ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	EMBODIED ECOLOGIES: PERFORMANCE ART AND ENVIRONMENTALISM, 1970-1990
	Melanie Woody Nguyen, Doctor of Philosophy, 2024
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This dissertation explores how U.S. artists used performance strategies in their work to critically examine human relations with the natural world in the 1970s and 1980s. It is structured around three case studies: Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), Mierle Laderman Ukeles (b. 1939), and Maren Hassinger (b. 1947), each of whom worked at the intersection of performance and environmental art and has been neglected by histories of these movements. This dissertation contextualizes these artists' work within the history of American environmental activism and contemporary environmental theory that refuses a binaristic divide between the human and nonhuman. During this period, the exclusive focus of mainstream environmental groups on conservation and wilderness protection was challenged and broadened to incorporate concerns about pollution, public health, and racial equity. Responding to this time of rapidly shifting conceptions of the natural environment and increasing awareness of the deleterious effects of

toxic pollution on human bodies, these artists took on animallike personae, mimed the work of environmental laborers, and created movement in response to natural materials to scrutinize the relationship between their bodies and nature.

Among the first to center women and women of color artists in environmental art history, this study challenges traditional narratives of postwar American art that position environmental and performance art as distinct fields. In bridging performance and environmental art, this dissertation renegotiates the boundaries of environmental discourse and how it circulated in advanced art of the period, moving beyond a narrow focus on Land art in the American West. The coda explores how this work has great relevance in the art of today, as artists respond to natural threats that again feel immediate and experienced differently across socioeconomic groups.

EMBODIED ECOLOGIES: PERFORMANCE ART AND ENVIRONMENTALISM, 1970-1990

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Introduction: Eco-Performance

“What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social? Seriously unthinkable: not available to think with.”
Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 2016[1]

This dissertation is the first scholarly account of the substantial overlap between environmental art and performance in the United States, proposing a rewriting of the history of both movements. Its temporal focus, from roughly 1970 to 1990, covers a time in which new threats to human health from industrial pollution challenged modern understandings of the body’s vulnerability to environmental threats. In this era, beginning with Rachel Carson’s intervention in *Silent Spring* (1962), the modernist myth of the contained, impenetrable body was shattered, and the body became a contested site for both environmental hazards and resilience. This project’s major intervention is to argue that in this era the body became a key site of environmental experience and artists contributed to this reorientation by working with their own bodies in performance. Their work presented bodies as not only sensitive to new threats from environmental toxins but also a powerful point of attachment between the human and nonhuman worlds, one that could be marshaled to develop a stronger connection between the two. These artists presented a form of humanity that is immanent to and embedded within the nonhuman world, in a state of constant flux and exchange with nonhuman others.

This study is structured around three case studies of artists representative of these ideas: Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), Mierle Laderman Ukeles (b. 1939), and Maren Hassinger (b. 1947). Each of these artists worked in what I term an eco-performance mode, meaning they created

[1] Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 30.

performance pieces, either for public audiences or private actions disseminated through film or photographic documentation, that engaged with issues of ecology or environmentalism in some form. Their engagements ranged widely from performing labor relating to municipal waste removal in New York City to more poetic movements that explored human-nature interrelations. They also came out of different stylistic backgrounds and training. Mendieta worked in performance from her early student years but also engaged in sculpture and filmmaking. Ukeles's work came out of the tradition of conceptual art but also pioneered public art forms centering around social issues such as feminism and labor. Hassinger was trained as both a dancer and a sculptor and used movement to activate her sculptures. What they share is an allusion in some form to the nonhuman world and the place of humans within it in their performance work. Through their bodily movements, they were able to bridge many of the artificial divides placed between humans and nonhumans.

Taking the body as a subject inherently makes an environmental project intersectional, as the body forms of the nucleus of issues of identity, health, food, housing, and citizenship, among many others. These artists embraced the layered meanings of the body in their work. Not only attentive to the conservation of wild places intended for human recreation and aesthetic appreciation, these artists turned their focus to urban areas and sites of everyday encounter between humans and their environments. They illuminated the myriad ways that the environment is imbricated within human social systems and how these systems subtend our understanding of nature. Nature, or the environment, is not experienced evenly across social groups, and these artists engaged with nascent understandings of environmental equity and justice developing at the time.

"Embodied Ecologies" seeks to address several art historical oversights. First, it challenges narratives that position performance art and environmental art as distinct movements. While scholars have recently published excellent studies of environmental art of the late twentieth century, none have included a sustained discussion of the use of performance as a medium. Scholarship on postwar environmental art, furthermore, often takes a universalist approach to the relationship between human beings and their environment, ignoring how this relationship is shaped by social categories such as race and gender. In bridging environmental and performance art, this study challenges this universality by revealing the variety of human experiences of the natural world. Artists working in eco-performance also expand traditional readings of performance art to be more attentive to the body's materiality and its interactivity with both human and nonhuman others. Equally important, this study counters the narrative that American art's engagement with the environment in the postwar period amounted to the contributions of land artists and little more. For this dissertation's artists, on the contrary, environmental thinking was small-scale, tactical, and focused on the sites where the natural world meets the human body.

Ultimately, by making these two interventions, this dissertation provokes a more advanced kind of environmental thinking. Specifically, the artists and artworks discussed allow us to see nature not as something "out there" (in the remote West, for example) but rather as forever in delicate contact with human beings. They also enable us to see environmental concerns as inextricable from concerns for racial and gender equity. It is only through thinking about these challenges in tandem that art history and the humanities can help us meet the challenges posed by climate crisis.

Engagement with Existing Literature

In its broadest outlines, this project belongs within the history of ecocritical art historical inquiry and the environmental humanities. Scholars in fields outside of art history have engaged with environmental issues since at least the 1970s when professional organizations and dedicated publications in environmental history and ecocriticism first appeared.[2] These fields aim to recuperate the presence of the nonhuman in human history and cultural production. As literary theorist Timothy Morton writes, "Ecology permeates all forms. Nowadays we're used to wondering what a poem says about race or gender, even if the poem makes no explicit mention of race or gender. We will soon be accustomed to wondering what any text says about the environment even if no animals or trees or mountains appear in it."[3] Ecocritical scholarship within the field of art history is, however, still nascent and was inaugurated in 2009 with the publication of Alan Braddock and Christoph Irmscher's anthology, *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*.[4] The basic premise of ecocritical art history is to reorient the subject of art historical inquiry from an exclusive interest in human affairs to a more expansive understanding of humans as a single part of a broader more-than-human world. As art

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[2] The American Society of Environmental Historians was formed in 1977. The first issue of the publication, *Environmental History*, which began as *Environmental History Review*, appeared in 1976. Examples of early work in this field include Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972); Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996). In literature, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment was founded in 1992. Its publication, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, released its first issue in 1993. Early examples of this work include Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
[3] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 11.
[4] Earlier expressions of interest in ecology in the history of art include Greg M. Thomas, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

historian Robin Kelsey succinctly claims, "Like the study of literature or music, the study of art has tended to implicitly separate social life from its ecology… Art has thus helped generate and sustain fantasies of human life as independent of terrestrial restriction."[5] The task of ecocritical art history is therefore to bring together an understanding of natural history and human history once again as inextricably linked.[6] Following the intervention made by Braddock and Irmscher's *A Keener Perception*, other books, articles, and special issues in major publications followed.[7] Altogether, these publications represent the history of art from ancient times to the present and across many geographic areas from an ecocritical perspective. The overall trajectory of the field, which began primarily in the context of American art, has been to increase its global focus and the diversity of artists and understandings of ecology represented.

Within the broader field of ecocritical art history, this project specifically looks to the postwar period in the United States, an area most often associated with the development of Land art. In the late 1960s artists began to work outdoors, using materials such as dirt, stone, and concrete, and created sculpture that was massive in scale and responsive to its site. Because of this connection with their environments, the works were often viewed as in dialog with the nascent environmental movement then growing in popularity in the United States. However, scholars such as Suzaan Boettger have complicated this association, suggesting that environmentalism was only one of a constellation of concerns for these artists, including the

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[5] Robin Kelsey, "Ecology, Sustainability, and Historical Interpretation," *American Art* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 11.

[6] As first argued by Dipesh Chakrabarty in Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.

[7] While these are too numerous to list here, some notable contributions include: Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); T. J. Demos, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology," *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 1–9; Alan C. Braddock and Renée Ater, "Art in the Anthropocene," *American Art* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 2–9; T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016); Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2019; and T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

rising antiwar and antiracism movements.[8] Many artists at the time felt that Land art represented a destructive tendency that only harmed the environments in which they were situated.[9] Other scholars have agreed with the contention that land art was not exclusively concerned with growing concerns of environmental degradation but added that ecology permeated a wide array of artistic forms of the time and not all of them would fall under the banner of Land art or earthworks.[10] This project builds upon this critique, arguing that performance art, too, was responsive to growing concerns about environmental degradation in the 1970s and 80s. Recent scholarship has also sought to counter the dominance of men in scholarship on Land art practices. A major exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, *Groundswell: Women of Land Art*, curated by Leigh Arnold for the Nasher Sculpture Center provided the first all-women account of the movement, challenging some of the assumptions about its contours.[11] While scholars like Boettger acknowledged the "cowboy" persona of many prominent Land artists, they nevertheless left unchecked the male-dominated canon of the time. The contributors to the *Groundswell* catalogue, on the other hand, address the lack of institutional support for women artists by many of the major backers of Land art projects like Virginia Dwan and the Dia Art Foundation and broaden traditional definitions of Land art to incorporate more portable sculptural works and public art projects to provide a more expansive understanding of artists' response to the land of the time. This interest in the intersection of marginalized identities and

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[8] Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 208.

[9] For example, Hamish Fulton said of the American land artists, "I feel the three artists you mentioned [Smithson, Heizer, and De Maria] use the landscape without…any sense of respect for it…I see their art as a continuation of 'Manifest Destiny'…the so-called 'heroic conquering' of nature." Quoted in John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 44.

[10] Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4-12; and James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 4.

[11] Leigh A. Arnold, ed., *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* (Dallas, TX: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2023).

ecology can be found throughout the field, though recent additions have provided more sustained attention to issues of gender, race, and class within dialogues on ecology.[12]

This dissertation participates in this expansion of both which artists and what forms are taken into consideration within ecocritical art history. While mentions of performance and the body as important threads within the postwar ecological art movement exist across this scholarship, this project will be the first monograph on the overlap of performance and ecological art of any period. In shifting focus away from massive earthmoving projects and towards performances occurring in both rural and urban environments, this project is able to broaden discourses of environmental art to foreground the work of women and women of color artists of this period.

This project also represents an intervention within the history of performance art, particularly building upon its long history as an effective vehicle for activist and politically oriented art practices. Art historians began to chart developments in performance art in earnest in the late-1970s and 1980s, laying out the groundwork for how these practices would be interpreted in the future and ensuring that they would continue on as fully accepted forms of art in their own right. Early scholars sought to historicize these artists within a longer chain of modernist art. RoseLee Goldberg, for example, sought to link the postwar neo-avant garde performance artists to developments in the early-twentieth century in Europe, specifically Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism, tracing that lineage through to the experimental practices at Black Mountain College and the international Fluxus movement.[13] Scholars also argued for performance as a key component of art by women artists, specifically those with a feminist

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[12] Notably Christopher P. Heuer and Rebecca Zorach, eds. *Ecologies, Agents, Terrains* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Clark Art Institute, 2018), x.

[13] See RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art, 1909 to the Present* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1979), and Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1988).

orientation. Crediting feminist art with the rapid advancement of performance as a medium, authors like Moira Roth and Lucy Lippard brought to light many of the pivotal women artists engaging in performance in the 1970s. Roth argues that it was feminist artists that transformed "body art" of the late 1960s and early 1970s, by such artists as Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, and Vito Acconci, into the more fully-formed "performance art" of the mid-1970s, especially through their embrace of autobiography and narrative forms.[14]

In the 1990s, there was a resurgence in writing on feminist performance art and attempts to recover these artists as working with a complex understanding of gender-based discrimination and its undoing. Authors like Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, and Amelia Jones argued that performance is a highly effective method for analyzing normative structures of a gender-based society. Jones argues that artists who use performance break down the supposed universality of artistic expression by revealing the body of the artist, especially as a sexed and raced body, thus overturning the traditional assumption of the whiteness and maleness of the artist. Schneider argues that in collapsing the distance between the viewer and the work, performance art can undo regimes of representation that present women as objects to be seen. Phelan similarly sees the power of performance to lie in its unreproducibility, i.e. its existence outside of commodity exchanges. These authors refuse to view performance art as exclusively a series of formal

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[14] Moira Roth and Mary Jane Jacob, eds., *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983), 20-26. And Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," *Art in America* 64 (May/June 1976): 75. There was some backlash to this new feminist performance art, however, with some critics arguing that the artists were exploiting their own, usually young and attractive, bodies to gain art world recognition. Furthermore, by the late-1970s and 1980s, there was a growing concern that feminist art of this period had become "essentialist," that is interested in seeking out a distinctly feminine experience of the world that is shared among all women, regardless of race, class, or sexual orientation. In the following decades, this approach to feminism was seen as continuing to uphold strict gender binaries that later feminists would hope to break down. Therefore, because it was so intertwined with second-wave feminist politics, the most advanced performance art of the period was caught up in debates about essentialist feminism. See Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 35.

experiments but as specifically political actions that problematize some of the most deeply held conceits of the art world establishment.

Recent scholarship on performance art continues with this association between the medium and its political expediency but rejects the exclusion of many performers of color and those outside of the United States in these histories. In 2013, Valerie Cassel Oliver organized *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. The first to examine the important role of African American artists in the development of performance art, Oliver and her fellow authors highlight the inescapability of socio-political meanings when performance art is enacted by a Black body. Race, class, and imperialism are all tackled in the works featured in the exhibition, including by artists such as Lorraine O'Grady, Pope.L, and Papo Colo. Two other authors, Michelle Stephens and Uri McMillan, have addressed performances by Black men and women, respectively, in more detail, tracing the history of Black performance back to minstrelsy and performative actions of enslaved persons.[15] Both argue that in embodied performance, artists can escape, and find fruitful alternatives to, scopic regimes of power.[16]

Scholars of Latin American performance art, too, have noted its rejection of "art for art's sake," particularly when created in nations under authoritarian regimes. Rather than expressions that are meant to address the art world specifically, performance artists in Latin America often aimed their critiques at political systems and social hierarchies directly. Coco Fusco notes that in many Latin American countries, the art market did not play a major role until very recently, and

[15] Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
[16] McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 9.

the main patron of the arts in the region was often instead the state.[17] Therefore many performance activities of artists were viewed as direct confrontations with the state, especially under regimes in which censorship was commonplace. Addressing performance art in Cuba, Fusco argues that Cuban artists since 1980 have often used performance as a tool to sidestep the limitations of the state-controlled arts academies and as a response to the performative acts of citizenship imposed upon them by the Castro regime.[18] Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra supplemented this analysis with her reading of performance art in Latin America of the 1970s and 80s. By that point disillusioned with utopian politics, artists turned to performance art to express an "embodied experience of power."[19] Fusco and Ezcurra open the bounds of political art to incorporate forms of aesthetic dissensus that, while not directly supporting a specific political figure or cause, reflect a generalized resistance to authoritarian rule through embodied actions. These authors almost unilaterally agree that performance art can be a powerful vehicle for political statements in avant-garde art. However, traditional histories of this subject exclusively focus on feminist politics. This characterization ignores a longer history of performance art by African American and Latin American/Latinx artists in the United States who have wielded their bodies to speak back to dominant power structures. Furthermore, still missing from these conversations is the importance of environmental issues within performance art of the postwar period. As the case studies in this dissertation will show, performance artists were engaging with a wide range of environmental issues in their work, from interspecies relations to urban waste

[17] Coco Fusco, ed., *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.
[18] Coco Fusco, *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015). This situation is not only unique to Latin America. In this same period, Amy Bryzgel has noted that artists in Eastern Europe also employed performance to skirt government censorship and reflect the performative citizenship required under an authoritarian regime. See Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017).
[19] Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra, *Touched Bodies: The Performative Turn in Latin American Art* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 5.

removal to environmental justice. Their work supports and augments the now established belief in the effectiveness of performance as a medium for socially engaged art.

Bringing environmental histories and theories to bear on performance art also opens new avenues in the field, particularly in emphasizing the materiality or fleshiness of the performing body. While many scholars of performance art tend to read bodies as discursive signs, an ecocritical reading foregrounds the body's physicality and its connection to the nonhuman world. Elise Archias pointed in this direction in her recent study which focuses on the importance of the "concrete body" to performance artists. In her discussion of Carolee Schneeman, in particular, she notes that the artist's performances highlight the materiality, physicality, and sensuousness of the body.[20] The elevation of the body to an authentic vehicle for fine art upsets hierarchies that value the mind over the body and the human over nature, making it an ideal medium for ecological narratives.

U.S. Environmental History

When discussing art that responds to environmental concerns, it is helpful to understand the specific environmental movements that these artists were responding to. While some studies of environmental history point to the period of economic decline in the mid-1970s as a time of lessening enthusiasm for environmental causes,[21] the era could rather be seen as a time of more intense focus on this public health aspect of earlier environmentalist discourse. Environmental historian Christopher Sellers has argued that what set apart environmental movements of the post-World War II period from their predecessors in the Progressive Era was, in part, "how

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[20] Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 114.
[21] See for example, Hal Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation? Environmentalism in the United States since 1945* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998).

[they] posited threats to nonhuman nature and to human bodies side by side, as interwoven or even one and the same."[22] The growing recognition that environmental problems can have real effects on individual human bodies is perhaps why the movement gained so much momentum in the 1960s and '70s. Many trace the emergence of the modern environmental movement to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), in which she reports, in a straightforward style, on the harmful effects of the insecticide DDT. One reason why this book became so popular was her inclusion of the negative health impacts of the chemical on animal *and* human populations.[23]

An illustration published in a 1977 issue of the environmentalist group Friends of the Earth's newsletter demonstrates contemporary concerns about the effects of modern industrial society on the human body [Fig. I.1]. The illustration depicts the specific sites where radioactive, cancer-causing materials emitted from nuclear power plants might lodge. The text included in the drawing further describes these materials with language meant to convey the longevity and dangers of these materials to human bodies. The illustration presents the body without skin. Muscles are indicated by black-and-white striations alternating with clusters of circular forms, and the areas of the body shown to be susceptible to nuclear radiation are shown in red. A large streak of black ink just behind the figure's right shoulder and coming out from under his left foot, dotted with the same clusters of circular forms, forms the only ground for the figure, suggesting that the cancerous intruders are coming from outside. The artist has labeled the image "Nuclear Man," drawing parallels with Leonardo's fifteenth-century *Vitruvian Man* drawing.

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[22] Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 7. His ideas reflected a longer interest in this subject, such as Samuel P. Hays and Barbara D. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
[23] Ellen Griffith Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement Post-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 82.

Whereas Leonardo's man is frontal, extended, and the master of his surroundings, the "nuclear man" is hunched, downturned, and flayed. He is also dismembered. His arms are cut off, and his hands, his primary tool for manipulating the world around him, are not present. The body in this period is laid bare, open to insidious and imperceptible threats from outside. It is also powerless to fight off these attacks, as its agentic capacity symbolized by human hands has been removed.

One major turning point for environmentalism at this time was the Love Canal disaster, which came to public attention in 1978. Love Canal was a community of mostly white, working-class families situated outside the city of Niagara Falls.[24] After noticing widespread incidents of rare diseases and foul odors, residents of the neighborhood discovered that the community had been built on top of a former dump for the Hooker Chemical Company, and over a dozen chemicals were buried beneath their homes and schools. In the spring of 1978, they formed the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA) and the Concerned Love Canal Renters Association (CLCRA) to put pressure on lawmakers and file suit against the Hooker Chemical Company. Their pressure campaign, culminating in temporarily taking two EPA officials hostage, eventually paid off in 1980 when President Carter issued an order to relocate all remaining Love Canal residents, and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (more commonly called Superfund) was passed in Congress.[25] This highly publicized ordeal brought national attention to the dangers of toxic chemicals for human health and well-being, and concerns about "another Love Canal" were common parlance in the years following. It also shed light on the power of grassroots organizing and experiential knowledge.

