

MEDIATING THE SPATIALITY OF CONFLICTS

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Conflictual Waste: Performance Art as Mediation Tool in the Work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Francesca Zanotto

Politecnico di Milano

francesca.zanotto@polimi.it

Abstract

In 1970 Pier Paolo Pasolini filmed the first national strike of Italian sanitation workers, sitting back and asking better treatment and recognition. Pasolini identified one of the many conflicts around urban solid waste: the one between the necessity of a removal chain and the repulsion surrounding it. Waste raises deep discomfort, identified by Lynch in the disturbing connections it holds with death, decay, consumption, and filth. The same discomfort surrounds waste management facilities and those close to waste, as sanitary workers or those relying on waste for daily support. At the same time, in the urban environment waste often becomes the weapon to fight social and political battles: practices as dumpster diving and freeganism are performed by citizens not accepting the status quo of individuals as customers and employing waste as tool to outline alternative consumption paths. The mediation of conflicts raised by waste is at the core of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work, artist-in-residence at the NYC Department of Sanitation from 1977. Laderman Ukeles devoted her interest to the removal affecting waste and the oblivion around maintenance labour, working to foster awareness of public metabolism as the first step to deactivate conflicts caused by waste in the urban environment.

Keywords

Waste; Maintenance; Conflict; Stigma; Urban Metabolism; Performance Art

Introduction

For a documentary¹ he never edited, in 1970 Pier Paolo Pasolini filmed the first national strike of sanitation workers in Italy: for the first time, trash collectors sat back, leaving waste piling up in the streets to ask better treatment and recognition. In this episode, Pasolini identified specific conditions surrounding waste as the causes of the conflicts it raises: the essential role it plays in the urban metabolism, the non-recognition and stigmatization of the care and maintenance work it necessary requests, the direct involvement of citizens in its generation, the privilege of those who consume and the misfortune of those who handle the dross of this consumption, the repulsion waste causes. This repulsion plays a major role in all the conflicts raised by waste; in *Wasting Away*, Kevin Lynch

individuated its causes in the subtle and disturbing connections of waste with death, aging, decay, consumption, eating and discharging, cleanness and filth. Waste is an indicator of our time and the symptom of the deep dichotomy characterizing contemporary consumption: the awareness of resource scarcity and the abundance of waste, as well as the recognised necessity of a removal chain and the struggle to get closely involved. As shown by Pasolini's work, the urban environment is the setting where this discomfort explodes in different forms of conflict, of which the complex chain of collection and disposal of waste is a major trigger.

Waste in the urban environment: a public story of conflict and stigma

Urban environment has a tight relationship

with waste due to the growing density of contemporary cities and the consequent increasing necessity to maintain urban space safe and decent. This aim is pursued through a removal chain, which main purpose is to move waste through private and public settings towards a more convenient and less disturbing location without interfering with their operations. The chain is characterised, on one hand, by the scaling up of waste involved: the chain starts handling small items in the domestic environment and finishes with huge piles of trash in waste disposal facilities. On the other hand, a clear shift in the jurisdiction on waste takes place, moving from private to public. This shift in the responsibility on waste has characterised Modern Age, when first regulations and authorities around waste management were established in cities.

The public intervention in waste management were followed by changes and adaptations of the spaces devoted to handle waste in the domestic sphere: they 'shifted in location and nature; some were eradicated, other created'², transformed and moved continuously from the inside to the outside of the domestic sphere, from the backyard to the kerbside to fit raising hygienic standards, cultural habits and collection logistic, changing the domestic environment as well as the public urban landscape. In the first years of nineteenth century, the management of waste started to be included in the spatial organization of houses: the necessity to divide 'dirty' rooms and 'clean' rooms was essential, and other hygienic and sanitary measures started to be widespread, as flow of air and light into the rooms, larger spaces and spatial arrangements to increase the separation of social, private and service areas.³ First water closet facilities started to be created and spread out in their rudimentary forms, usually outside the dwelling. Cleanliness and hygiene, from social definer, became the centre of a privately-based sanitary movement⁴, which soon arrived to interest

the city: the necessity to manage waste became a driver of change. Streets started to be paved, sewers to be built, garbage collection services started to be established, representing a shifting of responsibility on household waste management from private to public. Sanitation systems were formulated to make waste 'invisible and odourless, and to prevent the population from any contact with it'.⁵ This purpose contributes today to maintain the oblivion around urban metabolism and waste chain, poorly known after the illustrated shift in jurisdiction. This oblivion regards all the maintenance work in the urban domain, not seen because performed with the purpose to create the least possible nuisance, and removed because dirty and discomforting. Despite remaining mostly unseen, the necessity of this work suddenly appears evident when the system collapses: when streets are not wiped and bins are not emptied, dirt and garbage accumulate. Maintenance work becomes visible when not performed, hence in its absence.

