Gendering landscape art

Edited by Steven Adams & Anna Gruetzner Robins
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Trash: public art by the Garbage Girls

Jo Anna Isaak

The relationship between art and trash has always been a close one – there is a clear continuity in the line that runs from the Readymade, objet trouvé, arte povera, to the art of waste management, recycling, reclamation and redemption. Trash, junk, garbage, refuse, waste, offal, mess, dirt, rubbish, excrement – we produce it, we mass produce it in exponentially increasing amounts; we throw it out, pick it up, clean it out, bury it, truck it off, float it away, melt it down, compact it, pulverise it, recycle it, reassemble it, keep it moving … some place else, out of sight, but never it seems completely out of mind. It returns – sometimes even as art.

In the production of waste we are all active participants. According to Freud we instinctually value our waste, at least until we are trained to devalue it. The child is ‘first obliged to exchange pleasure for social respectability. To begin with, his attitude to his excreta themselves is quite different. He feels no disgust at his faeces, values them as a portion of his own body with which he will not readily part, and makes use of them as his first “gift”, to distinguish people whom he values especially highly. Even after education has succeeded in its aim of making these inclinations alien to him, he carries on his high valuation of faeces in his estimate of gifts and money.”

Historically, artists have had a very important role in bringing us back to our initial assessment of our waste production; enabling us to ‘own’ them once again and thereby ‘own up’ to them, to take responsibility, even to take credit for our products. Marcel Duchamp, perhaps the foremost waste theoretician of the art world, asserted that ‘Money is to art as shit is to shit’, an assertion he made manifest in his Ready-mades in general and Fountain and Elevage de Poussi ère (Dust Breeding) in particular.

Numerous artists have been assiduously exploring this particular mother lode. Piero Manzoni, in Merda d’artista (1961), canned his own faeces and sold it by the gram for whatever the price of gold was on that day’s market. Lynda Benglis produced an almost five-foot high pile of unmistakable composition, colour and viscosity entitled For Carl Andre. Karen Finley took up the sticky themes of coprophilia and abjection in her performance as she screamed, ‘Smear chocolate all over your body until you are a human shit.’ In the Post-Partum Document, Mary
Kelly analysed faecal stains for clues to her child’s health, the mother’s role within the patriarchy, and her own role as an artist. Mierle Laderman Ukeles recalls that the idea for the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* came to her while she was changing her child’s diaper. Margaret Morgan has been drawing upon plumbing designs and a vast photographic archive of bathrooms in public places to explore the complex site in which the individual and the mass butt up against each other and modern civilisation purges itself of its detritus. In *Portrait of a History of Modern Art as Sanitary System* (1997) she superimposes Alfred Barr’s famous ‘flow-chart’ in which he set out the hegemonic history of modern art in an orderly system of influences and cultural advancements on to a plumbing diagram used to illustrate Adolf Loos’s essay ‘Plumbing’. In his paean to plumbing, Loos described the plumber as ‘pioneer of cleanliness … quartermaster of civilization’ as if civilisation itself was a war on waste. Subtitled *The House that Adolf and Alfred Built*, Morgan’s architectural drawing (later realised in three dimensions as a wall-sculpture made of dysfunctional interconnected plumbing fixtures) suggests these early engineers of modernism’s purity and lineage had a premonition of the wave of the future and the debasement to come (much like Clement Greenberg’s worry about the encroachment of kitsch into High Art).


In this chapter I examine the interconnections between the production of waste, the production of art, and the role of women in those productions. A disproportionate number of artists working with trash, waste management, pollution and the social factors associated with waste are women. I am interested in what draws so many women artists to this field and what role women in particular have to play in it. Many of these artists have created problem-solving works that address specific environmental situations, designed recuperative projects for degraded environments, and broadened public concern for what is becoming the most pressing ecological issue of our time – what to do with the trash.