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[24] Richard S. Newman, *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 102.
[25] Jennifer Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic: American Environmentalism and the Politics of Health* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 43.

While Love Canal is perhaps the most prominent case of grassroots environmental organizing in this period, it marked only a crescendo in a longer series of environmentalist activities surrounding toxics and health. In 1962, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta launched the National Farm Workers Association (later the United Farm Workers), and a major focus of their organizing was limiting the exposure of agricultural workers to chemical pesticides like DDT.[26] In New York City, one of the first actions of the Puerto Rican activist group the Young Lords was the "garbage offensive" in 1969, which began with mass street sweeping demonstrations. Later, activists would put uncollected garbage in the middle of street to force the city to maintain their neighborhood. The action escalated on August 17, when uncollected garbage and burning cars were used to barricade the main streets of East Harlem to draw attention to the community's marginalized status in city politics. The visibility of garbage, which was not collected in East Harlem with the same frequency as it was in other areas of the city, was the most palpable representation of the overall neglect the Puerto Rican community felt from the rest of New York City.[27]

Similarly, in St. Louis, activists fighting for housing equity used lead poisoning as a symbol of the health dangers of their poorly maintained neighborhoods. In 1969, African American scientist Wilbur Thomas was appointed the director of the Environmental Field Program based at Washington University in St. Louis. As part of Thomas's work with the program, he would conduct research on air and water pollution, rat infestation, lead poisoning, and infant mortality and share that information with local community organizations.[28] In a

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[26] Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic*, 92.

[27] Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 164-65.

[28] Robert R. Gioielli, *Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis: Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 48-49.

speech given in 1970 titled "Black Survival in Our Polluted Cities," Thomas outlined how African Americans face disproportionate levels of environmental health hazards, noting specifically lead poisoning as well as air pollution from highways and a lack of access to green spaces in Black neighborhoods. He states, "These examples show how Blacks encounter another set of environmental hazards in addition to the universal burden on all, and hence receive a double dose of ecological backfires."[29] Thomas and others saw lead poisoning through a specifically environmental lens, as on par with air and water pollution.

By the 1980s, concerns about the limited scope of mainstream environmentalist activities developed into a loose coalition of movements aligned under the banner of environmental justice. Environmental justice aims to counteract environmental racism, or the disproportionate distribution of the benefits and harms of environmental pollution in communities based on their racial makeup.[30] A key aspect of environmental justice is to expand the concerns of environmentalism to include the detrimental effects of pollution on human health. The environmental justice movement gained mainstream acceptance when President Clinton mandated that all federal agencies explicitly address environmental racism in their activities in 1994 and again more recently when President Biden made environmental justice a key element of his executive order to tackle climate change on January 27, 2021.[31] Rather than national organizations like the Sierra Club or the Environmental Defense Fund (though these organizations do engage in environmental justice work), environmental justice groups are often

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[29] Wilbur Thomas, Jr., "'Black Survival in Our Polluted Cities,' 1970," in *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader*, edited by Christopher Wells (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 101.

[30] Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 13.

[31] Sze, *Noxious New York*, 13. And Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Executive Order 14008, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad," January 27, 2021. The White House Press Office, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/. Accessed June 9, 2021.

loose coalitions formed in response to a specific concern, such as the siting of a pollution-generating power plant. These grassroots organizations at times catalyze into broader rights groups but at other times simply disband once they achieve their specific targets. This troubles traditional historical narratives, which tend to focus on grand narratives rather than episodic coalitions.[32]

As these examples illustrate, in positing that the environmentalism of the 1970s and 1980s is a continuation of a broader interest in health and the body in postwar environmental movements, I challenge narratives that suggest that the postwar environmental movement was simply a continuation of nineteenth and early twentieth century movements that were interested in the conservation of wild places primarily for the recreation and visual pleasure of mostly white middle- and upper-class individuals. Historian Ellen Griffith Spears writes that this narrative of environmentalism, "elided the diverse roots of environmental reform, ignored key constituencies, narrowed the scope of issues tackled, and failed to identify key participants, even within conservation circles."[33] Other recent histories have also pushed back on this telling, charting the relationship between environmentalism and feminist, labor, and civil and Indigenous rights groups.[34] In broadening the scope of environmentalism, we begin to gain a more accurate

[32] Environmental justice also poses a problem for traditional accounts of environmental history because it mostly engages with urban and suburban areas. Environmental history is conventionally seen to be the province of the nonhuman, while cities are viewed as exclusively shaped by human activities. Historians since the 1990s, such as William Cronon, have pushed back on this assumption, arguing that in fact cities have always posed environmental questions about how resources are extracted and distributed and how the health of humans and animals is protected. Many recent scholars of environmental history have turned their lens on this urban environmental activism, to great effect. Robert Gioielli writes on case studies in Baltimore, St. Louis, and Chicago involving issues such as lead poisoning in children. Matthew Gandy and Julie Sze focus on New York City, while David N. Pellow writes on garbage disposal in Chicago and Laura Pulido writes on environmental justice activism in Los Angeles. Building on these models, the artists presented in this study, particularly Mierle Laderman Ukeles, also take urban environments as their sites of investigation.
[33] Spears, *Rethinking American Environmentalism*, 4.
[34] The first study of this kind is Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993).

picture of the environmental concerns of artists from 1970 to 1990 and why performance was one strategy they used to address environmental issues.

Environmental historian Linda Nash writes, "By the 1980s the supposed distance between bodies and environments that had helped underwrite the project of modernization had become increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of ongoing pollution and unexplained illness."[35] Much environmental legislation also followed the concerns of these activists, first with the Clean Air Act (1970) and later the Clean Water Act (1972), showing that beyond wilderness and species preservation, the environmental movement of the 1960s and '70s was also directly focused on preserving human health. This wider purview allows us to view the 1970s and 1980s as a continuation, rather than a weakening, of the public health focus of this earlier movement and helps us to understand why human bodies became a central concern for environmental artists of the time. The pernicious effects of toxic pollution, from birth defects to asthma and lead poisoning, were viewed as central concerns of environmentalists but were often difficult to measure or display. Artists therefore chose to use their own bodies to manifest these various concerns.

Precedents of Eco-Performance Art

These historical developments were not unnoticed in the broader art world at the time and engaging with eco-performance art of the late 1970s and 1980s allows us to identify the strong presence of the body and bodily encounters in earlier Land and Earth art. The most notable precedent for this type of work is Richard Long and his series of works made from the indentations in the land left by the artist's footsteps, such as in *A Line Made by Walking* (1967).

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[35] Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 206.

Mendieta noted Long's work as an influence and appreciated its lighter touch on the land as opposed to the more destructive tendencies of other land artists.[36] This work shows the interplay of body and land. Another forerunner is Dennis Oppenheim, particularly in works like *Back-Track* (1969). In this performance, documented in film, the artist lays on his belly on a sandy beach. He reaches his arms over his head and continuously scoops large handfuls of sand towards his torso [Fig. I.2]. Oppenheim recalled of this piece, "I was trying to get as close as possible to the material supporting me, to interact directly instead of vicariously activating an ecosystem."[37] Oppenheim's work engages the natural world through bodily encounter in the form of simple actions.

As these models clarify, the body formed a key element of many of the experiments of earthworks or land artists, and both performance and environmental art share a common ancestor in the postmodernist break of 1960s art. Critic and curator of earthworks art, John Beardsley, noted the convergence of their origins in 1984, writing, "A group of younger artists, dissatisfied with the current forms of painting and sculpture, opted for alternatives to the precious object in environmental and performance art."[38] Environmental and performance art both come out of the rupture of 1960s art, and both share in the dissatisfaction of this period with traditional hierarchies of artistic media. Both sought to evade traditional arts institutions and were also invested in process, the integrity of their materials (even when that material is the body), and the slippage of art into everyday life. One of the 1960s movements most influential for the

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[36] Joan Marter, "Joan Marter in Conversation with Ana Mendieta, 1 February, 1985," transcript reproduced in Stephanie Rosenthal, Adrian Heathfield, and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2013), 231.
[37] Quoted in Nick Kaye, "The Body as Material of Thought: Energy, Time, and Performance in Dennis Oppenheim's Conceptual Art," in *Dennis Oppenheim: Body to Performance 1969-73*, ed. Nick Kaye and Amy van Winkle Oppenheim (Milan: Skira, 2016), 30.
[38] John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 41.

development of both performance and environmental art was Minimalism, particularly the critical armature surrounding its reception. In Minimalist art, bodily encounter became a central concern of artists and critics for the first time in the history of modernism.

Minimalist criticism emphasized the ability of Minimalist sculpture to create or enhance a viewer's spatial relationship to the environment of the sculpture. This concept was spearheaded by both Robert Morris, particularly in his series of essays "Notes on Sculpture," and Rosalind Krauss. Both relied on different theoretical models: Morris on gestalt theory and Krauss on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Morris's well-worn quote from "Notes on Sculpture, Part II" illustrates his main concerns: "The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and a viewer's field of vision."[39] Morris argued that the formal reduction of Minimalist sculpture, including the elimination of surface detail, elaborate compositions, or narrative references, allowed a viewer to efficiently take in its appearance and then shift their observations to that of their own body's responsiveness to the sculpture and its context. In Morris's 1964 installation at the Green Gallery in New York, unadorned rectangular forms made from painted wood were arrayed throughout the space of the gallery [Fig. I.3]. The forms' simplicity allowed viewers to take in their internal relations nearly instantaneously and then move on to examine their external relations to both the architectural space of the gallery and the receptive perceptual apparatus of the viewer. For example, a long, narrow rectangular work resting on the floor bisected the center of the gallery, altering available paths for moving through the space and creating an imagined separation between the two halves of the gallery. These sculptures intentionally rejected any detail that might require sustained

[39] Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2" in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris.* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 15.

attention so that they could be utilized as a reflective tool, calling on the viewer to examine their own spatial and experiential relationship to its forms.

Noted critic of Minimalist art, Michael Fried, too, picked up on the importance of viewer experience to its forms. Writing of Minimalist (or, as he called it, "literalist") sculpture, Fried famously complained that this work was more akin to theater than to visual art. This new art was theatrical in that it could not be grasped a single instant, but instead required time for the viewer to move around it in space and view the work from many points. "[T]he experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation*, one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*."[40] Fried's critique of Minimalism, as noted by Hal Foster, has been so salient in scholarship on the movement because, while he ultimately aims to discredit Minimalist forms, he does so from a position of thorough understanding.[41] I, too, believe Fried recognizes a key dimension of Minimalist art: the incorporation of embodied experience into its apprehension. In fact, Fried noted that the work, "refuses, obstinately, to let him [the viewer] alone—which is to say, it refuses to stop confronting him…"[42] It was perhaps because of this imposition that Fried found the experience of viewing Minimalist art "aggressive" and "disquieting." Minimalist sculpture intrudes uncomfortably into the space of the viewer, forcing them to reflect on their own embodied experience and their spatial relationships with the objects that occupy the space of the gallery.

Krauss similarly argued for Minimalist sculpture's ability to develop a heightened awareness in its viewers. She expanded on this notion of perception in her 1977 book *Passages*

[40] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 125.
[41] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 53.
[42] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 140.

in Modern Sculpture where she stated, "The abstractness of Minimalism makes it less easy to…project ourselves into the space of the sculpture with all of our settled prejudices left intact. Yet our bodies and our experience of our bodies continue to be the subject of this sculpture—even when a work is made of several hundred tons of earth."[43] Here, over a decade after the movement's beginnings, Krauss links directly Minimalists (and now Postminimalists and Land artists) to this exploration of embodied experience. Well into the time the artists in this study were working, the implications of Minimalist sculpture, and in particular this form's relation to subjective experience, were still being debated in the art world's critical establishment.

It is well established that certain strands of more conventional environmental art developed in response to Minimalist sculpture. Many of the early Land artists began their careers as Minimalist sculptors, including Smithson and Morris. Thus, in developing a framework for understanding eco-performance art, Minimalist art serves as important context. The body, and its perceptual apparatus, played a key role in the development and critical response to Minimalist sculpture, and many Land artists carried this forward into their works made of and with the earth. The archetypal work of Land art, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1969-70), provides an example [Fig. I.4]. The piece is a 1,500-foot-long coil of basalt and earth along the northern shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Its spiral form mimes that of the crystalline structure of the salt that would build up on its form over time. While its location in an isolated location two hours outside of Salt Lake City limits its viewership, the piece is meant to be navigated on foot. Viewers/visitors to the sculpture's site walk on its rocky path over the lake's surface in a spiral form. Following the path, visitors walk in an increasingly tight circular pattern that provides a dizzying effect. For those who cannot see the work in person, this effect was mimicked in Smithson's film about the

[43] Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 279.

work, in which the camera similarly moved in a circular pattern. As in the work of the artists I present in this study, the body acted as a site for environmental experience in Smithson's work, and those of other Land artists.

The work of Smithson, Heizer, and De Maria is often read as a continuation of aestheticized visions of wild lands and even destructive towards the environments in which they were situated. Some even argue that environmentalism had very little to do with these artists' work.[44] However, if we read them alongside artists like Mendieta, Ukeles, and Hassinger, we begin to see that these artists, too, felt compelled to examine the limits of human perception and the boundedness of the human body. These works are both aligned with yet distinct from a conception of eco-performance. Where they offer a universalizing experience of the body, the eco-performance artist instead presents embodied environmental experience in communion with others and with a level of particularity not seen in these earlier Land art interventions.

Ecofeminism's Provocations

The time frame of this project also overlaps with the development of ecofeminism, and all three artists engaged with both feminism and environmentalism to varying degrees. While I illustrate their connections to environmental causes in depth in the chapters, I will focus here on their relationship to feminism. Ukeles is perhaps the most intertwined with feminist art of the time, as she participated in the groundbreaking feminist art exhibition *c. 7500* curated by Lucy Lippard, and her early work dealt explicitly with feminist topics, such as domestic labor and caretaking. Mendieta and Hassinger were perhaps more ambivalent about their association with feminist art. Mendieta's first review was written by Lippard for *Ms.* magazine in 1975, and she

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[44] Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 152-53.

was also included in Lippard's article "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art" in *Art in America* in 1977.[45] These early mentions placed Mendieta's art squarely within the nascent feminist art movement, which would later help her secure a place as a member of the A.I.R. Gallery, a cooperatively run gallery that supported the work of women artists, when she moved to New York. Mendieta's time with A.I.R. was fraught, though, and she would eventually leave the gallery in 1982 due to disagreements over its exclusion of women of color.[46] Prior to her departure, she co-organized a group exhibition of "third world" women for the gallery in 1981.[47] Hassinger, too, was loosely affiliated with some feminist art groups but felt similarly marginalized. For example, she was invited to exhibit in a group show at the Women's Building, a feminist art space in Los Angeles, in 1983, but, upon hearing that she was the only woman of color included in the show, staged a protest performance with Senga Nengudi called the "Spooks Who Sat by the Door."[48] Both Mendieta and Hassinger shared in a broader impression that the women's movement was primarily focused on the concerns of white, middle- and upper-class women.[49]

This pattern of exclusion also infected ecofeminism. Additionally, ecofeminists were considered to be overly interested in the material world and reducing the experience of women to a biological essentialism that would come to be the target of postmodern critical thinking in the

[45] Lucy R. Lippard, "Transformation Art," *Ms.*, October 1975. And Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," *Art in America* 64, no. 3 (June 1976): 73–81.
[46] Ana Mendieta, "Resignation Letter from Ana Mendieta to the Executive Committee of A.I.R. 19 October 1982," 1982. Reproduced in Stephanie Rosenthal, Adrian Heathfield, and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2013), 218.
[47] Kat Griefen, "Ana Mendieta at A.I.R. Gallery, 1977-82," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 21, no. 2 (2011): 175.
[48] Amelia Jones, "Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Los Angeles Performance Art in Art History," in *Live Art in L.A.: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 126-27.
[49] For a more specific analysis of this debate in the context of the feminist art journal *Heresies*, see Amy Tobin, "Heresies' Heresies: Collaboration and Dispute in a Feminist Publication on Art and Politics," *Women: A Cultural Review* 30, no. 3 (2019): 280–96.

last decades of the twentieth century, which explains why it lost much of its cultural currency by the late 1980s and 1990s. While this critique is reflective of much ecofeminist writing, some notable exceptions existed, and returning to early ecofeminist positions can offer some lessons for the present day. For example, early ecofeminists like Ynestra King denounced a reduction of feminist relationship to ecological issues to biological essentialism or "goddess cultures."[50] King also contributed to the feminist art journal *Heresies'* 1981 issue on "Feminism and Ecology," in which both Mendieta and Hassinger were featured. Her essay, "Feminism and the Revolt of Nature," argued that ecofeminism could reconcile differing factions of feminist critique. She stated, "The liberation of women is to be found neither in severing all connections that root us in nature nor in believing ourselves to be more natural than men. Both of these positions are unwittingly complicit with nature/culture dualism."[51] This issue also included contributions from Indigenous women and articles on women's exposure to toxic chemicals in the workplace. The compound concerns inherent in ecofeminism propose a proto-intersectional understanding of forms of oppression. Anna Lovatt proposes that ecofeminism is "a critique of interlocking structures of power."[52] While the early women's movement, in general, fell short in acknowledging the importance of intersecting identity positions and relied too heavily on essentialist notions of femininity, some early texts can be productive to consider as a starting point in an analysis of women artists working with ecological themes.

Recent feminist scholarship has acknowledged this overall debt to early ecofeminist thinkers, particularly in the field of material feminism. Feminist theorists Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman write, "Clearly feminists who are also environmentalists cannot be content with

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[50] Ynestra King, "What Is Ecofeminism?," *The Nation*, December 12, 1987, 702.
[51] Ynestra King, "Feminism and the Revolt of Nature," *Heresies* 4, no. 13 (1981): 14-15.
[52] Anna Lovatt, "Only Connect: Art, Feminism, and Ecology in the 1980s," in *Groundswell: Women of Land Art*, ed. Leigh A. Arnold (Dallas, TX: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2023), 150.

theories that replicate the very nature/culture dualism that has been so injurious—not only to nonhuman nature but to various women, Third World peoples, indigenous peoples, people of color, and other marked groups."[53] Early ecofeminist artists and scholars acknowledged both the interlocking structures of the oppression of women and nature as well as denied a strict dichotomy between nature and culture. These themes have resurfaced in more recent feminist theorizing, particularly around the new materialisms and posthumanism, and one of the primary sites of this theorizing is the body.

Methods and Case Studies

Coming out of these intertwined fields, this project employs both environmental history and contemporary environmental theorizing to argue that artists responded to the shifting tides of environmentalism in ways that were responsive to the body and its materiality through the medium of performance art. I also incorporate archival material, both from larger archives such as the Archives of American Art, and smaller or personal archives, such as the Sanitation Foundation Archives or the Estate of Ana Mendieta. This material is supplemented, where necessary, with interviews with the artist and their collaborators. The three case studies, on the work of Ana Mendieta, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Maren Hassinger, present a breadth of approaches to this topic. Arranged loosely chronologically, the three chapters each present different approaches to eco-performance. Each was chosen because they examine with some depth environmental issues through a performance medium. As I have illustrated above, they were not the first, nor will they be the last, to do so. However, their work was created in a moment in which the understanding of the body was being refigured along ecological lines to be

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[53] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, "Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory," in *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 4.

more open to the environment. Their approaches to the topic range widely, however, and are based on their differing intersectional identities and geographic positions. However, many overlapping themes emerge. Ritual, for example, can be seen in each artist's work. Mendieta, Ukeles, and Hassinger were all interested in exploring spiritual practices outside of Christianity. Ukeles's Jewish faith, Mendieta's interest in Afro-Cuban spiritual practices, and Hassinger's interest in African ritual all play into their approaches to the natural world. Each was searching for an alternative means of relating to the nonhuman than the dominant, extractive approach of the Western world. Taken together, this study presents these three figures as the most prominent artists working on the topic of environmentalism and ecology of their time, rather than figures working at its fringes. To do so, I aim to redraw the boundaries of "ecological art" to incorporate a broader range of concerns, including the relationship between environment and animals, labor, and health.

