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The Manifest Disharmony of Ephemeral Culture: Art, Ecology, and Waste Management in American Culture

The waste management crisis, a subset of the larger ecological crisis, is the subject which artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles addresses in her work. As part of the Art and Ecology movement, Ukeles calls attention to the byproducts of wanton production practices: the garbage, the waste, and the landfills where ephemeral consumer products eventually rest. As the Artist-in-Residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation, a position she has held since the mid-1970s, Ukeles worked on the renovation of the Fifty-ninth Street Marine transfer station in midtown Manhattan to create Flow City. She produced a public access space through which the public can walk and view the facility and its operations. The importance of Flow City is derived not only from the innovative collaboration it represents, but also from the implications of the Fresh Kills landfill site, the eventual repository of the waste stream that flows through Flow City.

The global problem of waste management is one which the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles chooses to address in her work. She addresses the crisis locally, rather than globally. Approaching the predicament on a local scale is more manageable considering the magnitude of the issue of waste management, which is a subset of the larger ecological crisis that typifies our society’s current situation. To the concerned and enlightened individual, these issues are so overwhelming that finding individual empowerment and an appropriate course of action to take are not easy tasks. In current art practices there are artists who choose to champion environmental issues such as Helen and Newton Harrison, Alfredo Jaar, Dominique Mazeaud, Peter Fend, Patricia Johanson, Mel Chin, Viet Ngo and Vijali, to name but a few.¹

¹ Jackie Brookner. ‘The Heart of the Matter.’ Art Journal 51 (Summer 1992), 9-11. In addition to Brookner’s statement as editor, the entire Art Journal was devoted to art and ecology issues. See the summer 1992 issue for an overview of artists.
These artists share a common desire to improve the current ecological situation and to curtail the technological despoliation of the environment. They are members of the Art and Ecology movement. “It’s about intention and potential” (Cembalest 99-100), asserts David Floria, director of the International Friends of Transformative Art (IFTA). The issues of the environment and ecological crises are not uncomplicated concerns. Looking at a variety of ideological approaches, in addition to reviewing cultural constructs, will help to reveal the viability of Ukeles’s approach.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is artist-in-residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation. She was appointed in 1977 to the “official” and unsalaried position. Ukeles is truly a public artist, funded by over 30 fellowships and grants. This paper is an analysis of her work through a close reading of Flow City, a permanent public art and video environment that she designed as a component of the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station on the Hudson River in New York City. Integral to Flow City is the fact that Ukeles was made the “Artist of the Fresh Kills Landfill” through a New York City percent-for-art award. An analysis of Ukeles’s contribution to contemporary art must be centered on an ecological frame of reference. Particularly important is the fact that Fresh Kills Landfill is one of the world’s largest man-made structures, and as such, it will be discussed as a monument of our culture. Without a context in which to place Ukeles’s work, it is difficult to understand. Factors influencing how her work operates are production, performance, reception, intention, and potential. Furthermore, she is situated within the parameters of contemporary environmental or ecological art, in what has been termed the Art and Ecology movement.

This paper provides a close reading of Flow City as a manifestation of our current technological predicament. In my treatment of the Fresh Kills Landfill site, I view it as a physical result of cultural practices which have led to environmental degradation. I hope to show how Ukeles’s Flow City renders a former site of degradation into a new positive site, where there is a possibility of an underlying paradigmatic shift. The new paradigm, or new way of viewing the world, is not rigid, but rather incorporates adaptation as part of its overall design. In effect, I hope to alleviate some of the casual indifference we might feel towards