Discussions about waste, its production and elimination, take on a peculiar privilege: that of mediating between psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic discourses. Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* is the classic psychoanalytic text on the subject of waste. In it she argues that our waste production plays an important role in the formation of our identity, that our continuous attempt to extricate ourselves from our waste is part of our ongoing attempt to constitute ourselves as individuals. She elaborates upon Freud and Lacan’s theory that the prohibitions on which social and symbolic order is based, from the incest taboo
to dietary regulations, simultaneously allow the subject to speak and produce categories such as cleanliness and filth, order and chaos. Learning to delimit and control the body is part of the process of developing a sense of borders, part of the perpetual construction of the self as separate from others. Our sense of a coherent ego requires that certain partial objects, originally thought of as part of the self (substances that issue from the body: blood, menses, faeces, urine, semen, vomit, saliva, breast milk, etc.), be cast out, ejected, abjected. For Kristeva, the horror in question is not the production but the return of the rejected and the fear that what must be expelled from the subject’s corporeal functioning can never be fully got rid of. It hovers at the borders, threatening engulfment: ‘what is abject, the jetisoned object ... draws me to the place where the demarcation between self and objects become ambiguous and meaning collapses’.

Abjection reminds us of the frailty of our own borders and the instability of our own individuality. Abjection can be read as referring predominately to the social and symbolic ordering of the female body, primarily the maternal body, since the first delineation of the self as separate from the maternal body is the prototype for subsequent separations and since it is the mother who experiences one-ness with the baby and she is the one who has the greatest familiarity with the infant’s bodily residues. Also, the female body during lactation and menses produces more of the substances designated as abject.

In her discussion of the abject, Kristeva draws upon the approach to pollution developed by the social anthropologist Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Implicit in Kristeva’s notion of the abject as the by-product or excessive residue left by the symbolic functioning is Douglas’s notion that dirt is simply matter out of place. ‘Where there is dirt there is system’, Douglas writes. ‘Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity.’ Notions about what pollutes, what disgusts, what defiles depend upon the symbolic system in which they occur. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, she notes, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table. Although it is not the point of her investigation, gender relations come into play in these categorisations. The authority to make these distinctions depends upon who has authority in the culture in general. In a patriarchal society, the enterprises of men are more likely to be protected from female pollution than vice-versa. Also, she points out that as a greater and greater investment is made in the system of ordering, a conservative bias is built in. Yet, there are several ways of dealing with anomalies besides the obvious one of rejection. One way, she mentions, is to re-categorise the anomaly, the thing out of place, as art:

But it is not always an unpleasant experience to confront ambiguity. Obviously it is more tolerable in some areas than in others. There is a whole gradient on which laughter, revulsion and shock belong at different points and intensities. The experience can be stimulating. The richness of poetry depends on the use of ambiguity, as
Empson has shown. The possibility of seeing a sculpture equally well as a landscape or as a reclining nude enriches the work's interest. Ehrenzweig has even argued that we enjoy works of art because they enable us to go behind the explicit structures of our normal experience. Aesthetic pleasure arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms.⁴

Douglas ends with a chapter entitled 'The System Shattered and Renewed' in which she draws upon William James to make a case for what she calls 'dirt-affirming' rather than 'dirt-rejecting' philosophies; quoting his suggestion that 'ritual mixing up and composing of polluting things would provide the basis of "more complete religion"'.⁵

There are certain parallels to be found between Douglas's theories of dirt and Kristeva's notion of the abject, on the one hand, and Andreas Huyssen's insight into the gender divide between modernism and mass culture. In 'Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other', Huyssen examines how cultural production and consumption affected conceptions of the boundary between self and other and how women were positioned in this great divide. He traces a notion that became commonplace during the nineteenth century — that devalued forms of popular or mass culture have historically been associated with women while real, authentic culture remains the privileged realm of male activity. He sees modernism as the historical culmination of a kind of paranoid view of mass culture and the masses, both of which are associated with women and with engulfment:

In the late 19th century a specific traditional male image of woman served as a receptacle for all kinds of projections, displaced fears, and anxieties which were brought about by modernization and the new social conflicts. An examination of the magazines and the newspapers of the period will show that the proletarian and petit-bourgeois masses were persistently described in terms of the engulfing floods of revolt and revolution, of the swamp of big city life, of the spreading ooze of massification, the figure of the red whore at the barricades — all of these pervade the writings of the mainstream media. The fear of the masses in this age of declining liberalism is always also a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass.⁶