Chapter one positions Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta as a central figure in the development of environmental art after 1970. Recent scholarly interest in her work has thus far neglected to account for the importance of the animal world in her practice, particularly through a series of filmed performance works involving animals (or their remains) from around 1974. In this group of works, the artist herself performed as or with an animal counterpart. For example, in *Dog* (1974), Mendieta covered herself in the taxidermied skin of a dog and performed for a camera and unwitting spectators on the streets of Oaxaca, Mexico. Mendieta built upon nascent understandings of the rights and vulnerabilities of animals through the medium of performance. Looking at these works through the lens of critical animal studies, particularly the theoretical approaches of Donna Haraway and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, I will argue that animals played a

key role in Mendieta's relational practice, allowing her to explore the sites of contact between humans and their others.

Expanding from personal ritual to massive social systems, chapter two considers performance and conceptual artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. It focuses on *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80), an 11-month odyssey through the New York City Department of Sanitation in which the artist shook the hand of each of the department's sanitation workers—over 8,500 at the time. Marshaling archival materials recently acquired by the Archives of American Art and video footage of the performance, the chapter argues that in foregrounding physical touch and repeating the movements of sanitation workers, Ukeles presented embodied labor as a key site of human connection to the natural world. Ukeles's early work was steeped in the politics of second-wave feminism, and I argue this piece catalyzed feminist redefinitions of labor into a remarkable intertwining of feminist, labor, and environmental concerns within the work of the New York City "sanmen."

Among the first accounts to position African American sculptor and performance artist Maren Hassinger within the history of environmental art, chapter three documents a series of performances that took place from 1976 to 1984, situating them within the environmental history of Los Angeles and the rising environmental justice movement. Hassinger's collaborative performance works, such as *High Noon* (1976) in which six performers engaged in frenetic, improvisational movement with a large tree branch, presented antihierarchal models of engagement with both human and nonhuman others. Bridging new materialist and Black feminist theory, I ultimately argue that these works present models for unruly forms of being-human-in-the-world that mirror nascent trends in environmental organizing of the time. Finally, a brief

coda will examine the legacy of eco-performance in more recent art, particularly the performance work of Kenyan-American artist Wangechi Mutu.

Chapter One: Ana Mendieta's Animal Mediators

In a short film titled *Mirage* from 1974, a mirror rests on the trunk of a small tree, and in its reflection is the artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) [Fig. 1.1a-b]. In the mirror, the artist, who is nude and wearing a prosthetically enlarged belly that gives her the appearance of being heavily pregnant, sits on the ground in a wooded environment. She appears to gaze directly at the viewer through the mirror's reflection, while her long, black hair blows softly in the wind. Surrounding the mirror and the artist, we can see only trees and brush. For the first minute of the film, the artist is still, staring out at the viewer. Then, she slowly reaches in front of her for what appears to be a knife. She plunges the knife into the top of her belly and agonizingly pulls it straight down, at times sawing into the skin-like appendage. Fluffy white material begins to escape from the belly, slowly at first and then rushing out. The artist then reaches into the belly to pull out handfuls of the white material, now recognizable as feathers, and scatters them onto her lap. Some catch in the light wind and are pulled off-screen. Finally, she stares down into the empty void left after the belly was emptied. The use of a mirror and fake pregnant belly in the film allude to psychoanalytic thinking, a fragmentation of the subject. In extracting the pile of white feathers from her belly, Mendieta also gestures toward an animal inside herself. That the beast resides in her belly suggests a porous boundary between the human and animal worlds. That she might be able to birth a creature covered in feathers suggests she could overcome barriers of reproduction, a key marker of speciation. The violence of her attempt to extricate the feathers underlines the risks of exploring the boundaries between the human and the animal.

This work is one of several performance works by Mendieta from around 1974 that engaged with animals or their remains. Her signature body of work, the *Silueta Series* (1974-80), is characterized by abstracted outlines of a female human figure imprinted on various outdoor

surfaces. Other works of the mid-1970s, including those she called "earth-body" works, featured the artist's own body in connection with the surface of the earth. Some are documented in still photographs, while others are shown in film or a series of stills. They were created using natural materials, including mud, sticks, flowers, feathers, and blood. Some are also highlighted with pigment, while others are lined with combustible materials and ignited. They were primarily sited in both wooded areas outside of Iowa City, particularly an area called Old Man's Creek, and in or around archaeological sites the artist visited in Mexico, though others were created in Miami, Cuba, and Washington, DC. Working either alone or with one other assistant, Mendieta created works that were ephemeral and located in remote areas.

In this chapter, I will discuss key examples of nonhuman animals in Mendieta's performance work, beginning with the first of this kind, *Chicken Piece* from 1972, which revealed for Mendieta the possibility of using animals in her work. Completed while still a student in the Intermedia Program, this performance featured Mendieta holding the body of a recently decapitated chicken as its blood gushed onto her torso. The year 1974 was a highly productive year overall for the artist particularly for her animal works, including *Mirage* discussed above. In *Dog*, the artist covered herself in the taxidermied skin of a dog and performed in an alley in Oaxaca. In another work from this year, *Ocean Bird (Washup),* she attempts to take on the embodied experience of a bird as it floats on the surface of the ocean. In *Blood + Feathers*, the artist performs a ritualistic transformation into a bird. In sum, the chapter takes several examples of animals in Mendieta's practice to illustrate her wider concerns about connection with and recognition of the natural world.

Born to an upper-middle-class family in Havana, Cuba, Mendieta and her older sister Raquelin were sent to the United States in 1961 through a program sponsored by the U.S.

Department of State and the Catholic Church called "Operation Pedro Pan" ("Operation Peter Pan"). The program was intended to safeguard children in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, and most families who participated believed they would be reunited with their children within the year. Without family in the U.S., the Mendieta sisters were sent to live in a series of foster homes and orphanages in Iowa until they were reunited with their mother and brother in 1966. As an undergraduate at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Ana studied painting. After graduation, she continued as an MFA student at the university and eventually transferred into the new Intermedia Program, which was created in 1970 by German artist and professor Hans Breder. Breder, with whom Ana had both a romantic and professional relationship, embraced interdisciplinary practices and supported the convergence of art with writing, dance, music, and theater. One of the most forward-thinking programs of its kind at the time, the Intermedia Program introduced students to a wide array of contemporary practices and artists and particularly emphasized performance or "body art," as it was known at the time. Breder encouraged students to keep up with art world developments through publications such as *Artforum* and *Avalanche* and invited visiting artists and critics, including Vito Acconci, Allan Kaprow, Hans Haacke, Robert Wilson, John Perrault, Willoughby Sharp, and Lucy Lippard.[54] During her time at the University of Iowa, Mendieta also took classes on so-called "primitive" art and archaeology and traveled several times, both with the Department of Archaeology and the Intermedia Program, to Mexico to visit sites of archaeological importance.

In 1978, the artist moved to New York, where she gained some modest success including participating in the Artists in Residence (A.I.R.) Gallery, an all-women artist-run gallery. She also showed her work at Franklin Furnace and the State University of New York, Old Westbury,

[54] Olga M. Viso, "The Memory of History," in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985*, ed. Olga M. Viso (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2004), 40-44.

and won awards from the Guggenheim and the National Endowment for the Artists. In 1980, she was able to return to Cuba for the first time, and in 1981 she created a series of carved-rock pieces called *Rupestrian Sculptures* in a national park outside of Havana. She also tried her hand at curating when she organized the group exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* at A.I.R., now viewed as a key moment in feminist art history. In 1983, she was awarded the Prix de Rome and moved to Rome to create work there. Around this time, she entered into a romantic relationship with sculptor Carl Andre. The two married in January 1985, and in September of that year she died after falling from Andre's 34th-floor window in New York at the age of 36. Andre was charged with her murder but was later acquitted.[55]

This tragedy cast a shadow over scholarship on the artist, and readings of her work in the immediate aftermath of her death attempted to find some kind of foreshadowing of this event in images that referred to death and violence, including her first major retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1987. Scholarship on her work since the 1990s has expanded to provide more varied and complex accounts of her work. These new avenues include specific consideration of the artist's use of Santería symbols and her varied influences, including her contact with artists such as Vito Acconci and her study of the Viennese Actionists. A pivotal moment in this scholarship was a major exhibition, *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985*, organized in 2004 by Olga Viso and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C., which traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art

[55] Many consider his acquittal to be a miscarriage of justice and are outraged by Andre's continued success in the art world after he committed such a crime. Protests still occur when Andre's work is shown in major exhibitions, with many protesters bearing signs asking "Where is Ana Mendieta?". It remains to be seen what impact the artist's recent death in 2024 will have on this discussion. A podcast hosted by Helen Molesworth discusses the artist's alleged murder, the trial, and the aftermath of these events within the artworld. Helen Molesworth, *Death of an Artist*, 2022, produced by Pushkin Industries.

among other venues. This exhibition provided the most comprehensive survey of the artist's work to date, hinting at the breadth of both her oeuvre and scholarly interpretations of her work.

Recent scholarship has expanded to examine Mendieta's work through many different lenses. Two major exhibitions offered new information on the artist's work based on new discoveries in her archive. *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (2013) at the Hayward Gallery presented recently unearthed archival documents, and *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta* (2015) presented for the first time a complete record of the artist's filmworks, which had until that point been considered subordinate to her photographic production. Both exhibitions also catalyzed the creation of new scholarship in the form of essays for their respective catalogues.[56] Journal articles have examined more closely her relationship with artists working in Cuba, her time at the A.I.R. gallery, and her role as curator of *Dialectics of Isolation*—each adding to an understanding of the artist as a connecting point within the larger art world in New York and Cuba.[57] Genevieve Hyacinthe's recent monograph on the artist, *Radical Virtuosity: Ana Mendieta and the Black Atlantic* (2019), relates with unprecedented specificity Mendieta's relationship with Black Atlantic spirituality and ritual.[58]

While most if not all these sources acknowledge Mendieta's deep commitment to the representation of the natural world, only in recent years has she been included in studies of ecological art history. These studies do not take her engagement with land and natural materials

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[56] Stephanie Rosenthal, Adrian Heathfield, and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2013); Lynn Lukkas et al., *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta* (Minneapolis, MN; Katherine E. Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota, 2015).
[57] Laura Roulet, "Ana Mendieta as Cultural Connector with Cuba," *American Art* 26, no. 2 (2012): 21–27; Kat Griefen, "Ana Mendieta at A.I.R. Gallery, 1977-82," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 21, no. 2 (2011): 171–81; and Sadia Shirazi, "Returning to Dialectics of Isolation: The Non-Aligned Movement, Imperial Feminism, and a Third Way," *Panorama* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021), https://journalpanorama.org/article/dialectics-of-isolation/.
[58] Genevieve Hyacinthe, *Radical Virtuosity: Ana Mendieta and the Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).

as a metaphor, but rather as an attempt to grapple with the changing reality of the environment both in the time in which she is working—shortly after the development of the popular environmental movement—and today—in an age of climate crisis. Two notable examples are a chapter devoted to the artist in Amanda Boetzkes's *The Ethics of Earth Art* and Matthew Harrison Tedford's recent article, "Past Conditional Subjectivities: Enacting Relationships with the Non-Human in the Work of Ana Mendieta."[59] Both present Mendieta's work firmly within a history of artists exploring the relationship between the human and nonhuman and argue that her work has a unique contribution to this dialogue. As Tedford writes, "Mendieta offers an artistic contribution to a framework for a more collaborative and reciprocal organization of the world."[60] This chapter builds on these foundations. Mendieta, in her own words, made clear that one goal of her work was to explore the relationship between the earth and her body. In an artist statement for her first exhibition at the Corroboree Gallery at the University of Iowa, she wrote, "For the past five years I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth, and art." [61]

One area that has yet to be explored, either in ecocritical art history or in the history of animals in art, is the place of animals in Mendieta's oeuvre. Animals appear throughout her practice in many forms—a live chicken, a dog's skin, feathers—and yet have not been addressed comprehensively. Taken together, what can Mendieta's incorporation of animals into her performance practice teach us about the place of animals in ecological thinking more broadly? I argue that Mendieta used animal counterparts as mediators because of their close resemblance to

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[59] Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). And Matthew Harrison Tedford, "Past Conditional Subjectivities: Enacting Relationships with the Non-Human in the Work of Ana Mendieta," *Text Matters*, no. 12 (2022): 269–84.
[60] Tedford, "Past Conditional Subjectivities," 283.
[61] Ana Mendieta, "Artist Statement," 1977. Reproduced in Stephanie Rosenthal, Adrian Heathfield, and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2013), 194.

the human and yet ultimate *in*humanity. This dichotomy of similarity and difference allows us to relate to something outside of ourselves and understand beings that exist entirely outside of our experience. Animals are both part of a separate sphere of nonhuman nature and yet also fully assimilated into human systems of commerce, culture, and even familial bonds. They exist at the edges of the human and provide an entry point into all that is perceived to be nonhuman. In isolating Mendieta's works that use animal subjects, we can learn more about her broader practice.

Her use of her own body, or its silhouette, is key to this exploration. In the artist statement quoted above, she also says, "Using my body as a reference in the creation of the works, I am able to transcend myself in a voluntary submersion and a total identification with nature."[62] In her work, Mendieta aims to unravel a distinction between herself and nature, and in doing so, push on the boundaries between human and nature more broadly. In using her body, she employs her physical, external form to examine her similarities with the natural world, a "total identification." Her use of animals facilitates this identification, as they are similar to humans in many ways. Unlike plants, rocks, or weather patterns, animals have vision, locomotion, eat and reproduce in similar ways to humans, and have complex thoughts and even dreams. While we cannot know what it is like to be an animal (or another human for that matter), we can more easily imagine certain animal experiences based on our shared embodiment. Recognizing this shared embodiment allows us to imagine other beings outside of human instrumentalization. Mendieta's animal works, therefore, provide a compelling entry point to my study of eco-performance art. By employing an embodied connection to beings that exist in a

[62] Mendieta, "Artist Statement."

kind of border zone between humanity and its others, they challenge rigid distinctions between the human and nonhuman.

Most of these works are documented in both film and photographs. I will refer primarily to the film versions, as they provide the most complete documentation of the performances. All the films were created with a Super-8mm camera and film system, a common tool for artists at the time due to its affordability and ease of use—the film was in a cartridge that could be easily loaded into the camera and sent away for commercial processing. The Super-8mm film also had limitations: the aspect ratio was more square than rectangular, most could not capture sound, and the length of the reels in the cartridge (roughly 50 feet) only produced about three minutes of footage.[63] These limitations aside, the format was ideal for Mendieta, who wanted to capture performances outdoors and without a complicated set-up. As mentioned above, film was not a well-recognized aspect of Mendieta's work until 2015 with the exhibition *Covered in Time and History* and its associated catalogue, which contained a complete filmography. This work was the outcome of years of archiving and digitizing done by the artist's niece Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, who is a filmmaker herself, and in consultation with the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong.[64] This process revealed the magnitude of her film repertoire and even introduced new works that were not previously known to have been documented in film (*Dog* being one of them).[65] This development alters our understanding of the contours of Mendieta's practice and is the foundation for my research into her performance works.[66]

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[63] "History of the Super 8 Camera," Kodak, accessed December 29, 2023, https://www.kodak.com/en/motion/page/super-8-history/.
[64] For more on this digitizing process see, Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, "Uncovering Ana: The Rebirth of Mendieta's Filmworks," in *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, ed. Lynn Lukkas (Minneapolis, MN: Katherine E. Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota, in association with University of California Press, 2015), 168–81.
[65] Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, "Uncovering Ana," 175.
[66] I am grateful to the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong for granting me access to a number of these films, even those I have not had the ability to cover in this chapter.

First Animal Performance: *Chicken Piece*

Mendieta's early work *Chicken Piece* of 1972 marks her first attempt at using animals in her work when she was still a student in Breder's Intermedia Program. The mordantly titled film *Chicken Movie, Chicken Piece* documents the performance, in which Mendieta held a beheaded chicken as its blood spurted onto her [Fig. 1.2].[67] In the film, Mendieta stands nude against a white wall on a cement floor already splattered with white paint from earlier artistic activities in the room. A white chicken speckled with black spots is held down by an assistant and killed by Breder using an axe. The assistant hands off the now decapitated chicken to Mendieta, who holds it upside down from its legs in front of her torso. The artist grimaces as she struggles to get a hold of the chicken and turn it into position due to its violently flapping wings. She looks to the side and says something indecipherable (the film has no sound) to her assistant. She struggles to keep hold of it as the creature's blood begins to soak the ends of its wings. Blood also splatters onto Mendieta's torso, legs, and the wall behind her. The chicken's flapping wings alternate between wild flailing, brief moments of rest, and eventually subtle twitching. These movements persist for nearly two, excruciating minutes. After the chicken's movements subside, she hesitantly adjusts her grip on its feet as its headless, limp body hangs in front of her with its wings outstretched. With her torso covered in splattered blood and blood dripping down her legs and feet onto the floor, she glances at the audience and the camera. She then looks to the floor, examining the blood around her feet. The camera pans to the floor and then cuts to the scene without the artist present where the ghostly presence of her feet is marked by the absence of blood.

[67] The performance is documented in both film, taken from two different angles by students in the class, and a series of 35mm photographs.

The sacrifice of small animals, especially birds and chickens, was a common practice for Santería followers to appease the various orishas or ask for their favor and this likely served as Mendieta's inspiration for the performance. Like many artists of her generation, including David Hammons, Betye Saar, and José Bedia, Mendieta incorporated ritual and spirituality into her artistic practice, particularly non-Western spiritualities. One of the greatest influences for Mendieta was the Afro-Cuban religion Santería, which she encountered as a child growing up in Cuba and, later, as an adult in the Cuban diasporic communities of New York and Miami. Despite her Catholic upbringing, the artist was exposed to syncretic Afro-Cuban spiritual practices as a child through her family's maids and nannies.[68] After leaving the island, she felt that these rituals symbolized a connection to her Cuban culture and, likely, a distinction from the Catholicism that she felt had harmed her in both bringing her to the U.S. and in placing her in abusive situations in orphanages and foster homes. We know that she studied some religious practices in her art history class on "primitive" art, and at the time of her death, she had in her library several books on Afro-Cuban religion, including Lydia Cabrera's *El Monte*, an ethnographic study still regarded as the definitive text on the practice of Santería.[69] Her study and appreciation of Afro-Cuban religious ritual grew as time went on, from a rather superficial understanding pieced together from childhood memories and undergraduate study to close friendships with practitioners in the late-1970s and 1980s. Given Mendieta's superficial knowledge of these rituals at the time she made *Chicken Piece*, it is no wonder that she latched onto the most shocking or exoticizing forms of the tradition. She also likely made connections

[68] Laura Roulet, "Ana Mendieta as Cultural Connector with Cuba," *American Art* 26, no. 2 (2012): 21.
[69] Olga M. Viso, "The Memory of History," in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985*, ed. Olga M. Viso (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2004), 249 and 63n99. Hyacinthe argues that Mendieta may have met Cabrera in Miami. Genevieve Hyacinthe, *Radical Virtuosity: Ana Mendieta and the Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 32n85.

between this practice and the Viennese Actionists, which she studied in her classes at the University of Iowa.[70] The Viennese Actionists were a group of Austrian artists working in the 1960s who engaged in performances meant to intentionally shock the bourgeois culture of Vienna in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Their performances often incorporated bodily fluids and slaughtered animals and intentionally subverted Catholic ritual practices. Mendieta's practice was less confrontational than this group, but she did incorporate the body, blood, and animal sacrifice into her work.

