

PATRICIA PHILLIPS: Sustaining Public Art



Aerial view of Staten Island's Fresh Kills landfill, the largest landfill in the world, recently closed but then reopened to take wreckage from the World Trade Center 9/11 disaster. Over the next ten years, artist Mierle Ukeles will work with New York City percent-for-art funds to create a new entity from this 2,200-acre dump.

ACCEPTING THAT SUSTAINABILITY is "culturally creative, and also ambiguous," the relationship of sustainability with public art stimulates different, but arguably dependent, lines of inquiry.* A *public art of sustainability* represents artists' practices and projects that actively engage discursive concepts of sustainability and centrally, if conditionally, cite this urgent subject in dialogues about art, environment, common space, and public values. Mierle Laderman Ukeles is a striking example. Her prodigious work negotiates theories and practices of culture, ecology, sociology, sanitation, maintenance, and public life. Her work first guided my ideas as a young, green (and I do mean inexperienced) critic and continues to now as a more seasoned, green (and I mean more ecologically minded) writer on art in the public realm.

Another just as timely, even urgent, dimension is the *sustainability of public art*. One angle might focus on progressive practices in the use of materials, conservation methods, and a fruitful, companionable connection of art to the character and conditions of site (its continuing viability). But just as insistently, *sustainability of public art* proposes a dynamic and dialectical, critical and theoretical environment for the field to develop, deepen, and connect in significant, "culturally creative" ways in the future. There are programs and mechanisms in place to ensure the continued production of public art (even in this unsettled time), but persistence and perseverance in the present does not "naturally" nourish best practices and animating ideas for the future. The *sustainability of public art* requires an investment in and commitment to a future made more meaningful and sustainable through a vivid and vigilant critical discourse today.

Ukeles's work is still deeply relevant, 40 years since she wrote a manifesto that examined and advocated for attentiveness

to recursive work, maintenance, daily life, and public values, and brilliantly presaged the inherently connective character of public, environmental, and critical sustainability that preoccupies us today. In 1969, as a young mother and "maintenance artist," she began the often challenging process of theorizing, making, and connecting work with art, labor with thinking, and a discursive practice with deeply felt ideas about culture, feminism, and the public realm through an auspicious range of projects throughout four decades.

If sustainability implies a commitment to make responsive and responsible connections between bodies and minds, environments and communities, it is fruitful—and inevitable—to link these two tangents of public art and sustainability. Ukeles's work over four decades is a vivid example of *public art of sustainability* that seeks to prompt and focus public attention and response to environmental issues by engaging complex issues, in discursive sites, and with tactics that radically expand to involve people, communities, and, arguably, an entire nation. Her connective process represents the *sustainability of public art* through intricately layered ideas and methodologies that negotiate theory with practice, stimulating, contributing to, and—yes—inspiring a vigorous legacy of trenchant and transformative critical discourse on public art and its future.

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NOTE

* General thoughts on sustainability from George Myerson and Yvonne Rudin. *The Language of Environment: A New Rhetoric* (London: UCL Press Limited, 1996).