I would like to draw on one other theoretical work to make the connection between women and waste. It comes from Michael Thompson's Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value.⁷ Thompson takes a synchronic approach to garbage. He begins by identifying two general categories in which we place objects, the transient and the durable. Objects placed in the transient class are thought of as having finite life spans and as decreasing in value or turning into rubbish over time. Objects viewed as durable retain their value or even increase in value over time. Thompson's inquiry is into the ways in which objects can change categories. Women themselves enter the transient category sooner, passing their 'sell by' date more rapidly than men do. An example he gives, linking women to journalism and transience (and, by implication, men to scholarship and durability) is provided in a
song sung by Mick Jagger: ‘Who wants yesterday’s [news]paper, Who wants yesterday’s girl?’ More significantly, Thompson reveals that women cannot affect the change of objects from the transient to the durable in the same way that men can. He traces the change in category of Stevengraphs – woven pennants or banners that were commonly sold at fairs during the Victorian era and up until just before World War II. These cheap souvenirs have become valuable collectors’ items. The story of their metamorphosis is also the story of their shift in ownership from women to men. In the early days Stevengraph-collecting, like knitting, was largely a feminine occupation, ‘the housewife’s harmless little self-indulgence’ as Thompson put it.8 However, as the transition from transient to durable proceeds so Stevengraphs are transferred to male collectors. Men write authoritative books about the collections, and an exclusive auction house regulates their sales and prices. He concludes his analysis by noting: ‘It seems probable that women were excluded from durability by a double mechanism. Items controlled by women were transferred to the durable category by transferring control to men and, when this transfer of control did not occur, nor did the transfer from rubbish to durable … Women have been excluded from durability just as they have been excluded from the Stock Exchange and from Great Art.’9

I have taken this brief excursion through these theories about waste and women in order both to establish women’s credentials in the field of garbology and to suggest why women are strategically so well positioned to deal with the trash. Now I would like to look at the work of a number of the ‘garbage girls’ (to borrow Lucy Lippard’s term for women artists working with waste).

Christy Rupp makes sculptures of endangered dolphins, fish and various species of marine life from the discarded objects that are destroying them. In Red Tide two giant turtles made of discarded red plastic Tide detergent bottles stuffed in steel armatures seem to be expiring on the gallery floor – one turtle lies belly up while the other looks on expectantly. Detergents are frequently given deceptively cheery names like New Era, Dawn, Cascade, Surf, Breeze, Sunlight as if to mask their effects upon the watershed. In Fossil Fuels Forever, made in response to Exxon’s catastrophic oil spill in Prince William Sound, five tar-covered cormorants and two empty oil barrels form a kind of despondent tableau vivant – one bird is expiring while another tries to lift itself up from under the crushing weight of an oil barrel. In Ooze Sorry Now, oil seeps through the cracks in the shell of a snail made of steel taken from a deconstructed oil barrel. In Deep Sea Dinner, a dolphin form filled with cat food and tuna cans and covered with polyethylene netting – the same material used in fishnets that trap unwanted dolphins – becomes a monument to the thousands of dolphins killed each year by the commercial tuna industry. Species Born–agradable is a steel-framed frog made of so-called biodegradable garbage bags that do not, in fact, decompose in landfills. In Synthetic Water and Wave of the Future mussel and seashell forms are filled with transparent, blue, green and clear plastic water bottles. The double-edged elegance of the pearly nautilus is an ironic commentary on our growing reliance
on bottled water, another shortsighted solution which adds to the problem. With
deft humour, Rupp's sculptures bring us right back to confront what we thought
we had got rid of, giving new meaning to the notion of the eternal in art.