Mendieta's appropriation of Santería forms was never a direct imitation of specific rituals or practices. Unlike other artists who were initiated into these religious communities as formal practitioners, Mendieta instead adapted their forms and symbols for her own purposes.[71] Art historian Genevieve Hyacinthe writes that, while Mendieta was not a follower of Santería, she saw Afro-Cuban religious practices as an important element of Cuban culture. Hyacinthe writes that Mendieta had not, "intentionally imbued her work with these traditions 'to the letter,'" but rather that, "she consistently, but not without exception, makes work that has, to varying degrees, black Atlantic aesthetic and cultural significations."[72] Mendieta's friend and fellow artist Juan Sánchez would later say of her appropriation of Santería forms: "So there's a transformation or, if you may, even a metamorphosis, in terms of how she took that and made it into something that

[70] Julia P. Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta, the Iowa Years: A Critical Study, 1969 through 1977." (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York, City University of New York, 1998), 158-59.
[71] For example, José Bedia, who is initiated into Palo Monte. Bedia, however, remarked that he kept his spiritual practice and artistic practice separate. His rituals were to please the orishas and his art, while inspired by spiritual forms, was a separate endeavor. He and others expressed concern for Mendieta that she might unknowingly upset some spiritual forces by misusing these forms. See Julia P. Herzberg, "Ritual in Performance," in *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, ed. Franklin Sirmans (Houston, TX: The Menil Collection, 2008), 58. And Olga M. Viso, "The Memory of History," in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985*, ed. Olga M. Viso (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2004), 66.
[72] Genevieve Hyacinthe, *Radical Virtuosity: Ana Mendieta and the Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 24-25.

is more identifiable to her…"[73] Rather than direct replications of Santería rituals, objects, or forms, Mendieta's work incorporated loose stylistic affinities with these practices in order to convey her own meanings.

Santería, also known as Lucumí or Regla de Ocha, is one of several syncretic religious belief systems in Cuba that originated with the enslaved Africans brought to the island, primarily from the Yoruba and Kongo cultures. The practice combines African animistic belief systems with Catholic saint worship. The core deity, Olodumare, is accessed through a pantheon of orishas/orichas (saints or deities) with whom practitioners communicate through rituals and divination. These rituals often involve offerings like candles, flowers, herbs, and fruits. Offerings can also take the form of animal sacrifices, which are often later prepared as food and shared with the community.[74] Santería and related practices like Abakuá were criminalized in Cuba during the period before Castro's revolution and highly discouraged during the early years of Communist party rule.[75] They were seen as subversive practices counter to the "civilizing" mission of the European colonizer states and were, and often still are, therefore practiced in private homes or wooded areas rather than formalized shrines or houses of worship. The practice of animal sacrifice was perhaps the most striking and most contested aspect of Santería to Cubans of Hispanic descent (like Mendieta and her family) and, as these practices spread with waves of migration from the island after the Cuban Revolution, to Anglo-Americans.[76]

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[73] Juan Sánchez, "Oral history interview with Juan Sánchez, 2018 October 1-2," interview by Josh Franco, 2018, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

[74] Danielle N. Boaz, *Banning Black Gods: Law and Religions of the African Diaspora* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 15.

[75] Maha Marouan, "Santería in Cuba: Contested Issues at a Time of Transition," *Transition*, no. 125 (2018): 59.

[76] It became a target for government intervention and a tool for discrimination against these new migrants in the U.S. In a notable case from 1987, in response to the construction of the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, the city of Hialeah, Florida, passed an ordinance to ban the slaughter of animals outside of official slaughterhouses. The Supreme Court eventually weighed in on this ordinance and determined that it unconstitutionally targeted Santería religious practices, while exempting ritual animal slaughter in the Jewish and Muslim traditions. This case was a

Mendieta's performance of *Chicken Piece* differs from a true Santería ritual in several key ways. First, she completes the piece without the supervision or guidance of an ordained priest or priestess, who would be necessary to determine which sacrifice the orisha preferred and how to perform the rites. Second, no orisha was verbally called upon and no request or reason for the offering was specified.[77] Furthermore, the blood of the animal was not offered to the orisha directly, which would traditionally mean spilling the blood onto a statue of the orisha rather than onto the person making the offering. Finally, after a ritual sacrifice, traditionally the meat from the animal is prepared. Some portions, such as internal organs, are offered to the orisha, and the rest is shared with the community.[78] No existing documentation of the performance suggests that Mendieta or her collaborators engaged in this kind of communal sharing of the chicken meat after the performance. Despite these stark differences, however, Mendieta's work does coincide with a primary goal of Santería ritual: to communicate with nature and the divine in the form of the orishas. Historian and Lucumí priest Willie Ramos wrote that animal sacrifice is, "a communion, the establishment of a bond between worshiper and deity that serves as a medium of exchange."[79] While Mendieta stripped away many of the details and specifics of the ritual, she seems to have aimed to retain its main goal of exchange and communication.

Integrating the approach of the Viennese Actionists with Afro-Cuban spirituality, this performance marks the artist's first direct reference to the animal world in Mendieta's work. As in these models, the ritual-like nature of the performance marked off a space outside of the

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lightning rod for debates around religious freedom, multiculturalism, and animal rights and is an example of a moment when animal rights and religious freedom came into conflict. Boaz, *Banning Black Gods*, 36-37.

[77] See, for example, the description of the sacrifice of a chicken in Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte: Notes on the Religions, Magic, and Folklore of the Black and Creole People of Cuba*, trans. David Font-Navarrete (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 53.

[78] Miguel "Willie" Ramos, "Afro-Cuban Orisha Worship," in *Santeria Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 59.

[79] Ramos, "Afro-Cuban Orisha Worship," 59-60.

everyday, a liminal space where boundaries that isolated the human world could be breached. By spilling the blood on herself rather than a statue, Mendieta suggests an affinity between her own body and that of the chicken—to feel the drops of warm blood dripping down her legs and recall her own blood coursing through her veins. While these models provided an entry point for this inquiry, its telling that none of her later works involved the killing of live animals, and Mendieta may have been uncomfortable with the violence of this performance. In the 35mm slides and photographs of the performance, the artist mostly maintains a calm, even demeanor. However, the film reveals cracks in this façade. First, the flapping of the chicken's body just after it is killed is much more emphatic in both intensity and duration in the film version (and likely even more so for those in the audience). The performance was filmed by two audience members, and in restoring the work, the artist's estate has cut the two versions into a single HD video with one version immediately following the other.[80] The second version offers a wider shot than the first, and in it, we can see the artist as the chicken is being beheaded. Her body language reveals her visible discomfort in witnessing the killing: she shrugs her shoulders and balls her hands into fists near her face [Fig. 1.3]. Mendieta's friend also recalled that, in a practice run for the performance, she worried the chicken would scratch her.[81] She later recalled the performance in an interview in 1985, stating, "I really didn't want to do it…It really was something that was very weird for me to do."[82] Her discomfort may have been due to fear of injury, perhaps even from disease spread by the blood, or out of sympathy for the chicken's life.

[80] Laura Wertheim Joseph, "Filmography," in *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, ed. Lynn Lukkas and Howard Oransky (Minneapolis, MN: Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, 2015), 207.
[81] Herzberg, "The Iowa Years," 157-58.
[82] Joan Marter, "Joan Marter in Conversation with Ana Mendieta, 1 February, 1985," reproduced in *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, by Stephanie Rosenthal (London: Hayward Gallery of Art, 2013), 229.

History of Animal Rights

To understand Mendieta's animal works, it will be useful to briefly consider the history of the animal rights movement before and during the 1970s. When Mendieta embarked on her animal works, the issue of the animal and its place within society was in the process of transforming. The animal rights movement was gaining momentum and would crystallize with the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* in 1975. While many trace the origins of the modern animal rights movement to Singer's contribution, he in fact built upon over a century of activism and legislation for the protection of animals. *Animal Liberation* came at the apex of slowly expanding movement that, in alignment with other human rights causes, fought first for compassion and later for the full rights of nonhuman animals.

Advocates for kindness to animals can be found dating back to ancient times, but it was in the nineteenth century when formal organizations for the protection of animals began to form in the United States. In 1866, Henry Bergh created the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (based on the model of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals created in the United Kingdom in 1824) and collected two dozen signatories to his *Declaration of the Rights of Animals*. Bergh's society was also deputized to identify and, if necessary, arrest those who violated New York state's animal cruelty law.[83] Animal welfare groups modeled on Bergh's approach later appeared in post-Civil War cities across America. They sought to both increase awareness of animal cruelties in the form of pamphlets and meetings as well as to create and/or enforce laws against committing cruelties to animals.

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[83] Emily Patterson-Kane, Michael Patrick Allen, and Jennifer Eadie, *Rethinking the American Animal Rights Movement* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 51.

Opposing the view that animals were unthinking machines promoted by enlightenment thinkers like Rene Descartes, animal advocates in the nineteenth century aligned the interests of animals with those of other human rights campaigns, such as the suffrage and abolitionist movements.[84] Historians of the animal rights movement Lawrence and Susan Finsen argue that "the evidence suggests that those who devote themselves to the welfare of one exploited group (whether human or animal) in many cases extend concern to other groups as well," which they term the "Extension Thesis."[85] They go on to note the many supporters of the nineteenth-century humane and antivivisectionist movements were also involved with suffrage and abolitionist causes, such as Frances Power Cobbe and Horace Greeley. The timing of the rise of this movement coincided with greater attention to human rights and fights for justice and equality for other exploited groups, including the enslaved and formerly enslaved, women, children, and the poor. Therefore, after several decades of relative hibernation in the first decades of the twentieth

[84] Patterson-Kane, *Rethinking the American Animals Rights Movement*, 49. The nineteenth-century movement can be subdivided into two key areas of concern: the humane movement, which called for more humane treatment of livestock and transportation animals, and the antivivisectionist movement, which called for either the regulation or total abolition of the use of animals in medical experimentation. Concerned primarily with the prevention of cruelty, Henry Bergh's ASPCA tackled specific incidents of cruelty to animals. For example, Bergh brought criminal charges against a sea captain who transported turtles from Florida to restaurants in New York upside-down and with their flippers tied to one another. He lost this case as the judge determined that animal cruelty regulations did not apply to reptiles, but the case did cause a stir in the media. Antivivisectionists specifically targeted the use of animals in scientific experimentation. In the nineteenth century, it became common to practice surgical methods in classrooms using live animals, and, as anesthesia was still uncommon for human patients, this instruction was performed while the animals were fully conscious. Frances Power Cobbe formed the antivivisectionist group, the Victoria Street Society in 1878, which sought initially to abolish the practice altogether but eventually became more conservative in pushing for more restrictions and oversight to lessen the animals' suffering. Inspired by Cobbe's model, Caroline Earle White formed the American Antivivisectionist Society in 1883, though by this time the medical community had sensed the threat of these groups and had organized a robust defense. Medical groups argued that the benefits of vivisection far outweighed the costs and offered examples of rapid advancements in medicine to back up this claim. Therefore, the movement was less popular in the United States and resulted in only modest legislative gains. Nonetheless, these two causes would bring to public attention a debate over whether animals could suffer or if their pain merited legal or even moral consideration. Emily Patterson-Kane, Michael Patrick Allen, and Jennifer Eadie, *Rethinking the American Animal Rights Movement* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 51-67.

[85] Lawrence Finsen and Susan Finsen, *The Animal Rights Movement in America: From Compassion to Respect* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 28.

century, it makes sense that concern for animal welfare would reappear alongside other social justice movements in the postwar era.

As the civil rights, gay rights, feminist, and antiwar movements began to take shape, America's moral concern also extended to nonhuman animals. After 1945, during a time of economic prosperity and with wartime fears behind them, many middle-class Americans felt free to once again turn their attention to animal rights. From 1945 to 1975, existing animal rights groups gained renewed strength, and several new national groups were formed, including the Defenders of Furbearers (1947), the Animal Welfare Institute (1951), the National Humane Society (1954, later renamed Humane Society of the United States), the Fund for Animals (1967), and International Fund for Animal Welfare (1969) among many others.[86] These new groups not only ran shelters and education campaigns but also engaged in lobbying for new federal legislation for the protection of animals. The Humane Slaughter Act was passed in 1958 which regulated slaughterhouses to ensure animals were being humanely treated prior to slaughter. The use of animals in scientific labs was first regulated when the Laboratory Animal Welfare Act was passed in 1966 and amended in 1970. Finally, the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act were passed in 1966 and 1972, respectively, to protect wild animals from overhunting and threats of extinction.[87]

These national groups and legislation mark a shift in tone from previous animal welfare campaigns. While nineteenth-century campaigners often couched their concern for animals within a wider appeal for human safety (such as protection from tainted meat) or in a paternalistic appeal to morality and charity, postwar groups and legislation began increasingly

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[86] Don Liddick, *Eco-Terrorism: Radical Environmental and Animal Liberation Movements* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 32.
[87] Diane L. Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2006), 154.

using language that asserted that animals have an inherent right to safety and freedom from cruelty. As Historian Diane Beers states, "[H]umanitarians increasingly framed their positions around the animals themselves, insisting that they deserved protection and rights regardless of human cost or benefit."[88] Perhaps more than any other, the Endangered Species Act, first passed in 1966 and altered with still more protections in both 1969 and 1973, guaranteed protection to nonhuman animals for the first time based on their perceived rights. It allowed for lawsuits to be brought by advocacy groups and the government on behalf of species on the brink of extinction.[89] These steps reveal that well before the publication of Singer's *Animal Liberation*, concerns about animal welfare and rights were circulating in the public consciousness.

It is clear, though, that Singer's book brought together many strains of this movement and added a layer of credibility to what was at the time still seen as a movement based on emotions and sentimentality rather than science.[90] In *Animal Liberation*, Singer developed an argument for animal welfare based on the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham. Alongside descriptions of poor treatment of animals in factory farming and laboratories, he argued that because they are sentient, animals are deserving of moral concern in decisions regarding their treatment. This concern did not, however, preclude the exploitation of animals for, say, food, clothing, or medical research. His argument suggested only that efforts must be made to do as little harm as possible in service of the greater good.[91] He also popularized the term "speciesism," originally coined by Richard Ryder, to denote discrimination based on one's species in the same vein as racism and sexism. Singer's book was highly influential for major animal activists and led to the

[88] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 161-62.
[89] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 190-91.
[90] Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking the American Animal Rights Movement*, 89.
[91] Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: New York Review, 1975).

professionalization of many animal welfare groups. However, Singer's position was still conservative compared to what we might consider animal rights today. This change came about with Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), which argued for a total abolition of animal exploitation, including an end to animal research, animal agriculture, and hunting. Regan's claims supported the goals of the more radical animal activists of the time. These two thinkers, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, catalyzed the modern animal rights movement of the late-twentieth century, though their ideas are grounded in earlier activism dating back to the nineteenth century.

Mendieta's animal works, mostly created around 1974, came about during a time in which the status of animals in human society was undergoing rapid redefinition, spurring the adoption of animals and animal forms in her work. While I do not argue Mendieta intended to make a specific argument about the ethics of animal agriculture, in *Chicken Piece*, she provided her body as a surface on which to reveal the bloody evidence of the chicken's slaughter and a visceral reminder of the shared life in both humans and nonhuman animals. This action would have been particularly shocking at a time when debates about the rights of animals were circulating.

Noticing Nonhuman Others

In the years since Mendieta's death, discourses on animal rights have coalesced into an interdisciplinary field grouped loosely under the umbrella of Critical Animal Studies. This field is less interested in making ethical claims or provoking change in either behavior or legislation than in developing a more comprehensive accounting of the place of animals in the world and their relationship with human beings. Early examples of work in this field can be found in Vicki Hearne's *Adam's Task* (1986), Harriet Ritvo's *The Animal Estate* (1987), and Donna Haraway's

Primate Visions (1989). Each took up the animal as their subject and reconsidered how our understanding of animals and our relationships with them are conditioned by human social systems. More recent work in the field, including Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2007) and several books by philosopher Cary Wolfe, reconsiders ontological divisions founded on a rigid separation between humans and nonhuman animals. New scientific research at the end of the twentieth century challenged previously held assumptions about animal cognition, language, tool use, and altruism, revealing that differences between humans and nonhuman animals are of degree rather than kind. These discourses are related to but not identical to posthumanism. While posthumanism and animal studies are both invested in redefining the boundaries of the human and decentering humans as one form of being among many, critical animal studies and its inheritors are much more interested in *relations* between humans and their others.

Today, theorists have expanded their consideration of the limits of "animal" studies into a broader study of the many kinds of being outside of the human, which may include nonhuman animals, plants, single-celled organisms, rocks, and phenomena such as tides or weather patterns. The field of interspecies or multispecies studies does not consider the interactions of isolated individuals, but rather, "the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations…"[92] Like earlier developments, this new direction is based upon new understandings in the natural sciences about the boundaries of individuals that suggest that symbiosis is a necessary foundation for life rather than an aberration. As developmental biologist Scott Gilbert writes, "Only about half the cells in our bodies contain a 'human genome.' The other cells include about 160 different bacterial genomes […] Human bodies are and contain a

[92] Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (May 2016): 3.

plurality of ecosystems […] so we are not *anatomically* individuals at all.”[93] This new turn in critical animal studies takes seriously the “enfolding of bodies within bodies”[94] that is taking place in nearly every corner of the earth. Beyond a denial of human exceptionalism, interspecies and multispecies approaches think through the interdependence of humans and other species and how those entanglements shape sociopolitical systems.

These new understandings of nonhuman life can trace their origins to the period in which Mendieta, too, was exploring nonhuman animals in her work. The development of a rhetoric of animal rights, codified most prominently in Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1975), set out one strategy for addressing the fraught relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. Critical responses to this approach, both for and against, catalyzed these wider scholarly approaches, many of which are opposed to the liberal humanist basis on which Singer rests his argument.[95] These scholars also look to indigenous, ancient, and non-Western ways of knowing and understanding human and nonhuman life outside of Western scientific systems. Mendieta, too, was deeply invested in her study of ancient Mesoamerican culture and the syncretic Cuban religious practices around which she grew up in her childhood. This study informed her understanding of animal life as much if not more so than an interest or investment in animal rights as a unified movement.

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[93] Scott F. Gilbert, “Holobiont by Birth: Multilineage Individuals as the Concretion of Cooperative Processes,” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M75.

[94] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M3.

[95] See for example, Cary Wolfe, “Introduction,” in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xii. “[O]ne of the central ironies of animals rights philosophy—an irony that points directly to the pressing need for this collection—is that its philosophical frame remains an essentially humanist one in its most important philosophers (utilitarianism in Peter Singer, neo-Kantianism in Tom Regan), thus effacing the very difference of the animal other that animal rights sought to respect in the first place.”

During a trip to Mexico in 1974 with Breder and other students from his multimedia class, Mendieta executed a work called *Dog* [Fig. 1.4a-b]. The piece was created in the small town of San Felipe just outside of Oaxaca where Breder and Mendieta had rented a private hacienda.[96] According to Breder, the artist borrowed the skin of a local resident's shepherd dog, which he had kept as a memory of a former pet.[97] Mendieta cloaked herself in this skin and created a performance in an alley, which Breder filmed. Like most of her films, this one is roughly three minutes long, as dictated by the length of commercially available Super-8 film reels. In addition to wearing the animal's skin, Mendieta took on the movements of a dog by enacting the performance entirely on her hands and knees and moving slowly and carefully. Passersby in the alley walk through the frame, seemingly either unaware of her presence or intentionally avoiding her. This is Mendieta's first and only work on the topic of a dog. At the time of this performance, dogs had recently become a locus of organizing in the context of the animal rights movement. Dogs and animals more generally also play a large role in the Mesoamerican traditions that she was studying as part of this trip. Through multispecies theory, I will argue that the performance presents a form of noticing by bringing the animal world into full view and developing an attentiveness to the nonhuman within the artist during the piece.