The discomfort caused by waste and the limited knowledge of the functioning of the removal chain interests the spaces and facilities where urban solid waste is managed as well: waste management facilities are often at the centre of Nimby syndrome-related struggles, on the basis of the dirt, pollution, noise, smell, unpleasantness, depreciation, danger they bring along. Although necessary, no one wants them nearby. Waste management facilities are generally inaccessible spaces, out of scale in comparison to the proportion of inhabited areas of the urban environment. Their dimensioning is studied to work with big amounts of matter, not matching human scale; their industrial, mechanical nature spreads a message of imperviousness and danger. Around them, a fine cloud of particles often infests a fallout area: the tangle of the public system lets items and materials slip – physically or administratively, leaving them fall back down or are abandoned outside. 'Waste

lacks pattern: in fact it spoils pattern'⁶; waste's innate nature is formless and its behaviour unpredictable, contributing in large part to the repulsion, disturbing and removal around it. Waste management facilities are part of this oblivion chain: they are 'monuments to the mystery of the separation of matter'⁷, swallowing garbage in an unknown logistics. Big effort and clamour are spent promoting meticulous management of waste in the private environment; little is known, among private citizens, about what happens when waste leaves the household and enters public but inaccessible facilities. The measures adopted to minimise the nuisance their operation may cause to public life contribute to make them warding off: big surfaces hiding manufacturing areas, chimneys to distance smokes and smells from the ground, entrance forbidden, nocturnal functioning. These facilities are perceived as murky and detrimental and are wrapped up in oblivion, when not repulsion, causing issues of integration in the urban fabric: not infrequently they generate conflicts out of their fences. The story of Fresh Kills landfill represents an example of how the management of public waste may closely affect the quality of life and the sense of belonging of those living nearby a facility. Opened in Staten Island in 1948, Fresh Kills has been the biggest landfill in the US until 2001, when it was closed and immediately reopened after few months to receive World Trade Centre's rubble and host the operations of recovery of human remains after 9/11; two years after, in 2003, remediation works started to convert the site, in thirty years, into the biggest urban park of New York City. Twice as large as Central Park⁸, Fresh Kills accommodated five hundred hectares of buried waste, more than fifty years of New York City's trash rising, in some points, up to sixty meters high. The documentary *The Fresh Kills Story: From World's Largest Garbage Dump to a World-Class Park* by Andy Levison narrates about the

unbearable and persistent smell emanated by the landfill, afflicting residents' life, forcing them, when leaving, to run from the doors of their houses to their cars and leading the administration to pour 'gallons'⁹ of pine scent on the site, as an attempt to mitigate the issue. Plastic bags were flying everywhere above the neighbourhoods, despite the retaining nets system set up around the landfill, evoking the visual landscape of a military camp, or a prison. Floating bags were covering up trees, as plastic leaves on ominous, artificial plants.¹⁰ Staten Island residents living around Fresh Kills area also reported high rates of emphysema, asthma and severe allergies. The landfill has been a long-time would for Staten Island, compromising the image of the surrounding neighbourhoods.

The same stigma suffered by Staten Island's resident is attached to those close to waste, who handle it for necessity or willingness: sanitary workers, as well as those relying on waste for daily support, as pointed out by Lynch: 'Dealing with waste as one's primary task is polluting in itself and indicates low status. Scavengers and junk dealers are never quite respectable, even when they earn substantial incomes'.¹¹ The aversion these subjects raise unveils the social and political potential of waste. Weaker categories have to deal with others' dross, depending on them for survival: this state of things defines and perpetuates existing power structures. In the last years, however, waste has more and more unveiled how it often retains remaining value, being a potential resource for new uses and emancipation practices. Therefore, it often becomes a tool to fight social and political battles in the urban environment against the high-consumption, unfair and excluding character of the established economic system. Dumpster diving, freeganism, kerb mining are performed in the urban space by citizens at the periphery of conventional politics¹², not accepting the status quo of 'citizens as customers'¹³; they 'protest over-consumption by abstaining

from consuming anything that must be purchased¹⁴ and employ waste as tool to outline alternative consumption and relational paths. These practices often raise conflicts among practitioners and other taxpayers, law enforcement, sanitation workers as they question the urban order, defended by administrators through specific rules to 'ensure that the city produces those spatial relations that are necessary for capitalism's reproduction'.¹⁵