Nancy Rubins's sculptures portray the collective pathos of thousands of
rejected consumer items. She turns scrap-yard junk (TVs, air conditioners, cof-
feemakers, hair dryers, toasters, plumbing appliances, etc.) into art of the abject. It
is the scale of Rubins's work that commands our respect; respect for the millions of
jettisoned Mr. Coffees, toasters, hair dryers, etc. that are accumulating yearly in our
landfills. Once these unwanted consumer items return en masse, they are awe-
inspiring. In 1982, she compiled Worlds Apart, a 42-foot high mushrooming cloud
of trash that spiralled up and over Washington's Watergate Plaza. After it has had
its apotheosis as art, the junk is dismantled again and returned to the dump. Rubins
has moved on to ever more gargantuan junk. Another Kind of Growth (1988)
(Figure 36) was made of discarded mobile homes climbing up and over live oak
trees at Pittsburgh's Point State Park. Almost airborne, these mobile homes seem
to have gained agency. As if sensing the urge for transcendence in all junk, Rubins
went to the Mojave Desert to search for wrecked airplanes, junk that had once been
able to fly, and refashioned them into works such as Four Thousand Lbs. of Smashed
and Filleted Airplanes in 1986 and Topanga Tree and Mr. Huffman's Airplane Parts
in 1990. One expects that the next step for Rubins will be space debris.

Betty Beaumont’s *Ocean Landmark Project*, a sculptural reef for breeding fish, began when Beaumont, who is a scuba diver, realised that the only use made of the continental shelf off Long Island was as a dump site for everything including industrial sludge, atomic waste, unexploded bombs, discarded police guns, etc. and that this dumping, more than over-fishing, was the principal cause of the destruction of the marine life in the area. What is perhaps most intriguing about Beaumont’s reef is that it is made of material that is causing another ecological problem on Long Island – waste coal fly-ash, the by-product of hydro-electric power plants. Working with a team of material scientists, Beaumont learned that although this ash is unstable above water and a potential pollutant, in water it can be stabilised and stored safely. She investigated a variety of reef-building methods used in Japanese aquaculture to determine the optimum shape and size of her sculpture. She had 500 tons of coal ash fabricated into 16-inch bricks at a concrete plant, trucked to the Jersey shore, and loaded on to a pocket barge. The blocks were then control dumped at the designated site to form a reef sculpture on the floor of the Atlantic. *Ocean Landmark Project*, completed in 1980, lies seventy feet below the surface of the water about 50 miles from New York City off the coast of Fire Island. It took over three years in the planning, but only a day to install. It is documented in photographs of every stage of the process, underwater film footage and sonograms as well as beautifully choreographed videotape showing the tugboat towing the barge out into the ocean and the controlled dumping of the bricks at the designated site. Subsequent visits to the underwater site in the first few months revealed the developing ocean plankton – the first link in the aquatic food chain – and then later fish began to inhabit the reef. It is now a flourishing aqua-system providing habitat and sustenance for a variety of marine life.

*Ocean Landmark Project* is a very pragmatic solution to several ecological problems and, at the same time, it is a fully resolved conceptual art work. As Beaumont says, ‘Fundamental to the original concept of the work was the belief that its integrity resided in its invisibility – it could only be imagined.’ Conceptual artists attempted to address the problem of the surfeit of objects in the world, including art objects. Various ‘dematerialised’ forms were developed that aimed to make art part of the solution rather than part of the problem. As Daniel Buren described it: ‘there was a group of people at that time, all of whom were working in a way which had almost nothing to do with aesthetics and which concerned itself with the question of how one can make something from nothing. There were people working from shadows – no cost; people working with words – no cost; people working with bits of wood found lying in the street or hedgerows – no cost; etc., etc. … Of course’, he goes on to say, ‘a lot of this stuff became chic and expensive, stylish and academic’. Overwhelmed by the power of the market-oriented art world and the failure to create a new context and new audience, the impetus faded: the dematerialisation concept was eventually re-embodied into commodities. But with the growth of more sophisticated art/political awareness during the eighties some of what conceptualism gestured at is being realised. In
large part, this is due to paradigm shifts taking place in art as a result of the convergence with broad-based movements like feminism and ecology.

A number of artists have dedicated themselves to cleaning up the waterways in performances that are as repetitive and ephemeral as housework. In 1987 Dominique Mazéaud organised trash brigades known as *The Great Cleaning of the Rio Grande River*, a performance she repeats each month. Since 1990, Suwan Geer has organised large groups of people to join her on Earth Day in cleaning up the Los Angeles River. These are extravagant gestures made in the face of a formidable task.