When the film begins, the viewer can see only a narrow alleyway. On either side are low-rise brick and stucco buildings with few windows. The alley is empty but for a few birds flitting around in the foreground. In the background is an undeveloped, lush landscape. Gradually, the viewer can see movement coming from this wooded area, filled with scrubby brush. A gray creature, only a couple of feet tall, moves slowly from the left of the frame and towards the

[96] Viso, "The Memory of History," 50.
[97] Laura Wertheim Joseph, "Filmography," in *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, eds. Lynn Lukkas and Howard Oransky (Minneapolis, MN: Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, 2015), 217n15.

camera. As we know, this is the artist, on all fours and covered in a dog's skin. She places one forearm carefully in front of another as she slowly moves closer to the camera. The unpaved alley, littered with rocks, must have made the performance uncomfortable for the artist. As we watch her slow procession, a man, balancing two metal buckets with a carrying pole over his shoulders, enters the frame from behind the camera, crosses the alley, and exits through another path to the right of the frame [Fig. 1.4a]. He does not seem to notice the artist's presence. Following this interruption, Breder, behind the camera, zooms in closer on the artist-as-dog figure. This closer look reveals more details of the flattened skin [Fig. 1.4b]. We can see that it must have belonged to a large dog whose coat was black down its back and gray on its legs and belly. Its limp face falls over the top of the artist's head. Mendieta continues to move in her dog-like ambulation, slowly and carefully toward the camera's lens. A woman and her child enter the frame. While they are in her path, Mendieta briefly pauses her movements. After they exit following the same path as the man, Mendieta remains still, and the film ends.

In performing as a dog in this work, Mendieta likely anticipated that she would garner responses of fear or disgust for her strangeness and incongruousness with her surroundings, particularly because her disguise was imperfect. In simply draping the animal's skin over her own, she could not convincingly pass as a dog. Art historian and scholar of animals in art Steve Baker has noted that imitation of animals is a common trope in contemporary art. He also argues that an intentional lack of verisimilitude forms an important part of their imitation. He writes, "These imitations generally act out the instability rather than the fixity of the thing nominally imitated. They suggest playful exchanges between the human and the animal, or between one animal and another, which may allude to borders and distinctions but which are not impeded by

them."[98] In taking on the guise of an animal, one that could not be quickly read as either fully human or fully animal, Mendieta destabilizes rigid boundaries of both "human" and "animal."

Despite Mendieta's uncanny appearance as a doglike creature in the film, the three individuals passing through the alley, only a couple of feet from the artist, showed no apparent interest in her. They likely assumed that approaching or responding to a person behaving in such a strange manner would not benefit them. Mendieta had a history of imposing her performance work on an unsuspecting audience. In her *Rape Piece* (1972), she invited her classmates in the Intermedia department for an unspecified performance in her apartment. When they arrived, they found the artist bent over a table, her pants at her ankles, and covered in blood. This was no doubt a horrifying scene for the artist's friends and classmates, especially as it was made in response to the recent rape and murder of a young woman in Iowa City. Similarly, in *Moffitt Building Piece* (1973), Mendieta deposited pieces of cloth and other items as well as a significant amount of what appears to be blood at the doorstep of an apartment building. She then sat across the street and filmed passersby as they saw the items [Fig. 1.5]. In the film, most of these bystanders either entirely ignored the items or only took a passing glance. Eventually, a maintenance worker for the building came to clean up the mess. *Moffitt Building Piece* showed how the public might respond to such disquieting or even threatening interruptions to their daily routines, and in each case, they simply ignored the strange activities and carried on with their day. The disinterest of the passersby in this film mirrors that of the three witnesses to *Dog*. They all rushed past the artist to their final destinations. Based on previous works by the artist, it was likely that she intended, by performing in such a public space, to encounter such unsuspecting viewers. Her appearance as a strange hybrid creature served as an uncomfortable intrusion of the

[98] Steve Baker, "Sloughing the Human," in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 158.

animal world into the quotidian human activities of San Felipe, a reminder of the entanglement of the lives of human and nonhuman animals.

Mendieta's choice of a dog for her guise has several layers of meaning. By the middle of the twentieth century, dogs had become a centerpiece of animal rights activism, particularly antivivisectionist activism. These groups, particularly the Animal Welfare Institute, used images and stories of the family pet undergoing cruel scientific experimentation to bring public attention to the larger issues of inhumane treatment of animals in laboratory settings. Scientific research in the U.S. underwent exponential growth after 1945 and with it came an equal increase in animal experimentation. Because of this rapid growth, the supply of animals from breeders was not enough to meet demand. To remedy this, the newly formed National Society for Medical Research (NSMR) led a campaign on behalf of the scientific community to push legislation that would require municipal dog shelters to turn over unwanted dogs to local labs on demand. These so-called pound seizure laws passed mostly without incident in states across the country in the late 1940s and 1950s.[99] Many labs also utilized private dog dealers to meet their growing need for animal specimens. These dog dealers were known for their unscrupulous methods for acquiring their wares, including some cases in which they stole pets from the backyards of their unsuspecting owners. One such case gained national attention when Pepper, a Dalmatian belonging to the Lackavage family from Pennsylvania, was stolen by a dog dealer, who would not return the family's pet even after the intervention of national animal rights groups. A later investigation would reveal that Pepper had been sold to a laboratory that experimented on her and incinerated her body.[100] In response to cases like Pepper's, a 1966 photo spread in *Life*

[99] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 169-70.
[100] Finsen and Finsen, *The Animal Rights Movement in America*, 56. This incident was reported by the Associated Press and was picked up by newspapers across the country, including the *Iowa City Press Citizen* which ran the

magazine detailed the treatment of dogs in the care dog dealers and described their conditions as "concentration camps for lost and stolen pets" [Fig. 1.6].[101] These high-profile events revealing the cruel treatment and improper sourcing of laboratory animals led to the passage of the Laboratory Animal Welfare Act in 1966, which established minimum standards for animal care and prevented the use of stolen animals in laboratory settings.[102] While this legislation applied to several animal species used in laboratories, dogs became the face of the postwar antivivisectionist movement. Because of their close connection to human communities, dogs became the indicators for the wider maltreatment of laboratory animals. In turning attention to dogs, activist groups hoped other species would be aided by greater regulation.

Beyond their association with the reinvigorated animal rights movement, the location of this performance in Mexico likely also carried strong associations for Mendieta. Dogs formed an important component of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultural identity, as they were one of the few domesticated species prior to the Spanish Conquest.[103] Since ancient times, dogs in Mexico have held a special place in beliefs about spirituality and the afterlife, particularly the hairless breed Xoloitzcuintli, which were believed to guide their human companions through to the afterlife. Some ethnic groups even considered themselves to be direct descendants of dogs in their creation myths.[104] Mendieta may have been familiar with these ancient associations through her classes on pre-Colombian Mesoamerican history. In 1967, she took a class called

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story on January 13, 1966, and would have been available to Mendieta and her family in their home in Cedar Rapids.

[101] Stan Wayman, "Concentration Camps for Dogs," *Life*, February 4, 1966.

[102] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 177.

[103] León García Garagarza, "The Year the People Turned into Cattle: The End of the World in New Spain, 1558," in *Centering Animals in Latin American History*, ed. Martha Few, Zeb Tortorici, and Erica Fudge (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 44. The fact is also related in Mendieta's textbook for her class on "primitive" art taught by Michael Kampen, Michael Coe's *Mexico: Ancient Peoples and Places.* He writes, "The only animals kept in domestication were the dog and the turkey, the former as well as the latter valuable for its meat." Michael D. Coe, *Mexico*: *Ancient Peoples and Places* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 24.

[104] García Garagarza, "The Year the People Turned into Cattle," 48-49.

"Introduction to Primitive Art" taught by Michael Kampen, which covered pre-Columbian art from roughly 1200 BCE to the Conquest.[105] In 1971, she traveled to San Juan Teotihuacan, Mexico for a class called "Field Research in Archaeology" with Professor Thomas Charlton.[106] She had also traveled to Mexico in the summer of 1973 with Hans Breder's multimedia class. The group stayed primarily in the city of Oaxaca while taking shorter trips to archaeological and cultural sites throughout the surrounding eponymous state. Her trip in 1974, in which she filmed *Dog*, followed a very similar format to this one. In all three trips, she was able to visit major archaeological sites, including Yagul, Mitla, and Monte Albán, and became familiar with local archaeologists and anthropologists at the sites, which were at the time undergoing active excavation.[107] Her robust education on ancient Mesoamerican cultures likely meant that she had some familiarity with the place of animals in their cosmologies.

Outside of Mesoamerica, dogs also carried supernatural associations in Euro-American society, where folk tales of werewolves are still common. Since antiquity, the tendency of rabies victims to bark like dogs and behave in an animalistic fashion furthered the belief that dogs could trigger transformations of humans into animals.[108] The ability of dogs to transmit this deadly disease, and its supernatural associations, made them creatures that could instill fear on sight. Fears of rabid dogs were so heightened that, in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New York City, a shout of "Mad dog!" in the street could cause mass panic.[109] These folktales and deep-seated fears reveal "beliefs that European-descended Americans of the time may not have

[105] Julia P. Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta, the Iowa Years: A Critical Study, 1969 through 1977." (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York, City University of New York, 1998), 64.
[106] Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta: The Iowa Years," 67.
[107] Viso, "The Memory of History," 50.
[108] See Jessica Wang, *Mad Dogs and Other New Yorkers: Rabies, Medicine, and Society in an American Metropolis, 1840-1920* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 59-70.
[109] Wang, *Mad Dogs*, 27-31.

themselves known they held."[110] As Historian Jessica Wang illustrates: "descriptions of rabies symptoms reflected a cosmology open to the possibility of immaterial and supernatural ties between humans and animals." Thus, in both her ancestral European inheritance and in her study and interest in ancient Mesoamerican cultures, Mendieta may have been familiar with dogs' unique place as mediators between humans and the wider nonhuman world.

Dogs provide a unique avenue to approach animal life as they are in many ways the ultimate form of a companion species. Globally, dogs have been bred by humans for hunting, herding, livestock guarding, companionship, and social status for millennia. Dogs live and work alongside humans in close relationships and have evolved to recognize and respond to human emotional cues.[111] This intimacy makes dogs particularly apt subjects when considering human-animal connections. In fact, in updating her "Cyborg Manifesto" for the twenty-first century, feminist theorist and historian of science Donna Haraway chose dogs as a locus to explore "significant otherness" in her *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and when she elaborated on these themes in *When Species Meet* (2008). Haraway writes, "Dogs are about the inescapable, contradictory story of relationships—co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all."[112] She argues that in our relationships with them, companion species—and in this case, dogs in particular—shape us as much as we shape them. This relating has a long history. She considers the co-evolution of dogs and humans, arguing that "[I]t is a mistake to see the alterations of dogs' bodies and minds as biological and the changes in human bodies and lives, for example in the emergence of herding

[110] Wang, *Mad Dogs*, 60.
[111] Natalia Albuquerque and Briseida Resende, "Dogs Functionally Respond to and Use Emotional Information from Human Expressions.," *Evolutionary Human Sciences* 5 (2023): e2.
[112] Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 12.

or agricultural societies, as cultural, and so not about co-evolution."[113] She argues that humans have been altered by their relations with dogs as much as the dogs have been altered by their relations with humans. To deny that these changes are related to nature is to put an unjustifiable barrier between nature and culture, in which dogs are only affected by nature while humans are only affected by culture.

Haraway also applies her role as a trainer for her two dogs in agility competitions to her understanding of companion species. She remarks on the ability of her and her dogs to learn to communicate with one another through this training. The two species enter into relation with one another and share a bond of mutual respect. She recalls the initial difficulty of implementing this mutual respect in her training. "Overtraining," or relying too heavily on human cues and not trusting the dog's ability to adapt to the course layouts, is a common mistake for new agility trainers.[114] This communication is not built on a hierarchal relationship of owner and property, nor parent and child, but a "cross-species team of skilled adults."[115] Outside of relations with companion animals, this mutual respect also shapes other cross-species identifications. Not only are her dogs listening closely to her cues, but she is also following theirs just as closely. This leveling can be scaled both up and down into other forms of relating as a shared system of exchange rather than vertical relations of inheritance and hierarchy. She reasons that this type of close attention to a nonhuman animal has something to teach us about our world. Sympathy for what she terms "significant otherness" opens up new knowledge about the world that is not centered exclusively on human consciousness. She writes, "This is the core of my companion

[113] Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto,* 31.
[114] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 224. Courses in agility competitions are decided by the judges and the human trainers are given only ten to fifteen minutes to walk the course before the competition. Their dogs are given no advance knowledge of the course before the event.
[115] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 225.

species manifesto. I experience agility as a particular good in itself and also as a way to become more worldly; i.e., more alert to the demands of significant otherness at all the scales that making more livable worlds demands."[116] The careful attentiveness developed with companion species can also model new forms of relating to all others, both human and nonhuman.

Attentiveness is also a key aspect of multispecies studies. Anthropologist and theorist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, "Living in a time of planetary catastrophe thus begins with a practice at once humble and difficult: noticing the worlds around us."[117] Developing a careful awareness of the nonhuman includes not only observation but also identification. In their introduction to a special issue on multispecies studies for the journal *Environmental Humanities*, the authors point out that, "Immersive ways of knowing and being with others involve careful attention to what matters to them—attention to how they craft shared lives and worlds."[118] In donning the dog's skin and mimicking a dog's bodily movements, Mendieta attempted such careful attention. In attempting to take herself out of a human-centered approach to the world, she was able to appreciate the place of a dog, or a nonhuman animal more generally, in the worlds in which she occupied. She cultivated a sense of curiosity about the nonhuman world and explored it through bodily engagement.

Earlier that same year, in May 1974, Joseph Beuys also engaged with the animal world in a performance at the René Block Gallery in New York. For the piece, titled *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Beuys spent three days in the company of a live coyote. For eight hours a day, he and the coyote shared a space in the gallery behind a large wire fence that separated visitors from the performance. He lay in the gallery wrapped in felt with a cane or staff sticking

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[116] Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto,* 61.
[117] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., "Introduction: Bodies Tumbled into Bodies," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M7.
[118] Van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, "Multispecies Studies," 6.

out from it [Fig. 1.7]. A pile of straw and copies of the *Wall Street Journal*, replenished daily, were the only other items in the space. Periodically, he would emerge from the felt to perform a series of actions which included throwing a pair of leather gloves on the floor, playing a triangle, and engaging with either the coyote or visitors.[119] At the end of the performance, Beuys embraced the coyote after apparently developing a connection with the animal.[120]

While the artist's intention for the performance was to develop a metaphor for relations between the United States and Native Americans, the reception of the piece focused mostly on the human-animal relationship on display. Those who witnessed the performance seemed to agree that some form of communication happened over the course of the performance and the pair developed a sort of bond. One critic, writing just after Beuys' death in 1986, wrote, "Though reprobated in the dictionary as a carrion eater and four-legged garbage truck, the coyote came on at the René Block Gallery as sensitive, playful, memorably quick and sharp in its reactions and capable of something that, if not affection, was a very good imitation of it."[121] The coyote, a wild rather than domesticated animal, posed some level of risk to Beuys' personal safety, and the coyote likewise felt threatened by his human counterpart. Nonetheless, moments of communication occurred, such as when Beuys encouraged the creature to tear at his felt wrapping [Fig. 1.7].[122] To gain this level of trust, both Beuys and the coyote had to imagine a perspective quite unlike their own, based on subtle outward behaviors.

While Mendieta did not work with a live dog, she, too, had to imagine the perspective of a dog in enacting her performance. This interspecies exchange models a form of living deeply attuned to nonhuman others, or a way of, according to Haraway, being "alert to the demands of

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[119] Roberta Smith, "Joseph Beuys," *Artforum*, September 1974.
[120] Cary Wolfe, "The Biopolitical Drama of Joseph Beuys," *New Literary History* 51, no. 4 (2020): 847.
[121] John Russell, "Art: Joseph Beuys at the Feldman Gallery," *The New York Times*, October 31, 1986.
[122] Wolfe, "The Biopolitical Drama of Joseph Beuys," 847.

significant otherness." Both works also bring nonhuman animal life to the attention of viewers/passersby. The response of viewers to Beuys' work emphasized the exchanges between the artist and his nonhuman counterpart. Mendieta's work brought to light for her unwitting spectators the ongoing entanglements of human and nonhuman animal life that often go unnoticed in daily life. For Mendieta, like the antivivisectionist activists, dogs provided a useful entry point into concern for the broader world of the nonhuman.

Embodied Knowledge of the Animal in *Ocean Bird (Washup)*

In the same trip to Mexico in the summer of 1974, Mendieta and her companions also traveled to the coast of Oaxaca to Salina Cruz to film two works on the beach: *Bird Run* and *Ocean Bird (Washup).* For both works, Mendieta affixed white turkey feathers to her body using a latex adhesive.[123] She first experimented with this technique back at the University of Iowa with another student in *Bird Transformation* (1972), a performance documented in a series of photographs in which Mendieta carefully applied feathers to a model [Fig. 1.8]. Now, on the beach in Oaxaca, Mendieta has applied the feathers to herself using the same technique and similar patterning and placement. The feathers were applied in a neat pattern, emanating outward from the central line of her torso and from the center of her face. They also cover her limbs, leaving only her hands, feet, and genitalia exposed.

Like dogs, birds also held a special place in ancient Mesoamerican belief systems. Mendieta's use of turkey feathers is significant, as turkeys and dogs were the only domesticated animals in the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican world. Garcia Garaza writes, "The absence of domestic ungulates in the pre-Columbian world resulted in a civilization unique in its restriction

[123] Laura Wertheim Joseph, "Filmography," in *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, ed. Lynn Lukkas and Howard Oransky (Minneapolis, MN: Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, 2015), 219.

of animal husbandry to a few endogenous small animals, the most important of which were the turkey and the dog."[124] Beyond constituting one of the key sources of animal protein for many Mesoamericans, turkeys were also associated with nobility, and some belief systems held that nobles were descended from turkeys. This resulted in sumptuary laws, such as in the Valley of Oaxaca where Zapotecs and Nahuas limited the consumption of turkeys to the elite classes.[125] Thus, Mendieta's use of the turkey feather, possibly for reasons relating to their size and weight, also creates an allusion to the world of the Americas prior to colonization. In opposition to the chicken, which was a European import, turkeys were associated with the native traditions of Mesoamerica.

After applying the turkey feathers, the artist-as-bird embarked on a series of actions on the shore of an isolated beach. The resulting footage was eventually edited into the two film works. The first of these films, *Bird Run*, shows Mendieta running toward the camera along the waterline [Fig. 1.9]. I will focus on the second film, *Ocean Bird (Washup),* filmed just after the first, because it illustrates Mendieta's interest in exploring the unique embodiment of nonhuman animals. While Mendieta's filmed performances are often shot in a single take, this film is composed of three recordings, cut together to form a single piece. As the film begins, the artist, still covered in the white turkey feathers, is floating on her back in shallow water [Fig. 1.10a]. The water gently pushes her body closer to the camera. She resists at first, turning her back to the surf and lifting her head out of the water to catch a breath. She raises her head to look around and track oncoming waves. After roughly a minute, the film cuts to a wider shot. The artist is now farther from the camera and in deeper water. The waves, larger now, wash over her body, which is parallel to them. At times, she still lifts her head to catch a breath, but she allows the ocean to

[124] García Garagarza, "The Year the People Turned into Cattle," 44.
[125] García Garagarza, "The Year the People Turned into Cattle," 47.

carry her body with less effort now. A large log that has lodged into the sand, possibly from a mangrove tree, interrupts the movements of her body. As she is pushed into the log, she reaches her hand out gently to push herself out of its grasp [Fig. 1.10b]. Eventually, her body is propelled, now perpendicular to the shore, into shallower water, where she remains still as the shimmering waves pass over her body. Finally, in a third and final shot, she is again in shallow water. However, this time, rather than struggling against the tide, she lies with her eyes closed and her body limp as it washes over her. Her legs and arms move gently with the motion of the waves [Fig. 1.10c].

Sight, sound, and proprioception are all constituted by the human perceptual apparatus, but we know that other forms of perception exist outside of human recognition. In *Ocean Bird (Washup)*, Mendieta may have been attempting to engage in this second stage of her transformation. After taking on the appearance of a bird, she wanted to explore its embodiment. She may have noticed how sea birds float effortlessly on ocean waves as they come into shore, bobbing up and down with the waves without being overcome by them. In this filmed performance, Mendieta attempts to mimic this ability, with mixed success. At first, she struggles against the waves that crash over her. She almost unconsciously turns her back to the water and raises her head to catch her breath. She also could not resist the temptation to look out and anticipate when the next wave would crest and how large it would be. In her next attempt, after the film cuts, she is in deeper water where she is better able to float and allow the waves to carry her. She does not resist the direction of the waves, even as they pull her into driftwood. She does, however, respond by reaching her hand out and pushing herself out of the web of the driftwood. In the last cut of the film, we can see Mendieta being pushed and pulled by the shallow water. Her body is almost limp, allowing the waves to dictate her movements. The film reveals her

successive attempts to release conscious control over her body and allow the waves to carry her like they would a bird floating on its surface.

