

In Appreciation of Invisible Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the "White Cube"

Miwon Kwon

There is a story to be told of the antagonism between art and architecture, between artists and architects, within the history of institutional critique—a history that is currently riddled with a profound misconception wherein a "spanking" by a museum is seen as a direct measure of a work's "criticality." The more intense the expression of an institution's irritation or discomfort, the more pleased are these "critical" artists and their supportive interpreters who actively cultivate, then relish, the chastisement of the institution as a mark of their difference from it. Outright censorship is regarded as the ultimate prize in this context, excommunication becomes a token of highest success. (Never suspecting in the meanwhile the possibility that the loud objections may in fact be exclamations of institutional *pleasure!*)

But such institutional wrath has always been a complexly false one insofar as "the prodigal son" always finds his way back home to be welcomed into the arms of the forgiving father—a return that is a mark of a deeper bond (dare I say love?) than either suspected or wanted to believe. What begins as a vehement assertion of difference can become the most effective stabilizing force in the (re)affirmation of sameness and continuity (i.e., business as usual). This is why I have always been suspicious of the self-righteous tone in much of the discourse on institutional critique. To me it often sounds more like denial than anything else, and the more adamant the refusal to acknowledge the mutually dependent dance of love and hate between the "critical" artist and the museum, the more suspicious I become.

But back to architecture. Or, more precisely, back to the modernist white architecture of the prototypical exhibition gallery. Many emergent forms of institutional critique in the early 1970s challenged the idealist hermeticism of the museum by physically and symbolically transgressing the seemingly inviolable conditions of its architectural whiteness, "penetrating" beneath the white skin to expose not only its material support but its ideological functions. Qualities commonly associated with the museum space, such as neutrality, purity, and timelessness, that are foundational to the institution's self-definition and self-justification, were unmasked—via the unmasking of the white surface of its architecture—as nothing more than myths. Thus, the white room came under sharp scrutiny as the material manifestation and emblem of the art museum's ideological tendencies.¹

So what of an artist who, instead of aggressively countering the imposition of this repressive whiteness (by dirtying it up), opts to clean it? Instead of exposing

¹ Much art of the late 1960s and early 1970s that critiqued the idealist foundations of art and its institutions through an analysis of the conditions of the "white cube" indirectly challenged the dominant discourse of modernist architecture as well. For a critical study of the role of whiteness in modernist architectural discourse, see Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1995).

the behind-the-scenes “truth” about the museum, decides to wash, scrub, and polish its public face—to maintain the fantasy of its pristine perfection? This was Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ counterintuitive gesture in *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside* and *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside*. Performed on July 24, 1973, at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the artist spent four hours washing and scrubbing the entry steps and plaza of the museum, to be followed in the afternoon by four more hours of the same activity inside the exhibition galleries. The absurdity of *Hartford Wash*—Ukeles on her hands and knees for eight hours, soaked to the waist in dirty water, a minuscule figure in comparison to the grand majesty of the surrounding architecture—strikes a cord of pathos today when viewed in the form of its photographic documentation.

Certainly, in step with other practices of the period that directed their attention to the institutional framework of art, Ukeles’ cleaning frenzy exposes the museum’s appearance of neutrality and purity as artifice—an artifice that requires the repression of (the signs of) bodies and time. But in Ukeles’ case, this repression is given a more complex articulation than that of a faceless institutional interdiction. The appearance of timelessness and eternal stasis, or simple orderliness, in fact, requires work. It requires the kind of work that not only erases the marks of bodies and time, such as dirt, dust, and decay, but work that continuously erases the marks of its own labor (including the body of the laborer). It’s the kind of



Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside*, 1973 (photos: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).



work that renders itself invisible, and is rendered invisible, in order to make other things ("real" work?) possible.

Ukeles' performances translate such invisible maintenance work—cleaning, washing, dusting—into the register of productive art work, elevating menial tasks mostly associated with women and the maintenance of households to the public realm of aesthetic contemplation. But beyond rendering the invisible visible across the divides of gender, private/public, high/low, and art/everyday life, Ukeles' effort reveals the extent to which the ideological machinery of the art museum is in fact extremely unstable: It weakens, falls into phobic unrest even, in the presence of such innocuous things as scuff marks and dust balls. That is, the austere and seemingly implacable architecture of the museum (I mean this in a literal and metaphorical sense now) is a very fragile construction. Its need for maintenance and upkeep is constant—a dependence that is never acknowledged. Ironically, this essential work of maintenance and upkeep, which contributes to the authority of the institution (and the cultural status quo), is carried out in large part by those most likely to be oppressed and excluded by its operations. For the work of routine maintenance—hidden labor performed on a daily basis—is relegated to a particular class of people whose work is seldom recognized as such.

There is an unsettling literalness in Ukeles' performances, too, a literalness that is far more resonant than the various performative projects of recent years—Rirkrit Tiravanija's "cooking," Glen Seator's "sweeping," Janine Antoni's hair "mopping," etc.—which also involve the body of the artist engaged in everyday "chores" or activities inside the gallery or museum. I think part of the reason for this discrepancy, besides the tremendous difference in historical contexts, is due to a greater fetishization and reification of "everyday life" in contemporary art and criticism now, which further isolates, abstracts, and mystifies the everyday, exacerbating a deeper sense of alienation from it. Ukeles' performance affects the reverse. Perhaps because of the literalness of her symbolic action (in *Hartford*

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside, 1973 (photos: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside, 1973* (photos: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).



Wash she really washed sections of the museum for hours until it was clean), the already fetishized and reified conditions of the museum are recast in relation to the maintenance of everyday life, and not the other way around. In Ukeles' bent figure, scrubbing the steps of the museum, one sees not only the secret labor required to sustain a specific cultural institution, but also countless other maintenance workers—maids, janitors, and mothers—whose largely unacknowledged and underappreciated labor sustains the daily existence of our individual and collective lives. In this way, Ukeles' performance points to the economy of labor that structures our entire society—from homes and offices, to communities, institutions, and cities.

Like most people, I have a list of maintenance work to attend to on a regular basis: wash the dishes, do the laundry, go to the post office, cook dinner, clean the bathroom, take out the trash, sweep the floor, shop for groceries, etc. Repetitive work without closure, work that goes nowhere. It's the kind of work that occupied my grandmother most of her life, work that defines my mother's life today, work that I could hire someone else to do if I could afford it (so that I can get to what I think is my real work, i.e., writing). But no matter who does the work, I know that it is work that's never done. It is also work that, when accomplished well, goes unseen.