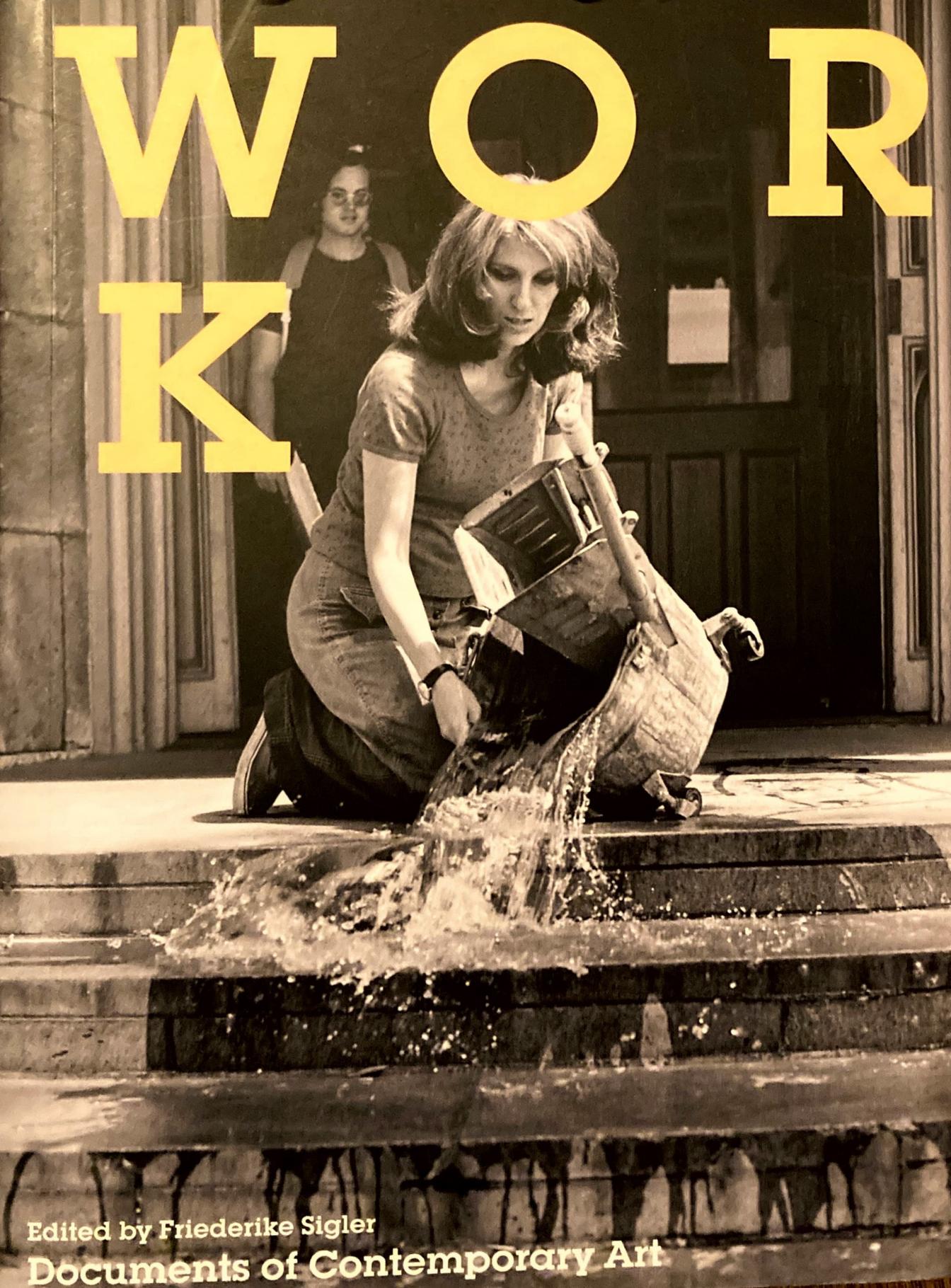


W O R K



Edited by Friederike Sigler
Documents of Contemporary Art

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

In Conversation with Tom Finkelpearl//2000

Mierle Laderman Ukeles [The 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*] proposed an exhibition, called 'CARE', where I would move into a museum with my husband and my baby, and I would do my family things, and also take care of the museum, maintain it, as well as taking care of, servicing, the visitors who came to the museum. The museum would be home. And that would be the artwork. In other words, I would clean it, I would change the lightbulbs, whatever was necessary to keep this place operating. The museum's life-processes would become visible. Second, the *Manifesto's* exhibition proposed to ask all different kinds of people in society, 'What do you have to do to keep alive? How do you get from minute to minute?' There would be many tables where people would be interviewed about what they did to stay alive. In Western culture, you're not supposed to talk about this stuff in polite company. Certainly in 1969, there were very few ways to talk about ongoing sustenance. The third part of the exhibition was constructing an image of the earth (outside) as a needy and finite place. Every day, containers of ravaged earth, air and water would be delivered to the museum. Each day, scientists and pseudo-scientists (artists) would process and purify these elements in the museum, and then return the elements to the city in a healthy mode. [...]