No less intrepid, Agnes Denes cleared a 2-acre landfill created from the debris from the construction of the World Trade Center in New York City. On land that is among the most valuable property in the world, she planted, tended and harvested 1,000 pounds of wheat. Throughout the summer of 1982, the sight of *Wheatfield Confrontation* (Figure 37), a golden field of wheat growing in the heart of the financial district, reminded an urban populace of its dependence on the land. Recently, Denes has completed *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule*, a massive earthwork and land reclamation project located in an abandoned gravel pit in Finland. Ten thousand Finnish pine trees were planted in a spiral formation on a man-made mountain. This huge collective project involved numerous people and organisations such as the United Nations Environment Program, the Finnish Ministry of Environment, foresters, engineers and local citizens. *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule* is a

realisation of the notion of ‘stewardship’ of the land, where one does not own the land, but looks after it for future generations.

Landfills seem to be the *œuvre* of choice for a number of women artists. Nancy Holt who is currently working on the New Jersey Landfill Project sees these vast landfills as distinctly American. ‘The feeling of awe I frequently feel standing on top of the landfill is similar to the wonder I experienced on the huge American Indian mounds in Miamisburg, Ohio and in the Cahokia sites along the Mississippi River in Illinois. Both kinds of human-made mounds were built to meet vital social necessities, but here the similarity ends. Landfills result, of course, from the essential need to rid ourselves of the used-up, cast-off materials of our culture, while American Indian mounds derived from deep spiritual, social, and ritualistic needs.’ At times, Holt sounds a bit nostalgic for these old dumps:

Trash piles have been with us for thousands of years, as far back as archeologists have traced. With a friend who is an archeologist, I once visited a cave home of the Anasazi, the earliest known human beings in the Southwest, in a high butte in northwestern Utah. There at the base of the butte, just below the cave I saw my first prehistoric trash — a large pile of broken pottery, fish and animal bone, shells and such ... Today’s landfills, then, have a long heritage. Around the globe there are millions of these shunned earthen forms — forgotten trash heaps, relegated to the realms of the unconscious. By the end of the century, with more reliance on improved methods of recycling and incineration, laws will go into effect to prohibit the use of landfills for garbage disposal. These heaps of rubbish will be seen as the artifacts of our generation, our legacy to the future. So there is no escaping our responsibility for making these mounds of decaying matter safe by using the latest closure technology, and eventually reinterpreting and reclaiming them, giving them new social and aesthetic meanings and functions.

Holt’s response to this vast inelegance that lies deep within the personality of American technological consumer society led her to design Sky Mound for the New Jersey landfill in such a way as to enable it to form a link between America’s past and future — referencing ancient Indian mounds as well as what looks like a landing site for future extra-terrestrial spacecraft. Her design uses the latest innovative technology of landfill closure: methane recovery wells, a methane flare, a surface drainage pond, mounds made of fill, a leachate collection system, a land drainage system, and a thirty-foot-deep slurry wall around the perimeter of the landfill. The area on top of the landfill was covered with a plastic liner made of recycled plastic soda bottles, then covered with topsoil and seeded. The mounds and steel posts in what she calls the ‘lunar area’ will mark the extreme orbital positions of the moon while from the ‘solar area’ the sun will be seen rising and setting on the solstices and equinoxes. When it is completed, this celestial calendar will be visible from the New Jersey Turnpike on one side and the Amtrak trains on the other and overhead by airplanes flying into the Newark Airport.