Scholars have argued that *Ocean Bird (Washup)* was created in response to Vito Acconci's earlier performance work, *Drifts* (1970),[126] and this work illustrates some aspects of Mendieta's strategy for engaging with the natural environment. The apparent connection between the two performances is supported by the fact that Breder promoted the work of body artists to his students, especially those associated with *Avalanche* magazine, and Acconci was a visiting artist at the University of Iowa in 1971.[127] In the piece, which was published in a series of black and white photographs and accompanying text in *Avalanche* in 1971, Acconci engaged in a series of three actions on Jones Beach, New York. In the first action, the artist, wearing a long-sleeve black shirt and dark-colored jeans or pants, lay on the beach parallel to the shore with his arms over his head and rolled toward and away from the ocean's waves [Fig. 1.11a].[128] For the second action, the artist, in roughly the same position, remained still as the water overcame him [Fig. 1.11b].[129] In the third action, the artist rolled in the sand in order to coax it to cling to his wet skin and clothing [Fig. 1.11c]. The piece represents an encounter between the body and the beach that explores the body's perceptual engagement with the world outside of it.

The second action in the series, in which Acconci remained still and allowed the ocean's waves to overtake him, is perhaps most akin to Mendieta's actions in *Ocean Bird (Washup).*

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[126] Julia P. Herzberg, "The Iowa Years," in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985*, ed. Olga M. Viso (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2004), 163.
[127] Herzberg, "The Iowa Years," 163.
[128] In the text accompanying the piece, Acconci described the first action as, "1. Rolling toward the waves as the waves roll toward me; rolling away from the waves as the waves roll away from me." The artist's movement was responsive to the movement of the ocean's waves and to the position of his body. His repetition of the word "rolling" to describe both his own movements and those of the ocean reflects the association between the two presented in the work. Both bodies and waves roll. Vito Acconci and Gregory Volk, *Diary of a Body: 1969 - 1973* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2006), 212.
[129] Acconci and Volk, *Diary of a Body*, 212-213.

Here Acconci explored the body's response to water rushing toward it, without attempting to avoid or control it. In his earlier work, too, Acconci engaged with the body's unconscious responses to external stimuli. In *Soap & Eyes* and *Blindfolded Catching* (both 1970), for example, he limited his movements in response to soapy water poured into his eyes or a ball thrown at him while blindfolded, respectively. Art historian Elise Archias writes of Acconci's body art of this period, "Acconci called on the body's basic motor reflexes to convey a sense of the impersonal, unintended dimensions of embodied life."[130] In these works, Acconci takes the body as material, exploring how this material responds to manipulation of various kinds without (as much as possible) the conscious intervention of the artist. Acconci's choice to work with the natural environment on the beach was only one among many such experiments. Mendieta, too, was interested in exploring her body's reactions to external stimuli. In *Ocean Bird (Washup),* as in *Drifts,* this interest took the form of the rolling waves of the ocean. However, Mendieta also incorporated the association of physical embodiment with animal life. Mendieta's interest in the perceptual body went beyond that of Acconci's, who was mainly concerned with the body as a self-contained material for art. In her hybrid human-bird guise, she explored how the body can aid in a more robust identification with the nonhuman.

Philosophers such as Martin Heidegger have described the animal's ability to access physicality and corporeality in ways unknown to humans. While Heidegger described animals as "poor in world," without the depth and interiority accorded to humans, they have other ways of knowing the world that are likewise closed off to humans. Writing on the use of animals in contemporary art, Ron Broglio writes, "While it remains stubbornly difficult to enter into the perception of animals, humans can come to know the world of the animal through their own

[130] Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 157.

contact with the corporeality of beasts and humanity's own animality. Amid human worlding, a raw physicality can pull us away from the privileged interiority of the subject and point the way to an-other relationship."[131] Both Acconci and Mendieta attempt to engage that "raw physicality" by placing their bodies into contact with the natural world in situations more or less outside of their control. Acconci recognized this in his performance. Placing his body at the point where the ocean meets the land was a way to surrender some level of his body's conscious control over its movements and instead explore its reflexive responses. Mendieta also explored this, but to do so, she took on the form of a bird to gain even greater access to her own corporeality. She imagined her body as that of a bird, able to sit effortlessly on the surface of waves in harmony with the ocean's rhythms. She explored this other way of knowing the world, one difficult to access for humans but one that animals navigate with fluency.

It appears, though, that in each attempt at the performance, the artist was ultimately "washed up," pushed by the waves to the shore and unable to match the ability of an ocean bird to float on top of the waves while remaining in place. In her attempt, she likely gained some knowledge of how to overcome the body's urge to oppose the force of the water, gradually limiting her involuntary movements and succumbing to the force of the waves. However, her body, unlike that of the ocean bird, cannot float on the surface of the water with the same ease. She ultimately found the gulf between the human and animal, an awareness of her own embodiment and its difference from those of other beings. She was able to imagine a wildly different way of occupying the world than her own and acknowledge that other beings exist outside of her perception of them. In *Ocean Bird (Washup),* Mendieta, in both action and in

[131] Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 89.

guise, imagines an embodied experience of a bird, but ultimately comes up short, demonstrating the inevitable difference between humans and other animals.

Philosopher Thomas Nagel's 1974 essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" probed some of the questions that Mendieta also considers in this performance and has also been influential for critical animal studies thinkers. In it, he argues that, "[F]undamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism[…]."[132] He ponders the ultimate inaccessibility of the subjective experience of another in the form of a bat. He attempts to imagine what it would be like to be a bat but comes up short. He writes, "Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task […] To the extent that I could look and behave like a wasp or a bat without changing my fundamental structure, my experiences would not be anything like the experiences of those animals."[133] This ultimate abyss between the experiences of humans and those of animals described here by Nagel mirrors the unknowability of all other forms of life and nonlife. Mendieta's attempt to gain access to a common experience of being a bird, floating on the surface of the ocean, fails. She cannot know the bird's experience but rather her imagination of what it might be like. This imagination rests on the shared ground of humans and animals—our shared embodiment.

Entering into the Contact Zone

Donna Haraway adapts Mary Louise Pratt's concept of a "contact zone" to discuss spaces of unruly intermingling. The spaces where the edges of two entities—whether cells, organisms, or ecological zones—meet and where transformations occur. She writes that, in contact zones,

[132] Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1974): 436.
[133] Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," 439.

"Probabilities alter; topologies morph; development is canalized by the fruits of reciprocal induction. Contact zones change the subject—all the subjects—in surprising ways."[134] Upon returning from Mexico, in the fall of 1974, Mendieta dove into such a "contact zone" between human and animal when she created another performance, *Blood + Feathers*, on the banks of Old Man's Creek near her home in Iowa City [Fig. 1.12]. In the film documenting this performance, Mendieta stood on a sandy bank, facing the camera and with her back turned to the creek. At her feet is a pile of white chicken feathers and down. She holds a glass bottle filled with blood in her right hand. She then pours the blood onto her nude body starting with her left arm, then her torso, over her shoulders onto her back, her legs, and finally her right arm, she carefully and thoroughly coats her body in the blood. Then, she tosses the bottle aside, falls to her knees, and lowers her body onto the feathers. She rolls onto her back, gathers more feathers in her arms, and distributes them over the front of her body. Methodically writhing, rolling, and spinning around in the pile, the artist coats her entire body in the feathers.[135] Returning to her knees, she once again gathers a pile of feathers in her arms as she rises, allowing the feathers to fall down her torso. She then slowly stands up as bits of down fall from her body. The white feathers, sticking to the blood, form an even layer on her skin. Now coated in the feathers, the artist steps to the side of the pile and holds her arms out to her sides with a downcast gaze.

The performance, using charged materials like blood and feathers, became a ritual of transformation, from a human to something not-quite-human. Her pose at the close of the performance, with her arms stretched out and bent upwards slightly at her waist [shown in Fig.

[134] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 219.
[135] She used chicken feathers and down because, in a previous attempt in a film titled *Untitled (Blood and Feathers),* she used larger turkey feathers that did not adhere as well to her skin. Laura Wertheim Joseph, "Filmography," in *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, ed. Lynn Lukkas and Howard Oransky (Minneapolis, MN: Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, 2015), 219-220.

1.12], appears similar to that of a bird. In documenting her transition, she not only examined what it might be like to be an animal but also what it might be like to be something *between* a human and a nonhuman animal. In highlighting this point of transition, Mendieta plunges herself into a meeting point where the edges of things become unclear and where transformations occur. Meeting points are crucial for critical animal studies. Broglio writes, "What, then, are the possibilities of thinking at the edge of the human world, at the place where it bumps up against the animal's world? […] Negotiating this meeting place, this contact zone, requires that the artists momentarily suspend or leave behind much of the world of culture and acquire new gestures and a different awareness of their bodies before the body of the Other."[136] Mendieta's metamorphosis from human to bird presents a liminal space between the human and nonhuman animal worlds, examining what possibilities might exist therein.

While animals formed a key element of Mendieta's work during a particularly productive period in and around 1974, they did not reappear until the 1980s. One compelling example, the film *Ochún* (1981), presents another such contact zone. The film documents a *silueta* created from sand on the beach at Key Biscayne, the southernmost point of Miami, and therefore also the closest to Cuba [Fig. 1.13a]. The *silueta* consists of only two curved lines made from sand that indicate a head, hips, and lower body, in a shallow pool of water on the beach. The title of the work and its documentation in film, Ochún, references a Santería goddess associated with sweetness, beauty, and rivers.[137] Mendieta made the piece with a group of students from Miami Dade Community College as part of the artist's visit to the campus and in conjunction with her participation in the exhibition *Latin American Art: A Women's View* at the college's art

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[136] Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 94.
[137] Viso, "The Memory of History," 93.

gallery.[138] *Ochún* is the only film in her oeuvre to feature sound, and the soundtrack is primarily the roar of the ocean and the sound of water rippling through the *silueta's* forms. The film cycles through several shots of the figure from various angles and then settles into a single shot of the work, where it remains for the final six minutes of the piece. The only subject in the film aside from the *silueta* is in the opening shot, which features a grouping of seagulls feeding in a small lagoon on the beach [Fig. 1.13b]. The seagulls dive in and out of the shallow water and hover gracefully just above it as they search for their prey. After this brief shot, the film then pans down the beach and rests on the *silueta*. The sounds of the cawing and chittering of the seagulls create a lively entry point to the work, in opposition to the stillness of the *silueta* form.

The work is located on a border: a natural border between land and the sea, as well as a geopolitical border between Miami and Cuba. The water moving through the form of the silueta will also reach the shores of Cuba. However, the geopolitical border is much more difficult to cross. The activities in these border zones are of great interest to theorists on Latin American identity. Shortly after Mendieta's death, Gloria Anzaldúa published *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which sought to examine what happens in the hazy zone where two territories meet as well as explore her own identity as a queer, Chicana woman. She writes, "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary [...] The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.'"[139] This

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[138] Joseph, "Filmography," 257.
[139] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th edition (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 25. Like Mendieta, Anzaldúa also refers to the traditions and cosmology of ancient Mesoamerica. For example, she is inspired by the Snake Woman as a representation of that which is feminine and earthly as opposed to the masculine and transcendental. She writes, "Forty years it's taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul." In reconnecting with the animal, Anzaldúa argues, we can reconnect with our bodies and with the rest of the natural world. She believes that

interstitial space contains within it everything and everyone who does not fit within the rigid binaristic thinking of colonial logic. Like a contact zone, it is a space where new possibilities can emerge. Mendieta's placement of her *Ochún* piece in such a border zone negotiates Anzaldúa's concept of a *frontera*.

Particularly in 1981, just after the Mariel Boatlift, the beaches of southern Florida were charged sites where legal and geopolitical transformation occurred. After an economic downturn, several thousand Cubans tried to leave the country by storming the Peruvian embassy. Fidel Castro agreed to allow them to leave and later announced that any Cuban who wanted to leave could go to any country that would take them through the port at Mariel Harbor. Between April and October 1980, over 100,000 Cuban refugees arrived in Florida. Castro took advantage of the exodus and also expelled "undesirables" from the country, including prisoners and mental patients, alongside the migrants. While these migrants were initially accepted by many Americans, opposition to the Mariel refugees and fears of an increase in crime rose as their numbers swelled.[140] It was thus a time of heightened recognition of the fluidity of borders—what crossing them might bring but also what it might risk. Known to be politically engaged, Mendieta likely followed this news and its reception in the United States closely.

Birds may have reappeared in Mendieta's work at this time as a useful metaphor for their boundary-crossing potential. Unlike the Cuban and American citizens, whose movements are circumscribed by geopolitical conflict, the birds shown in the film's first minutes can travel

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knowledge or awareness of this embodiment and this close connection to animals has been lost. "We've been taught that the spirit is outside our bodies or above our heads somewhere up in the sky with God. We're supposed to forget that every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it." Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera,* 48, 58.

[140] Reginald Stuart, "3 Years Later, Most Cubans of Boatlift Adjusting to U.S.," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1983, A1. U.S. policy towards Cuban refugees would be amended in 1995 with Clinton's "wet foot, dry foot" policy, which allowed only those Cubans who made it to the shores of the United States to enter, while those intercepted at sea would be repatriated.

freely between the two countries. The Mariel refugees were able to briefly take on this freedom of movement. They escaped from the standard restrictions on their movement and slipped through the border between the two countries. Birds are also commonly associated with transformation in ancient Mesoamerican religion and modern Latin American folktales. They occupy a contact zone between the human and animal world, one that can be entered by those with special abilities. Birds traverse boundaries and borders that limit human movements. By embodying the form of the bird, these limits can be overcome. *Ochún* is perhaps then an ode to those who were able to take on the form of a bird and evade previous limitations on their movements.

Conclusion

At a time when animals and their rights were undergoing rapid revision, Mendieta incorporated animals—either live animals or their remnants—into her eco-performance practice. In attempting to gain access to the world outside of the human, Mendieta appropriated animal mediators as guides and companions. This first took the form of an early student work, *Chicken Piece* (1972), in which Mendieta gently held the feet of a recently deceased chicken and allowed its blood to wash over her. Influenced by her growing knowledge of Santería and Afro-Cuban religious rituals, she sought out an animal to act as a conduit into the world of ritual. Mendieta learned from this piece, and her references to religious ritual became less direct and more invested in a metaphorical communion with a world outside the human. In 1974, she created a flurry of both animal and nonanimal works, and this productive period provides the greatest number of examples of animal works. In *Dog*, she began to engage in a process of careful noticing of the animal world. Both in her own actions in wearing the skin of the dog and in those

who witnessed the performance, the animal world crashed into recognition, its presence no longer under the radar. In *Ocean Bird (Washup),* she examined her "significant otherness" through embodiment. In attempting to transform into an ocean bird, both in her appearance and in her bodily movements, she gained a greater insight into being nonhuman. She ultimately came up short and recognized the impossibility of a total identification with any being outside of oneself. In *Blood + Feathers*, completed once the artist had returned to Iowa, Mendieta explored the "contact zone," that indeterminate zone where two entities meet and transformations occur. In documenting her transformation from human to bird, she plunged herself into that slippery space between human and animal. *Ochún*, too, examines a border or contact zone, a space outside of Western systems of colonialism and contemporary geopolitics.

Extracting Mendieta's animal works from her broader practice to analyze them in isolation has allowed us to see how animals act as collaborators in her broader goal of overcoming boundaries that separate humans from one another and from nonhuman nature. In their intimacy with humans, animals move more easily into recognition and comprehension, and this insight then allows Mendieta to gain a similar sympathy for other forms of the nonhuman. In works after 1974, she merges with a tree, a rocky slope, and a wet creek bank, respectively, all of which require an even higher level of dissociation from the human. This practice began with her animal works, which remain some of her most powerful and poignant articulations of the limits of the human and our embeddedness in nonhuman nature.

While at the time Mendieta may have been responding to new understandings of the place of nonhuman animals within human systems brought about by the animal rights movement or to alternative conceptions of animal life in contexts like Mesoamerica, the work has broader repercussions for contemporary viewers in light of climate change and with the assistance of

philosophical developments in animal studies and posthumanism. These models allow us to see the radicality of Mendieta's interventions, which position humans as enmeshed with nonhuman animals and all other forms of nonhuman life. In bringing these new theories and approaches to bear on her work, I shed light on the provocations they offer for rethinking the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, especially now at a time when global connections and climate change have resulted in an ever-increasing entanglement of species and systems that effects on the scale of global systems and microscopic bacteria in our bodies. Her performances wield animal forms to develop a form of embodiment that invites her engaged contemporary viewer to reimagine his or her own body as part of rather than separate from the entirety of the nonhuman world.

Chapter Two: Earthworkers: Work and Environment in Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80)

A photograph taken in the South Bronx on August 8, 1979, shows a meeting between an artist and a group of sanitation workers in the doorway of a garage [Fig. 2.1]. The workers, most in their dark green sanitation uniform, circle the artist, who is blonde and wearing a bubblegum pink shirt and matching pants. One appears to be speaking to her, gesturing with his finger touching his thumb to articulate a point. A man next to him, in only his undershirt, keeps his arms crossed and looks on incredulously. Several others in the circle look on and listen carefully. The artist, keeping her hands in her pockets, looks closely at the man speaking. The scene is not necessarily comfortable; there is an underlying tension, even distrust, between the men and the artist. However, they do not dismiss her, as they appear to be having a serious discussion. Perhaps this is due to the microphone, which enters from the bottom of the frame, or the camera itself. Despite some skepticism, the men, strategically, acknowledge that this might be a channel for them to challenge the public perception of them and their work. After this discussion, the artist will ask each worker to shake her hand, and she will say to them, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive!"

This moment was not unique. In fact, the artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, repeated it across the city, from July 1979 to June 1980, until she had shaken the hand of every sanitation worker in the city, over 8,500 at the time, in every district, at garages, incinerators, marine transfer stations, and at the city's largest landfill, Staten Island's Fresh Kills, for her piece *Touch Sanitation*. In a speech inaugurating the performance, given before the employees of the Manhattan District 1 Garage in Lower Manhattan, as well as the DSNY Commissioner, Norman Steisel, on July 24, 1979, she said, "There is a terrible gulf that exists between sanmen

[sanitation workers] and the public, that separates us in our denial of half of our lives, our mess, our waste […] I want to cross that gulf, and close it up, *literally, physically, hand-to-hand*" (emphasis my own). [141] Far beyond a superficial gesture of goodwill, a handshake carries a wealth of meaning. It requires close proximity, within arm's reach, and involves a face-to-face encounter. It is an intimate embrace, palm-to-palm, as well as a synchronized movement of the forearm and hands. It is a duet in microcosm. It symbolizes equality, familiarity, and a shared goal. While much has been said about *Touch Sanitation*—its logistical complexity, its relationship to feminism and conceptualism, and the artist's position as an early forerunner of public art—her choice to make the handshake the central element of this project and its existence as an extended performance has been largely left unanalyzed. I argue in this chapter that in engaging with the department's workers through performance, particularly through the physical, embodied connection of the handshake and the mimicking of their movements, Ukeles asserts the importance of an embodied ecological experience through the enactment of labor.

The choice of the Department of Sanitation as the site for this investigation came partly by chance, brought about by an offhand suggestion in a review by an art critic, and partly because garbage and sanitation work can be considered the closest link many urban dwellers have with the natural world in their daily lives. At the time Ukeles embarked on this performance, this close connection was being severed, as local incinerator projects were being curtailed by environmental regulation and community opposition and large open dumps like Fresh Kills were beginning to replace smaller, more evenly dispersed landfill operations within the city. The problem of garbage had reached "crisis" levels at the time and was a nascent concern for environmentalists, especially those interested in urban environmentalism. Garbage

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[141] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Sanman Speaks,* 1984.

was an ideal conduit for understanding the connection between bodies and the natural world because the point at which the city confronts its refuse is filled with skilled, moving, and working bodies. *Touch Sanitation* defines labor as the key to understanding this point of connection. Ukeles's work makes the case that through work we can gain access to a shared sense of being-in-the-world.