Mierle Laderman Ukeles: performance art as mediation tool

The mediation of conflicts arisen by waste in the urban environment is at the centre of the artistic production of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, self-appointed unsalaried artist-in-residence at New York City Department of Sanitation since 1977. In her first years at NYC Department of Sanitation, Laderman Ukeles devoted her interest to the removal affecting waste and the oblivion around maintenance work. She worked to foster awareness and involvement of citizens in the 'social pact' of public metabolism as the first steps to deactivate conflicts caused by waste in the urban environment. Maintenance has been at the core of Laderman Ukeles' work since the beginning of her career. In 1969, after the birth of her first child, she wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, casting light on the unseen maintenance work – private and public – required for the smooth operation of life:

Maintenance has to do with survival, with continuity over time. You can create something in a second. But whether it's a person, a system, or a city, in order to keep it, you have to keep it going. I think that one thing we must do is value and learn from those who provide this service.¹⁶

Her *Manifesto* was initially conceived as a series of notes for an exhibition named *Care*, which she later realised as a series of

three *Maintenance Art Tasks* performances put on during the course of 1973 at the Wadsworth Athenaeum museum in Hartford, Connecticut. She proposed to perform at the museum all the maintenance activities she performed at home with her husband and her son as a woman, wife and mother, exhibiting them as art:

I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls, ... cook, invite people to eat, make agglomerations and dispositions of all functional refuse. The exhibition area might look "empty" of art, but it will be maintained in full public view. My working will be the work.¹⁷

After her designation as New York City Department of Sanitation's resident artist, Laderman Ukeles extended her research around maintenance to the urban and public sphere, identifying in waste a powerful potential for art purposes as a matter able to make maintenance labour visible or invisible with its absence or presence. The first work she produced for the Department was the performance *Touch Sanitation* (1979-1980), devoted to expressing gratitude and consideration to NYC sanitation workers as main actors on the public scene. She spent almost a year meeting 8500 employees of New York City Sanitation Department, shaking their hand and saying to each one: 'Thank you for keeping New York City alive'.¹⁸ The core idea of the performance was to intervene on the stigma surrounding sanitation workers, who are identified with the matter they handle: 'they get called garbage men, as if they were the garbage'.¹⁹ Meeting them, shaking hands with them, touching them – as the title recalls – Laderman Ukeles directly unhinged the prejudice they are haunted with; thanking them for the work they perform was an open recognition of the essentiality of maintenance work in the functioning of urban environment and public life.

Later, Laderman Ukeles focused on the spatial dimension of urban environment and its infrastructures as the essential mediums triggering the social pact of urban metabolism. In 1983 she was called to deliver a proposal for a permanent public artwork to be installed at the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station in New York City, one of the eight points where the city's garbage was offloaded onto barges, to be moved toward sorting facilities and Fresh Kills landfill. In her proposal, named *Flow City* and never realised, the artist suggested to incorporate into the building's structure a public art environment able to 'give the public access to an active work site'²⁰ in order to closely observe the public handling of the city's waste and 'immerse themselves in a captivating sensory experience of public witnessing and individual implication'.²¹ *Flow City* was composed of three main interlocking, walk-through spatial elements: a Passage Ramp, a covered passage surrounded by a spiral of twelve different recyclable materials running in parallel to the ramp used by garbage trucks, bringing visitors on the same path of waste through the facility. The Passage Ramp led to the Glass Bridge, from which visitors could observe the transfer of garbage from the trucks on a long cantilevered bay over a slide towards the Hudson river, into the barges below, assisting as an audience to 'the violent theatre of dumping'.²² This bridge provided a view of the city on one side and the view of the river on the other. The artist planned to install a communication system between visitors and sanitation workers, to be opened only if each one would voluntarily connect on their side. The end wall of the bridge was planned to be occupied by a 'permeable membrane', a wall made of monitors screening images recorded by cameras on the roof of the facility, above Hudson river's surface, underwater and at Fresh Kills landfill. This Media Flow Wall would 'track both the flow of the river and the flow of garbage

from the city to its final destination'.²³ *Flow City* was aimed to disengage the oblivion around waste, making garbage 'visible, not as static artefacts, but as a dynamic process'.²⁴ Within *Flow City*, the waste management scenario was opened to the public, welcoming citizens inside to show waste management tools, spaces and rituals, with the purpose to defuse unawareness and suspect surrounding these operations. The work also insisted on the idea of urban metabolism, conceiving and depicting the city as a stack of flows, which waste chain is an essential component. The Glass Bridge provided a view on the river – the flow par excellence – and a view on the waste stream, establishing an immediate relation. The Media Flow Wall composed different images of the river, the city and the phases of waste collection, separation, treatment, reiterating the connection among these flows