The preeminent ‘garbage girl’ is of course Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Since 1976 she has served as artist-in-residence with the New York City Department of
Sanitation. She has been commissioned by Cultural Affairs and the Department of Sanitation to be the artist in charge of designing the largest garbage dump on this planet – a three thousand acre municipal landfill on Staten Island. From the five boroughs of New York, this landfill receives 27 thousand tons of garbage a day which forms mountains of garbage – 300 to 500 feet high, what the architect Michael Sorkin termed ‘the Alps of New York’. This magnum opus will occupy her for perhaps the rest of her life. When asked how she got on to this path which led to design the mother of all landfills she explained, she had a baby. As a mother, she became a maintenance worker. While she was doing the repetitive tasks involved in looking after the baby, she had a kind of Duchampian revelation – she realised that she was an artist and as such she could decide what was art, so she called what she was doing art. In her early performances involving repetitive activity such as changing diapers, picking up toys, dressing and undressing the child, she began an investigation of the greatest of all divides – the gulf that separates the unnoticed activity of housework from the highly valued activity of art making. In focusing on this divide she has gone to the heart not just of an important gender issue but an important ecological issue – one that is deeply entrenched in our thinking, whether that thinking is conditioned by capitalist or Marxist ideology. Central to Marx’s notion of human progress is freedom from manual labour, a freedom to be achieved through continuing technological developments. Marx tends to valorise cultural activity as the means to true individual fulfilment while grading as lowly many life-sustaining activities that could be potentially more fulfilling if approached and thought of differently. The result is that culture and self-expression are made to seem the complete antithesis of necessary material labour. Simone de Beauvoir has drawn attention to a similar kind of contrasting valuation between the self-limiting work of women and the self-transcending work of men. The work women are commonly engaged in such as housework, cleaning, growing and preparing food, caring for the young, infirm, or the elderly, etc., is treated as private, mundane, and concerned with the regeneration and repetition of life, while the work of men outside the home is regarded as public, important, concerned with shaping the future through technology and symbols.

In 1969 Ukeles wrote Manifesto for Maintenance Art which brought art and the work women commonly do into a provocative affiliation. It remains the central document that has influenced the content and direction of her work for thirty years. Her early performances included washing the floors of museums, scrubbing the sidewalk outside a gallery, and documenting the work of the maintenance staff of a branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The performances raised questions about enduring and ephemeral work, valued and undervalued labour, and the category of aesthetic value itself.

Making maintenance activity visible and involving all those who participate in it is the major impetus of her work. One of her projects was to shake the hand of every sanitation worker in New York City. Handshake Ritual (1978–79) remains one of her most memorable, arduous and controversial works. It involved a
complete immersion in the culture and routines of sanitation work. Mapping out the city according to a system of sweeps and shifts, she worked the day and night shifts to complete the performance. The attitude of the general public towards sanitation workers is one of indifference or even hostility; the public tends to associate the sanitation workers with the garbage and, in a way, blame them for it. They frequently receive insults and invective as they collect the garbage from the city streets. Ukeles first wrote to every sanitation worker explaining her intentions. She needed to gain their cooperation for this project – a number of workers did not want their friends and neighbours to know what they did for a living. Ukeles recounts stories of workers who would never dry their uniforms on outdoor laundry lines in order to hide the nature of their work from their neighbours. The intent of these thousands of handshakes was to honour and confirm the dignity of sanitation work. The performance attracted a lot of media attention and won her a place in the hearts of the sanitation workers. When the handshaking event was finished, Ukeles was appointed Honorary Deputy Commissioner of Sanitation and made an honorary member of the Teamster Union.

_'Handshake Ritual'_ was part of an ongoing series of works designed to bring people closer to their garbage. 'Transfer Station Trans Formation' undertaken in 1984 included performance and exhibitions at a waste transfer station at 59th Street in New York City. Here huge displays of sanitation tools and equipment and cages of recyclable material were arranged as monuments to the magnitude, energy and repetition of maintenance work. The show attracted thousands of visitors. In 1983, Ukeles installed a Plexiglas mirror on the sides of a garbage truck. As _The Social Mirror_ (Figure 38), as it was called, made its rounds collecting garbage, people walking in the streets could see themselves reflected in the mirror, reminding them of their participation in this art work. In _Ballet Mechanique_ (1983) she drew upon the Russian Constructivist tradition of choreographing machinery and scripted a ballet for six street sweepers and their drivers. The ballet was part of New York City’s Art Parade. At the end of the performance, the drivers turned the huge machines to face the audience and took a bow by raising and lowering the sweepers’ brooms while backing up. This was the first of several ballets she has orchestrated involving heavy equipment, including a barge ballet on the Hudson River. In this, as in all of her work, Ukeles likes to bring together opposites – the notion of dance coupled with work; lightness coupled with heavy equipment. In 1993, she choreographed a much larger piece involving twenty-seven city vehicles including garbage trucks, street sweepers, fire engines and barges for the city of Givors in France.