Within the history of environmental art, Ukeles is an outlier. Unlike earlier environmental artists such as Helen and Newton Harrison or Land artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, her work does not address "nature" as something existing outside of the places humans inhabit. Like her contemporary Agnes Denes, who planted a wheatfield in part of the former Battery Park landfill, Ukeles took up the urban environment as its terrain. It was only recently that garbage disposal had become loosely affiliated with environmentalist activism. Ukeles's practice is also pioneering in making strong connections between environmental and social ills, particularly the strained relations between environmentalist and labor movements. She forged links between the treatment of the sanitation workers themselves and the ignorance, neglect, and even disdain common in the relationship between humans and their environment. As environmental historian Richard White wrote, "Environmentalists must come to terms with work because its effects are so widespread and because work itself offers both a fundamental way of knowing nature and perhaps our deepest connection with the natural world."[142] The encounter of the sanitation workers with daily maintenance of New York City, and particularly its garbage, allowed them to develop an understanding of the city's ecosystem that went far beyond those who only appreciate the natural world for its aesthetic values.

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[142] Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1995), 174.

In this chapter, I narrate the elements of *Touch Sanitation* in fuller detail than any published account to date.[143] I situate the piece within the context of both performance art and environmental art, and I show how the work reveals fundamental connections between bodily labor and environmental protection. I contextualize the performance within the artist's broader practice, contemporary environmentalist concerns about a "garbage crisis," and the history of postmodern dance. Finally, I incorporate scholarship both within art history and from the environmental humanities more broadly on the relationship between art, the environment, and labor. I will show that, moving beyond the "art workers" and "worklike" dances of the 1960s, Ukeles's examination of the points of contact between the human and nonhuman places working-class labor squarely in its focus.[144] Ukeles' previous work was deeply invested in the value of labor. From her feminist perspective, she catalyzed a sustained investigation of the hierarchies of labor imbricated within categories of class and gender. Beginning with a reevaluation of domestic labor in a patriarchal society in her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art!* (1969) and her early works from the 1960s and 70s, she expanded this practice to engage with working-class labor in the mid-1970s. Labor, while traditionally viewed as harmful to the natural world or a less authentic experience of nature, has formed the primary meeting point between humans and nature for most of human history. Work is a site of environmental experience: the point in which humans have perhaps the most direct contact with the environment and the most capacity for either harm or healing. These earth-workers often already possess the embodied knowledge and expertise necessary to improve relations between humans and the nonhuman

[143] I rely on materials from the artist's extensive archive, which was recently acquired and made available to researchers at the Archives of American Art in 2020, as well as video footage of the performance I was able to access thanks to the Sanitation Foundation Archives.
[144] For more on art workers, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). On "worklike" dances of the Judson Dance Theater see Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*, October Books (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008); and Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

world. Ukeles's choice to address environmentalism through the lens of maintenance and labor puts pressure on the limitations of environmental art of her time, while also illuminating new paths in environmental activism more broadly, reinforcing coalitions between labor and environment and labor and art that were being tested in the new economic reality of the 1970s. This work has great relevance today, especially, in a time when calls for a Green New Deal reinforce the value of alliances between labor and environmental organizing.

Extending Past Existing Boxes: Existing Scholarship

The reception of Ukeles's oeuvre stretches beyond many postwar categories of art, from feminism and conceptualism to public art. In placing *Touch Sanitation* at the intersection of environmental and performance art, I hope to recover its most salient elements—its reliance on performative action and its far-reaching understanding of the work of the sanmen as environmental actors. Ukeles's first major piece of critical reception came shortly after writing her infamous *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* when this essay was picked up by Jack Burnham and published in an article he wrote for *Artforum* in 1971.[145] After reading this article, Lucy Lippard approached Ukeles to be involved in her *c. 7,500* exhibition focused on the work of women conceptual artists.[146] Thus began the artist's dual classification as feminist and conceptualist. Later, Lippard would write of their encounter, "Ukeles would pick up the possibilities of both [conceptual art and feminist art] and extend them way past their existing boxes, filling the famous gap between art and life in a manner Robert Rauschenberg probably

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[145] Jack Burnham, "Problems of Criticism IX: Art and Technology," *Artforum* 9, no. 5 (January 1971): 40-45.
[146] Lucy Lippard, "Never Done: Women's Work by Mierle Laderman Ukeles," in *Maintenance Art*, ed. Patricia C. Philips, (New York: Queens Museum, 2016): 15. She wrote of their first meeting, in a local playground each with a child in tow, that they were "two moms in the playground chatting about art that would shake up the art world for decades to come."

never imagined."[147] It is perhaps because of this boundary-pushing that Ukeles's work has struggled to find a neat position within the history of art of the 1970s. Early critical reception placed her well within the confines of feminist art, then just hitting its stride. Her work was featured in the feminist journal *Heresies* in both 1977 and 1978, and Lippard included her in several publications of the 1970s and 80s.

Beginning in the 1990s, a new framework for analyzing public art was beginning to take shape, one that would view Ukeles as one of its foremothers. Scholars such as Miwon Kwon, Shannon Jackson, Patricia Phillips, and Tom Finklepearl began to reassess the role of art in the public realm and proposed Ukeles's work, both in her *Touch Sanitation* piece and her later work with the Fresh Kills landfill, as models for future generations of public artists.[148] Kwon has traced public art schemes developed by the NEA and various state and local governments from the "plop art" model of placing large-scale versions of prominent contemporary sculpture in public spaces to "site-specific art" that was more attentive and responsive to the spatial, social, and political realities of its location.[149] Rather than coming in from outside and making a work without community buy-in, artists making "social works," as Jackson termed them, create an extended engagement with the communities in which they were working. She defined social works as, "an umbrella term for practices that performatively extend inherited art forms in space, duration, embodiment, and collectivity […]"[150] Jackson, in particular, admires Ukeles for her ability to reveal the "support" of the works she produces, thinking beyond support in a Greenbergian sense to incorporate both the institutional and social supports for both art and

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[147] Lippard, "Never Done," 15.
[148] See Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Patricia C. Phillips, ed. *City Speculations* (New York, NY: Queens Museum of Art, 1996); and Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000).
[149] Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 60-67.
[150] Jackson, *Social Works*, 18.

everyday life.[151] Much of this scholarship emphasizes the logistical challenges Ukeles faced in ingratiating herself within the department.

The first monographic publication on the artist came in 2015 with Kari Conte's publication, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Seven Work Ballets*. This text focused exclusively on Ukeles's *Work Ballets* series, which the artist began with the *Sanitation Celebrations* at the New York City Art Parade in 1983 and continued through a "Snow Workers Ballet" in Tokamachi, Japan in 2012. This text was closely followed by a major retrospective of Ukeles's practice held at the Queens Museum in 2016, organized by Patricia C. Phillips. This exhibition and its accompanying publication brought the long sweep of her career into greater relief, connecting for the first time her early experiments with maintenance art performances in her home through her long-term engagement as the official percent-for-art artist with the Fresh Kills Landfill. Phillips had published on Ukeles work for several years prior to organizing the show, and her perspective came out of the public art focus discussed above.

One early review of Ukeles's work came in *High Performance* magazine in 1982, and other brief mentions in various anthologies placed her within the history of performance art in the U.S. but also as existing somewhat outside of it. Her performance practice goes beyond the standards of the time in both duration and audience interaction. Similarly, while noted in shorter articles and given mention in various anthologies on the topic of environmental art, no extended analysis yet exists that places her work clearly within the historical context of postwar American environmentalism. This is despite the fact that in both her writings and interviews, the artist almost always clearly lays out her longtime dedication to this topic. As will be discussed further below, her first major writing, the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!,* devoted a third of its

[151] Jackson, *Social Works*, 33-38.

description of the proposed exhibition to considerations of "earth maintenance," and I will also show that writings created for the *Touch Sanitation* performance reveal that Ukeles connected her work with the Department of Sanitation with a specifically environmentalist ethos. Her projects after *Touch Sanitation* extend this aim, such as her work with Fresh Kills Landfill which continues to this day.

Becoming a Maintenance Artist

Ukeles's work with the Department of Sanitation is part of a larger body of work that examines maintenance activities—those actions that are necessary to maintain a steady state of a given being, from individual humans to cities, to the entire planet. Her interest in maintenance originated with her 1969 *Maintenance Art Manifesto!* [Appendix 2.A]. This four-page typewritten document was written in a single sitting but is the culmination of the artist's years of discontent with the art world's response to her and her work. While pursuing her MFA at the Pratt Institute in the early 1960s, Ukeles created sculptural work made with stuffed and dyed cheesecloth tightly bound to canvas backing that was labeled as "over-sexed" by her professors.[152] Following the departure of her mentor, who quit the school in protest of Ukeles's treatment, the artist left the program feeling isolated and unwelcome.

Ukeles continued to take classes and make work, but another major event disrupted her career in 1968—the birth of her first child. She would say later that she felt torn between being an artist and a mother.[153] While Ukeles struggled with these emotions, her husband, a city planner, was assisting with drafting the first New York City Comprehensive Plan. The plan

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[152] Patricia C. Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," in *Maintenance Art*, ed. Patricia C. Philips, (New York: Queens Museum, 2016), 31-32.
[153] Linda Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties: Sex, Food, Money/Fame, Ritual/Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 457.

divided the city's services into two major categories: development and maintenance. Development included all the programs meant to increase economic opportunities and help the city grow, while maintenance included all the city services meant to keep the city at a base level of functioning.[154] Ukeles was intrigued by this stark division and felt it applied to her life as well. She assumed that the great artists she had studied in school and admired, such as Jackson Pollock, were not bogged down with tasks like changing diapers and doing laundry due to their gender. Therefore, following in the footsteps of her "grandfather" Marcel Duchamp, she determined that, as an artist, all of what she did was art, and she would therefore perform her daily domestic activities but instead identify them as art.

The manifesto lays out this plan. It is divided into two sections, "Ideas" and "The Maintenance Art Exhibition: CARE," each with several subsections. In the "Ideas" section, she lays out the basic structure of development and maintenance. Development is "pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance…" while maintenance is summed up by her now well-known question: "[A]fter the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"[155] In her unique prose, which reads simultaneously like a rousing speech and a stream of consciousness, she lays out a long list of maintenance activities: "clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes…throw out the stinking garbage, watch out don't put things in your nose…"[156] The formulation of this list in itself is maintenance-like: even, repetitive, constant. The Ideas section sets out the binary of maintenance and development and then disrupts the hierarchy that places development as the pinnacle of achievement while

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[154] Phillips, "Making Necessity Art,", 24. See also, Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 302-304.
[155] Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 122.
[156] Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto," 123.

maintenance is regarded as the purview of women, the lower classes, and the racially marginalized.

The second half of the manifesto is devoted to an exhibition proposal in which Ukeles offers to live in a museum with her husband and baby and do all her everyday activities for the duration of the exhibition and call them art. She also proposes a series of interviews with people of many different types of occupations about the work that they do, including notably a sanitation worker. The final piece of the exhibition was to be called "earth maintenance." In this component, containers of various types of refuse, "one sanitation truck…polluted air…polluted Hudson River…ravaged land," would be brought to the museum daily to be "serviced," that is cleaned and/or rehabilitated.[157] This exhibition in its entirety never came to be, but it reveals that, dating at least back to 1969, Ukeles linked her concerns with feminism, maintenance, and environmentalism. It also shows the focus of her environmentalist thinking between 1969 and 1977. In the manifesto, the focus of the environmentalist "work" is on four elements: the sanitation truck, polluted air, polluted water (specifically from the Hudson River), and ravaged land. She places equal weight on elements of nature "out there" and those related most intimately with human life. Garbage and ravaged land are intermingled. Polluted air and water, while affecting whole ecosystems, also and most immediately pose a threat to human health.

As stated above, after seeing the manifesto printed in *Artforum*. Lucy Lippard invited Ukeles to include a photo album titled *Maintenance Art Tasks 1973* in *c. 7,500*, an exhibition focused on women conceptual artists. In the album (which also included its own attached dust rag to keep it clean), Ukeles included photographs of herself or her husband doing various tasks such as cutting hair, doing the dishes, and taking the baby to the pediatrician. She also exhibited

[157] Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto," 125.

a set of photographs called *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In* (1973) [Fig. 2.2] that depicted the artist bundling up her two young daughters in winter clothes to go play outside and shortly after undressing them to return to the house.[158] The lack of productivity and the droll repetitiveness of these tasks, which seem to always be undone as soon as they are done, are their key markers.

For some of the venues of the *c. 7,500* show, Ukeles also performed a series of maintenance art works live. For example, on July 22, 1973, she performed *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* and *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside* at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut [Fig. 2.3]. For this performance, the artist assiduously mopped and scrubbed with rags the floors of a single gallery and the steps outside of the museum. To designate the work, she posted signs stating plainly: "Dear Spectator,/ The cleanliness of this area is now being maintained as MAINTENANCE ART by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, artist."[159] On June 13, 1974, at New York's A.I.R. Gallery, Ukeles performed *Washing*, in which the artist obsessively scrubbed the sidewalk outside of the gallery from 2:00-5:00 pm [Fig. 2.4]. She worked on her hands and knees with a large bucket and some rags she had brought from home, often following passersby and cleaning right up to their heels.

The Collision of Labor and Maintenance Art at 55 Water Street

In the mid-1970s, she took the interactivity of her work to another level when she was invited by the Whitney Museum to participate in the exhibition *ART < > WORK* in their new space in a downtown New York skyscraper at 55 Water Street. For this exhibition, Ukeles created a piece, titled *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976) [Fig. 2.5], in which

[158] Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," 44-45.
[159] Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," 61.

she engaged all the building's maintenance employees. 55 Water Street was 52 floors high and covered four square city blocks. Roughly three hundred individuals were tasked with maintaining the building, and they worked in shifts covering twenty-four hours a day. Rather than incorporating a handful of museum or gallery visitors, this project engaged hundreds of individuals in a vast network of maintenance activities.

Before the exhibition, Ukeles circulated a letter to all building employees recruiting their participation in the project. She asked only that they choose one hour of their regular shift to perceive their daily activities as "art." During the run of the show, from September 16 to October 20, 1976, Ukeles would work in eight- to sixteen-hour shifts to engage with the staff. During these shifts, she would take a Polaroid photograph of the employees performing their work and ask them if what they were doing was "maintenance" or "art." The employees were not asked to alter their actions in any way, but only their perception of what they were doing. This charge placed agency for the performance in the hands of the participants, extending the power of artistic naming to the workers themselves. She then noted their selection on the polaroid with a pre-printed label.[160]

I will consider this performance in some depth, as it establishes some of the patterns that Ukeles would carry on in *Touch Sanitation* a few years later, and the response to this piece in fact sparked her collaboration with the Department of Sanitation. Prior to the opening of the exhibition, Ukeles first set herself to researching the various functions and types of labor required to maintain the building, as she would later do with the DSNY. She was impressed by the overall scale and complexity of the operation. She noted that it is "three and half million

[160] Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," 82-83.

square feet, 4 blocks square, the biggest single office building in the world [at the time]."[161] It has "miles of halls, walls, ceiling, floors, tiles, carpets, fans and 'units' [toilets]…to be maintained continually washed, waxed, dusted, scrubbed, sanitized, fixed, adjusted, unclogged."[162] After getting a sense of the operations of the building, she began to map out the various shifts of its maintenance workers. The building was operated in three shifts: 8:00 am to 4:00 pm, 4:00 pm to midnight, and midnight to 8:00 am. While she had planned to simply speak to the workers directly, she first had to be vetted and move through the hierarchy of the building from the building manager to the upper management at the building's owner, Uris Buildings, and its contracted cleaning company, National Cleaning. These negotiations took four months, and she gained access only the day before the exhibition opened.[163] She acknowledged this as her own unwilling absorption into this system. This taste of bureaucratic maneuvering would serve her well as she embarked on her odyssey through the Department of Sanitation.

In the exhibition space itself, she arranged the labeled Polaroid photographs of the workers in a large grid according to which shift the employee was working in the photograph. The work relied on Ukeles's first-hand encounters with each worker and therefore gradually accumulated throughout the run of the show. Ukeles recalled her own discomfort with the process when she realized that at the opening reception for the show, she had only a blank wall to present.[164] The photographs were arranged on a board according to whether they were taken during the single day shift (white background, indicated by a sun at the top), or during one of the two night shifts (dark blue background with a moon at the top). The individual photographs

[161] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "55 Water Street," 1977, box 3, folder 1, Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, c. 1960-2016, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
[162] Ukeles, "55 Water Street," 1977.
[163] Ukeles, "55 Water Street," 1977.
[164] Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," 82-83.

document individual workers or pairs of workers engaged in specific tasks. The tasks shown are unclear. In one set, a man is alone in a staircase [Fig. 2.5a, second row]. The photographs capture him opening a door, standing in the stairwell looking at his walkie-talkie, then walking down the stairs with an open note. His actions and their relationship to the overall goal of maintaining the building is unclear. These photographs are also labeled as "Maintenance Art." The repetition of unidentified tasks being performed by unnamed actors amplifies across the large scale of the photographic wall.

While the grid of photographs in the Whitney space forms the most visible product of the work, Ukeles also later wrote a report about the performance. Its typewritten format mimics the type of business communication that might have been created in an office at 55 Water Street, and it details both the preparations and some of the artist's observations as she completed the piece. In the report, Ukeles described the performative aspects of maintenance. She noted that, while the building was heavily guarded, its various levels of security were veiled from general visitors, so one would not be aware that certain areas of the building were much more restricted in access than others. Additionally, the cleaning crews were meant to move through the space virtually unnoticed. As many of the offices were staffed 24 hours a day, the cleaners often had to clean desks with people at them, doing their best to not disturb their work. Janitors were instructed to wear bowties during the day or clean work uniforms at night.[165] This directive was intended to make the maintenance staff to conform with, while remaining visibly distinct from, the building's white-collar workers. The whole operation relied on being seamless and hidden from view. She also noted the skill of the laborers, who, "graceful as a ballet dancer, perfect balance," would lift and maneuver hundreds of 70-pound bags of garbage through and out of the building

[165] Ukeles, "55 Water Street," 4. Ukeles noted that several photographs she had taken of men washing floors at night in their undershirts had to be destroyed, as the men could have been fired for this infraction of the dress code.

each day.[166] This experience of noting both the impressive skill and dramatic productivity of the building's workforce, but also its lack of visibility to the general public, prompted some of her thinking when facing the sanitation workers at DSNY.

This piece aligns with the work of many artists of the postwar period in its association of "art work" with working-class labor. Caroline Jones has elucidated how artists in the mid-twentieth century realigned their identity away from both the nineteenth-century ideal of a romantic individualist and the explicitly politically aligned socialist realist artists of the 1920s and 30s and towards an understanding of the artist as a businessman, such as a factory owner or an executive.[167] Julia Bryan-Wilson analyzes this reshaping of artistic identity formation in the Vietnam War era, scrutinizing the uneasy alliance artists attempted to form with working-class labor. In her book, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (2009), Bryan-Wilson states: "I argue that the term *art worker* would present an intractable conflict in that it connected art to work while also distancing artists from labor's specific class formations" (emphasis in original).[168] She narrates how New Left movements of the 1960s and 70s championed intellectual laborers, namely students and artists, as the carriers of the progressive banner rather than the dusty labor unions of the interwar era. Artists embraced this new directive and created their own approaches to collective bargaining, the most prominent of these being the short-lived Art Workers' Coalition. The group advocated for artists' rights, both for the inclusion of more diverse representation in mainstream institutions of art and for appropriate compensation and control of their own artistic products. Artists of this time directly associated themselves with

[166] Ukeles, "55 Water Street," 5.
[167] Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
[168] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 15.

blue-collar workers, as exemplified by Carl Andre's assertion that "the position of the artist in our society is exactly that of an assembly line worker in Detroit."[169] While they aligned their artistic practices with the labor of the working classes, these artists differed from their forebears in the 1920s and 30s in their distinct rejection of the working class as the audience to which their work was addressed. The kind of intentional populism apparent in work by artists involved with the Works Progress Administration, the Mexican muralists, or even the Russian constructivists was not an aim shared by the artists of the AWC. Their work embraced avant-garde formal qualities such as abstraction, a lack of finish or technical flourish, and the use of non-art materials. These aesthetic strategies limited their audience to a small circle of art world cognoscenti, a limitation that the artists did not seem eager to combat. Furthermore, with few exceptions, the artists of the AWC did not support organized labor protests or causes. Their activism was addressed to internal art world disputes.