Tom Finkelpearl After the *Manifesto*, what sorts of project did you undertake?

Ukeles In 1973, I was invited to be in 'c. 7,500', a show that Lucy Lippard organized of women artists. I sent several photo-series documenting maintenance tasks such as Jack [Ukeles' husband] diapering the baby, me dressing the children to go out in the winter and undressing them to come in, doing the laundry washing the dishes, other workers in my neighbourhood doing repetitive tasks. The exhibition travelled, and I got jealous. I thought, if my work can travel, how about me? So I started contacting these locations where the show was going, asking them if I could come and do a maintenance art performance work. I ended up doing about 17 different maintenance art performance works. I dealt with maintenance of continuity in nature, personal maintenance, institutional maintenance, maintenance of ethnic traditions. In these art institutions, I'd take over the persona of The Maintenance Worker, who is supposed to be unseen, and cleans behind the scenes, after hours. Or the guard, who keeps the keys silently. I was trying to bring maintenance out in public.

In 1976 I was invited to be in a group show called 'ART <--> WORLD', at the Whitney's branch at 55 Water Street. I went to check out the site and said, 'Oh my God, a skyscraper!' I had been waiting for years to get my hands on a skyscraper. Why? Because a skyscraper needs tremendous maintenance. In this sort of high-end commercial building, the maintenance people are supposed to be completely invisible. There's an Apollonian ethos in a skyscraper. Its maintenance mission is to create, during the property owners' and their clients' prime action hours, an appearance of stasis, beyond time. The goal is to look publicly as if nothing has happened and everything is always clean, always quiet. Which is actually shocking if you think about it. In other words, everything is secret. At 55 Water Street, for example, the maintenance workers were supposed to wear ties, and keep their long-sleeved shirts buttoned while cleaning, because that was the proper presentation for the real estate interests that owned the building – that one could do this maintenance work without even sweating. Of course, at night, when the office workers went home, when no 'one' (important) was watching, people would wash the floors in their undershirts.

The branch-museum concept was actually a utopian idea of the Whitney: a branch in an office building, so that people could have art right in the middle of their work day. I loved that idea. You didn't have to leave your life to go to the art museum, the art museum would come to your life. Except that the 300 maintenance workers in the building never, ever came into the museum, except to change a lightbulb and wash the floor. So I tried to turn the tables, make a piece with all the workers that kept this building operational 24 hours a day. The Whitney got me connected up with the owners, who said they would allow me to do this. I wrote a letter to 300 workers in this building. I invited them to do an artwork with me. The piece was called *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*. I asked them to select one hour of their regular work, and think of that work, that one hour, as art. It was completely up to them if they wanted to do this or not. Opening up the power to choose and power to name was critical.

I went around with a Polaroid camera documenting their work. There's an inch of white space at the bottom of each picture, which always intrigued me, so I made labels that fit that space. One label said 'Maintenance Work', and the other said 'Maintenance Art'. I would approach a worker, and I would say, "Can I take your picture?" If they said yes (and they all said yes), I would show the picture to them when it came out of the camera and said, 'Is this art or work?' In other words, have I crossed your path during that hour that you picked? Some people would say, 'This is art.' Sometimes, when people were working together, one person would be making art, and one person would be making work. I also gave everyone a button that said 'I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day', which, shockingly, most people wore for the seven weeks of this exhibition. [...]

every day I mounted the photographs I had taken in the museum. When I started the show, 'my space' was empty. Over the seven weeks, there was a gradual accumulation of photographs that recorded the choices of the people: this is art, this is not art. [...]

When I wrote the *Manifesto*, I had come to understand that, as a woman, as a mother, I was connected to most people in the world – the whole entire world of maintenance workers. Women were never invited to become a maintenance class, we were just told: 'You are like this. We know what you think. We know what you are. You take care of us.' Women have been defined like that within the domestic sphere, while service workers, of either gender, do this stuff outside, to make a living. That's most of the people in the country, and most of the people in the world. [...]

Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Tom Finkelpearl, extracts from 'Interview: Mierle Laderman Ukeles on Maintenance and Sanitation Art', in *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000) 295–322.