Ukeles’s zeal for putting people in touch with their trash makes her sound like the inspiration for a character in Don DeLillo’s _Underworld_: ‘Bring garbage into the open’, he urges, ‘Let people see it and respect it. Don’t hide your waste facilities. Make an architecture of waste. Design gorgeous buildings to recycle waste and invite people to collect their own garbage and bring it with them to the press rams and conveyors. Get to know your garbage.’ Since 1983, at the same site as her first large-scale installation at 59th Street, Ukeles has been doing just that. Working
with engineers, architects and ecologists she has been designing an ambitious public art and garbage access project called *Flow City*. Partly conceived of as a Museum of Human Labour, *Flow City* is intended to let people enter into an operational waste disposal system. It involves a series of sequential, participatory environments and observation points for the public. Ukeles is committed to bringing people into an immediate sensory experience with this giant influx of garbage because, as she says, it is theirs, it is an important social sculpture that they are producing every day. Like her work ballets, she sets up a series of philosophical contrasts in this site where mundane reality and the potential for transformation meet. The visitors enter through a long passageway whose walls and floors are made of recyclable material – glass, aluminium, newspaper, heavy metals, rubber, toxic materials. One wall of the passageway is clear glass, providing a view of the constant stream of incoming garbage trucks. From this passageway, the visitor comes on to the Glass Bridge, a proscenium framing the dramatic art of maintenance, what Ukeles describes as ‘the violent theatre of dumping’ – evidence of the tremendous energy and synchronisation involved in the transfer of garbage from truck to barge. On one side of the Glass Bridge, pictured through the glass windows, is a perfect postcard view of the Manhattan skyline, on the other side flows the Hudson River down which float the barges heaped high with garbage. The Glass Bridge ends in the Media Flow Wall, a wall of video monitors set in a sculpted wall of glass. The media wall will connect the building and its activities – via live transmission – to the landfill on Staten Island.
The juxtaposition of the rough, continuous mechanical frenzy of the disposal system with the sharply contrasting view of the pristine glass and steel towers of the Manhattan skyline, and the flowing water of the Hudson River, makes the installation a site of philosophical contemplation, bringing the viewer into a visceral relationship to this endless flow of material. As Ukeles says, ‘we end, but the flow continues. Waste represents the ending of use, it’s a metaphor for death, something most of us are afraid to deal with.’ Running throughout Flow City is the material and metaphorical realisations of transformation, reclamation and redemption.

The greatest danger today, suggests ecologist Joanna Macy, is the feeling that the crisis is too big to deal with. A major part of what needs to be done is what she calls ‘despair work’, envisioning ways to surmount what seem to be insurmountable problems. This may be one of the reasons why Ukeles, Holt, Denes, Beaumont, Rubins and so many others take on projects of such monumental scale. It may be the extravagance of the projects and the obsession that makes it work as art – as one reviewer wrote about the landfill project – ‘One man’s trash is another man’s gold, but seven million people’s trash, well that’s art.’ In the process they are radically redefining public art and expanding the realm of the aesthetic. As Ukeles says, ‘the design of garbage should become the great public design of our age. I am talking about the whole picture: recycling facilities, transfer stations, trucks, landfills, receptacles, water treatment plants, and rivers. They will be giant clocks and thermometers of our age that tell the time and health of the air, the earth, and the water. They will be utterly ambitious – our public cathedrals. For if we are to survive, they will be symbols of survival.’

In showing that maintenance is not the opposite of creativity, that it can be a reinterpretation of creativity, these artists are beginning to reverse the long process by which art became formalised and divorced from social and practical considerations. ‘Artistic freedom’ has been translated to mean the absence of any social consequences for art, but it long ago lost its emancipatory ring. The beliefs we have ascribed to art – that the problems of art are purely aesthetic and that art has no responsibility to anything other than itself – are beliefs that have diminished the capacity of artists for constructive thought and action, leading to cultural powerlessness. The premise that aesthetic creation is necessarily individualistic is a questionable romantic myth nourished by bourgeois liberalism’s ideology of individualism, and one that belies art’s essential communal and pragmatic dimension. This myth has been seriously undermined over the last two decades by the feminist intervention in art. The suggestion that art could become useful again, that it may in fact be in the process of being reintegrated into the praxis of life, may be what is the most disturbing aspect of all these women mucking about in the trash. As Sappho said, ‘If you are squeamish, don’t stir the beach rubble.’