Conclusions

Mierle Laderman Ukeles conveyed in her artistic production ideas of normalization of waste and recognition of maintenance work, to deactivate the fear they raise with knowledge and awareness. The importance of her intuition about the essential role played by the spatial dimension of waste management infrastructures in the awareness raising process she advocated and the consequent mediation of conflicts raised by waste is reiterated by contemporary architecture, which in the last decade has been taking charge of waste as environmental but especially cultural issue. The same normalization strategies devised by Laderman Ukeles - visibility, accessibility, knowledge, education, communication - recur in recently designed waste management facilities, envisioned to make sanitation visible and familiar and include it in the perceived urban sphere as well-accepted functions as street lighting, water network, public transport. Contemporary facilities are often conceived as polarities in urban regions, in

a dialectic relationship with other public services such as stations, concert halls, sport centres. They integrate public spaces and common functions related to leisure and culture: visitor centres, panoramic paths, exhibitions, education centres. This resignification, within the framework of a deeper understanding of environmental issues as social and cultural as well, unveils the mediating potential underlying in the tightening of the relationship between citizenship and consumption,

already devised by Laderman Ukeles. The normalization of waste and maintenance work she promoted with her art offers promising sparks for a progressive conception of urban environment as a place of cohabitation: being maintenance 'one of the several ways we establish our individuality'²⁵, a shared awareness and a public experience of maintenance has the potentiality to establish critical patterns of citizenship and mediate urban conflicts going beyond those raised by waste.

Notes

- 1 The film was found in 2004 and recut by director Mimmo Calopresti, with the title *Come si fa a non amare Pier Paolo Pasolini? Appunti per un romanzo sull'immondezza / How could one but love Pier Paolo Pasolini? Notes for a Novel About Garbage* (2005), presented at Berlin Movie Festival in 2006.
- 2 Mira Engler, "Repulsive Matter: Landscape of Waste in the American Middle-Class Residential Domain", *Landscape Journal* 16, no. 1 (1997): 62.
- 3 Ibid., 67.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., 68-69.
- 6 Ibid., 62.
- 7 Sara Marini, "As Blue as the Sky. Architecture and the Value of Waste", *Piano Progetto Città* 27-28, (2013): 112-125; 116.
- 8 William Langewiesche, *American Ground*, trans. Roberto Serrai (Milano: Adelphi, 2003), 137.
- 9 Andy Levison, "The Fresh Kills Story: From World's Largest Garbage Dump to a World-Class Park", video, 54:19; [3:33], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hMhWOaX_0o
- 10 Ibid., 3:59.
- 11 Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991), 16.
- 12 David Bollier, "A New Politics of the Commons", *Renewal* 15, no. 4 (2007): 10-16; 10. http://renewal.org.uk/files/Renewal_winter_2007_Bollier_Commons_.pdf
- 13 Wolfgang Streeck, "Citizens as Customers. Considerations on the New Politics of Consumption", *New Left Review*, 76, (July/August 2012): 24-47.
- 14 Alex V. Barnard, "'Waving the banana' at capitalism: Political theater and social movement strategy among New York's 'freegan' dumpster divers", *Ethnography* 12, no. 4 (November 2011): 419-444; 421. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138110392453>
- 15 Stavros Stavrides, "Common Space as Threshold Space: Urban Commoning in Struggles to Re-appropriate Public Space", *Footprint* 16, (June 2015): 9-19; 9. <https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.9.1.896>.
- 16 Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Anne Doran, "Flow City", *Grand Street* 1, no. 57 (summer 1996): 199-213; 210.
- 17 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art", 1969, <https://www.arnolfini.org.uk/blog/manifesto-for-maintenance-art-1969>.
- 18 Patricia C. Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* (New York: Prestel, 2016), 99.
- 19 Laderman Ukeles and Doran, "Flow City", 210.
- 20 Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles*, 142.
- 21 Ibid., 142.
- 22 Laderman Ukeles and Doran, "Flow City", 213.
- 23 Ibid., 209.
- 24 Mark B. Feldman, "Inside the Sanitation System: Mierle Ukeles, Urban Ecology and the Social Circulation of Garbage", *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no.1 (2009): 52 <https://doi.org/10.17077/2168-569X.1082>.
- 25 Hilary Sample, *Maintenance Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 131.