Ukeles's work similarly traffics in an association between art labor and working-class labor, but she perhaps took heed of some of the failures of the previous generation in at least attempting to reach out directly to the working classes as both the audience for her work and to deploy her work as a catalyst for some, modest, changes in the working conditions of those she labored alongside.[170] In centering the piece for her exhibition at 55 Water Street on the building's maintenance workers, she engaged in the sort of institutional critique first put forward by the artists associated with the AWC. While these artists, even when they did engage working-class

[169] Quoted in Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 44. Andre's grounding in Marxist theory and purported affiliation with the proletariat was a point of contention in his later relationship with another artist in this dissertation, Ana Mendieta. Mendieta claimed when introducing Andre to other Cuban artists living on the island, they ridiculed him as living in *la teoría* with little experience in the reality of communist rule. Laura Roulet, "Ana Mendieta as Cultural Connector with Cuba," *American Art* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2012), 24.
[170] Ukeles's alliance with these workers did not come from her own upbringing or class background. Her father was a professor at the University of Colorado, Denver and rabbi, and her mother was a civic leader and supporter of the local synagogue and the Denver Symphony Orchestra. Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," 28.

laborers themselves, left their work and identities largely hidden behind their authorial voices, Ukeles illuminated the working-class labor necessary to support the exhibition of avant garde works of art in the Whitney's downtown gallery space that is often kept hidden from its audiences. In allowing the workers to co-create the piece, determining whether their daily routines constituted "maintenance work" or "maintenance art," she extended this critique to incorporate the workers' agency within the discourse surrounding their own labor.

While Ukeles learned that the workers otherwise showed little interest in the Whitney's offerings, they did visit the gallery to witness their inclusion in Ukeles's piece. And, because not all of the workers were on duty during the gallery's open hours, Ukeles also held a one-night closing reception from 12:00-1:00 am so that workers on the building's two night shifts could see the art created with their cooperation. Ukeles wrote of the reception, "A separate and true event: the union of the artist and the worker in the museum."[171] In siting the event "in the museum," this statement reflects the inequity of this union. The playing field for their convergence was still within the confines of the art institution, and the worker's participation in the project was delimited by the artist. Ukeles went much further than her predecessors in building a coalition between the artist and worker, but this work nevertheless reveals the limitations of these types of coalitions. The only benefit accorded to the worker was short-term recognition and perhaps the opportunity to adjust their own internalized appreciation of their work. Ukeles also undertook only a short-term program of engagement with the workers and did not attempt to work towards resolutions for any of their complaints. Some of these contradictions would find resolution in *Touch Sanitation*, while others would stubbornly remain.

[171] Ukeles, "55 Water Street," 16.

Maintenance Art Meets the Department of Sanitation

I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day (1976) garnered some attention for Ukeles, including several mentions in the press. One such review would shape the future of her career. David Bourdon, writing for *The Village Voice*, gave an overall positive recap of the piece as the most noteworthy in the downtown Whitney show. He concluded his article with this: "Let's hope that New York City's financiers pursue the implications of Ukeles's maintenance art. If the Department of Sanitation, for instance, could turn its regular work into a conceptual performance, the city might qualify for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts."[172] Bourdon's addendum suggesting the city use federal funding for the arts to cover the cost of basic city services was most certainly written to be a tongue-in-cheek comment on the city's dire financial situation, but Ukeles took him up on his suggestion. The first step was to send a letter to the Department of Sanitation commissioner, Anthony Vaccarello. In the letter, she includes the clipping of Bourdon's *Village Voice* article and proposes herself as an artist-in-residence for the department, pointing out that funding for such an enterprise might be available from the National Endowment for the Arts [Appendix 2.B]. Astonishingly, Vaccarello agreed to a meeting and offered the support of the department. Thus began the artist's decades-long relationship with the Department of Sanitation, one that, thus far, has spanned the careers of 12 commissioners.

As she had in the development of *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, Ukeles moved through the various bureaucratic hierarchies of the municipal government, inserting herself into these systems and playing by their rules, to gain access to the department's employees. Archival documents reveal the years of planning that went into developing these relationships. They show a long series of phone calls, face-to-face meetings, handwritten notes,

[172] David Bourdon, "Art," *The Village Voice* (October 4, 1976), 105.

and typewritten letters. Mimicking not only the "aesthetics of administration" but also its actions, this aspect of the work could also be called performance.[173] The artist had to observe and note the codes of behavior and pathways to access within the department hierarchy. She had to negotiate with the commissioner, various directors, and the sanitation workers' union.

From the end of 1976 through 1978, Ukeles conducted research on the department's functions, visiting district garages, incinerators, marine transfer stations, and the central repair shop. She also compiled news clippings revealing the poor treatment of the sanitation workers by the media and the city at large. During this period, the DSNY appointed a new commissioner, Norman Steisel, who was intent on reforming its operations, starting with its workforce. Ukeles's notes from her first meeting with Steisel illustrate their shared concerns.[174] After this meeting, she came away with a letter of support for the project from Steisel.[175] She would also later obtain a similar letter from the president of the sanitation workers' union, Edward Ostrowski.[176] The letters from Steisel and Ostrowski were apparently of such great importance in solidifying her role within the department that she included copies of them on the back of the pamphlet she sent out to all the sanitation workers as she began the performance [Fig. 2.6c]. Internal communications that granted her access to various aspects of the department indicate the department's motivations for their cooperation. A memo dated November 16, 1977, from Wilfred Horne, Director of Public Affairs, stated that he felt Ukeles's project would result in

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[173] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (1990): 105–43.
[174] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Notes from Meeting with Norman Steisel, October 9, 1978. Box 46, Folder 5. Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2019, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. The date on these notes indicate that Ukeles met with Steisel just about one month after he began his role.
[175] Letter from Norman Steisel (DSNY Commissioner, 1978-86) to Mierle Laderman Ukeles, December 15, 1978. Box 46, Folder 4. Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2019, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[176] Letter from Edward Ostrowski (President, Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association) to Mierle Laderman Ukeles, February 20, 1979. Box 46, Folder 4. Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2019, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

some “heavy public relations and morale boosting,” and directed the recipients of the memo to “go all out” to accommodate the artist’s presence.[177]

After securing the support of the department’s leadership, Ukeles still needed to address the workers directly. This would be a challenging project, one that would collapse if the sanitation workers were not on board or did not understand her intentions. In a later interview, Steisel himself expressed concern that the workers would not understand Ukeles as an artist. He said, “The real issue of course was that something that may work in an environment where there’s an intellectual understanding about it may not work in the Sanitation Department with a bunch of men who are maybe not as sophisticated. Were they going to be moved by any of this stuff, except maybe to ridicule it, in fact?”[178] He recalled one moment during initial discussions about the project in which a union representative said to him, “Well she really wants to impress us. She cares about us and wants to do something to make us feel better, short of taking her blouse off in the garage.”[179] This conversation highlights the rampant sexism in the department at the time as well as the challenge of the task Ukeles had taken on, especially as a woman entering a field dominated by men. Until 1986, the DSNY had no female sanitation workers, and the only women employees worked in the main office. As an artist, Ukeles was also coming from a field that was viewed as a province of the elite. She was therefore a total outsider.

Ukeles’s artistic practice since the *Maintenance Art Manifesto* in 1969 had been concerned with labor but also feminist issues, and she saw her work with Sanitation as an extension of her feminist praxis. She believed the concerns of maintenance workers of any

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[177] Memo from Wilfred Horne (Director of Public Affairs) to Chief Barra (Director of Operations), November 16, 1977. Box 46, Folder 18. Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2019, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[178] “Norman Steisel, DSNY Commissioner, 1978-86” in *Maintenance Art*, ed. Patricia C. Philips, (New York: Queens Museum, 2016), 197.
[179] “Norman Steisel, DSNY Commissioner, 1978-86,” 197.

gender aligned with feminism, which recognized in the 1960s that domestic labor was undervalued due to its association with "women's work." Her feminist politics included a reorientation of hierarchies of labor, not only those performed within the household but also those performed for society at large. The labor of maintenance, which primarily but not exclusively falls on women, was just as worthy of value as the labor of creativity. She wrote in an artist statement for an exhibition of this work in 1981:

> Is feminism's most critical mission not that of promoting another kind of individual careerism, but rather to organize women (including women artists) whose power inheres in being a historical maintenance class! and to forge with that organization a stunningly great powerful coalition of … all other kinds of maintenance/service laborers…to demand the Western artist's notion of empowering freedom of choice/action for one and all?? YES[180] *(emphasis in original)*

As described by Helen Molesworth in her article, "House Work and Art Work," Ukeles understood that a feminist critique of labor opened up a path to understand and critique all forms of labor, not only domestic, unpaid, or feminine forms of labor. "Here the everyday labor of mothering, of feeding, of bedtime stories, and cleaning is laid down next to humanist art discourse, Marxist analysis, and the cruel facts of political domination; their polyvalence renders them, if not equivalent, at least impossible to hierarchize."[181] This conceptual scaffolding for the project was not always conveyed so easily to the workers themselves. Ukeles at times attempted to challenge their thinking and build her desired coalition between women and workers, but it was not well received. For example, one worker complains that the residents of his district think the sanitation workers are like "their mothers," only existing to clean up after them. When Ukeles challenges him on this comment, the worker scoffs.[182] Coverage of her work with the

[180] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Works Mongo," 1981, box 4, folder 23, Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2016, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[181] Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," October, 92 (Spring 2000): 92.
[182] Ukeles, *Sanman Speaks*, 1984.

department was also tinged with sexism. Some journalists described her as a "housewife," while others described her role as bringing a "woman's touch" to the department.[183] This was the context in which Ukeles embarked on *Touch Sanitation*.

The brochure sent out to each worker in advance of the performance, informing them of her plans and officially inviting them to participate, included a letter from the artist addressed to each "sanman," a map of the performance route, and a list of the project's sponsors and endorsements.[184] The cover of this brochure centers the performance on the handshake itself [Fig. 2.6a]. The two figures, cut off at the forearm, enter the frame of the photograph from approximately the same height, conveying an equality between the two. Ukeles is seen in a white blouse with black trim, while the unidentified sanman is wearing a darker shirt with lighter trim. The ambiguous identity of the sanitation worker in the photograph allowed viewers to see themselves in this role. The text around this image, in typical Ukeles straightforwardness, identifies the title of the work, "A Maintenance Art Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles," and its outputs, "City-performance/Video/Exhibition," and a more detailed description, "Public Art with Public Workers in Public Spaces for the Whole Public. It's Time."

The letter inside addressed to each sanman begins with a basic outline of the proposed project, assuring the workers that the artist would not disturb their work, was not affiliated with the department or the union, and would grant the workers agency over the final product [Appendix 2.C]. It then goes on to lay out the artist's philosophy behind the project. Ukeles identifies the work as a performance and compares this with the work of the sanmen. She writes, "This term, 'performance', is important here because of the similarity with what <u>you</u> do. You are

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[183] Gary Taubes, "Artist Gets Thousands of Your Tax $$ To Shake Hands With Garbage Men," *National Enquirer*, October 23, 1979; Steven Marcus, "Sanitmen getting a woman's touch," *New York Post*, July 24, 1979, 12.
[184] Also reproduced in Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," 101.

out there 'on stage' in the public eye everyday, rain or shine, performing your work as 'the sanman', no matter how you are feeling inside." The letter lays out clearly that the ultimate form of the piece is the performance, with and by the sanitation workers themselves. Previous scholarship on this work tends to focus on its tangible components, such as this letter or the telex messages the artist sent out to the entire department each day or the map of the various "sweeps" the artist would take. This is a reasonable approach to take. As art historians, coming in years or even decades after the fact, these materials are more accessible to us than the feeling of a handshake in the early morning hours of a September day in 1979 or the artist's movements as she mirrored the worker's own quotidian choreographies. However, this letter makes clear that the performance *was* the piece. The ephemera were important and give a sense of the logistical sophistication necessary to accomplish such a task, but in the end, they are ancillary to the ultimate purpose of the piece, which was about individual exchanges between bodies and people.

The last three paragraphs of this letter, finally, lay out a broader context for the performance and the actions of the sanitation workers in the city. She writes, "You already work in the NEW way we will have to act on planet Earth…We're all 'in' it together, and we must all take part in caring for our living places and, ultimately, for the whole earth. Or we will destroy it." In this letter, Ukeles links directly the activities of the sanitation workers with an environmentalist aim. She chose the Department of Sanitation as one example, on an impressively large scale, of the ways that the everyday actions of an individual impact the health of the entire planet. She viewed the sanitation workers themselves, their embodied actions, as a connecting point between those individual actions and their larger effects.

A Brief History of Trash in New York City

To understand the challenges facing the department when Ukeles undertook the *Touch Sanitation* performance, I will now provide a brief history of garbage collection in the city, particularly as it relates to labor. This history highlights the strong connections between trash, labor, and the environment in urban areas. By the mid-1970s, concern was growing that the United States was running out of land on which to dump its garbage, a situation quickly escalating into what some environmentalists termed a “garbage crisis.” From the perspective of the present, this “crisis” of storage appears overblown. However, the labor issues plaguing the department in the wake of New York City’s financial crisis and the looming threat of privatization of municipal services, including garbage collection, were at the point of boiling over. Like the minimalist artists affiliated with the Art Workers’ Coalition, who revealed a nostalgia for the labor of rust-belt manufacturing that was quickly becoming replaced by workers in the information economy, Ukeles perhaps also engaged in a certain kind of nostalgia for the era of robust public infrastructure that was rapidly disappearing. Rather than viewing the environmental issue of garbage disposal and the labor issue of garbage collection as distinct, she had the foresight to acknowledge their overlaps. As I will return to in chapter three, attention from environmentalists on municipal refuse would develop into the environmental justice movement in the 1980s and beyond, which was particularly concerned with the siting of landfills, incinerators, waste transfer stations, and recycling facilities. What will become clear throughout this history is that in attempting to solve a garbage crisis, labor becomes a key site for environmental intervention.

After World War II, solid waste generation in the United States steadily increased due to growing consumerism and the evolution of single-use packaging and products.[185] Thus, in the 1960s the first federal regulations on solid waste management appeared along with a general awareness of a "garbage crisis," or a concern about not having enough space to dispose of the massive amounts of garbage generated by American consumers.[186] This concept of the garbage crisis marked the point at which garbage became an issue relevant to environmentalists. This was made especially clear in the city in 1968 when the Department of Sanitation merged with the Departments of Air and Water Resources to form the New York City Environmental Protection Agency.[187] In an article in *New York Magazine* in 1969, columnist Paul Wilkes mused that "…[T]he day is fast approaching when there will be no more land we can reclaim with our refuse, save with garbage, build [sic] up with our cast-offs." Wilkes noted specifically that New York City's landfill space would be used up within eight years.[188] Nationally, there was growing concern about exponentially increasing amounts of garbage and shrinking lands on which to dispose of it. A 1973 report by the League of Cities and United States Conference of Mayors stated that solid waste was growing five times faster than population growth and estimated that almost half of the cities the task force surveyed would run out of landfill space to meet their disposal needs within 1-5 years.[189] The task force placed blame for the crisis on both the increase in packaging and disposable materials as well as increasing environmental regulations making practices like incineration less feasible.

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[185] Benjamin Miller, *Fat of the Land: Garbage in New York: The Last Two Hundred Years* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2000), 176-77.
[186] Miller, *Fat of the Land,* 190.
[187] Steven Hunt Corey, "King Garbage: A History of Solid Waste Management in New York City, 1881-1970" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York, New York University, 1994), 320.
[188] Paul Wilkes, "The Garbage Apocalypse," *New York Magazine*, March 10, 1969, 23-27.
[189] League of Cities and United States Conference of Mayors, *Cities and the Nation's Disposal Crisis* (Washington, DC: National League of Cities and United States Conference of Mayors, March 1973), 1-2.

While concern over where garbage in New York would end up was palpable during the 1970s and 1980s, the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island was able to handle the large amounts of garbage produced in the city and, in fact, could have continued to operate for another two decades after its closure in 2001.[190] A more pressing crisis in the overall waste collection pipeline since the emergence of municipal waste collection was labor, which was its single largest cost.[191] One example sheds light on the longer history of these problems and provides a model for how to address them in the twentieth century. In 1895, Colonel George Waring was appointed street cleaning commissioner and began a campaign to increase the cleanliness of the city based on his knowledge as an engineer and his belief in the power of a sanitary environment to promote not only aesthetic improvements but also improvements in overall public health.[192] Not only interested in technological fixes, Waring instituted reforms that acknowledged the importance of human labor to the endeavor of street cleaning. He first outfitted his crews with all-white uniforms, allowing them to stand out as city employees and associate their work with that of nurses or physicians in promoting good health. He also involved the wider community in the work of keeping the city clean by hosting annual parades of sanitation workers through the city and forming a Juvenile Street Cleaning League that recruited children to help bolster the department's efforts. Beyond better marketing for the department, Waring also reformed labor conditions, instituting an eight-hour workday, raising wages, and developing a system to address employee grievances.[193] Despite his success in making the department more efficient, effective, and visible to the public, Colonel Waring was removed from his post during a change in

[190] Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 112.
[191] Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 179, 195.
[192] Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 50.
[193] Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 54-55. The signature white sanitation trucks of today, which have been in use since 1966, likely took inspiration from Waring's "White Wings" uniforms.

administration in 1898. His approach, however, inspired the work of other reformers across the nation and shares some similarities with the work of Commissioner Norman Steisel.

Labor issues continued to plague the department through the mid-twentieth century. In the 1970s, the primary cause of the department's labor issues was the lasting effects of New York City's financial crisis. In 1975, as a result of the city's new "crisis" budget put into place under Mayor Abe Beame, the DSNY laid off nearly 1,500 workers.[194] The department was therefore forced to reduce pickups and street cleaning operations at a time when the amount of garbage was steadily increasing. The cuts also extended to the department's capital, including the purchasing of new trucks to replace aging equipment. At one point, around 40 percent of the department's fleet of 1,800 trucks was unusable due to mechanical failures, a problem worsened by layoffs among the mechanics charged with repairing them.[195] Because so few of the trucks were operable, workers had to share those that remained, forcing many to work at night on unpredictable schedules and driving down morale.

Sanitation cutbacks were the most visible of the city's austerity measures to the public. Garbage piling up in the streets was tangible to most citizens, whereas cuts to police and fire services might not be as readily apparent. Garbage collectors, therefore, often faced the brunt of the public disdain for the city's overall financial situation in the form of crude comments and mistreatment from residents on their daily routes.[196] The press circulated these ideas and articles about the department often had sensational headlines such as: "[Mayor] Koch lets retiring sanit cats lap up overtime," "Absences climb as many sanitmen play sick-and-treat," and "Sanitmen

[194] Ari Goldman, "Study Finds City as Clean as in '74 Despite Layoffs", *The New York Times*, November 30, 1975.
[195] Nathaniel Sheppard Jr., "City Trash Pickups 'at a Critical Stage,' Officials Assert," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1976.
[196] Enid Nemy, "And What Work Does Your Father Do? 'He's a Sanitationman and I'm Proud,'" *The New York Times*, August 1, 1975.

put city over a barrel on forced OT." [197] When interviewed by *The New York Times* about this lack of respect for his profession in 1975, sanitation worker Charles Walton said, "I've had things drop[ped] on my feet, been cut with glass, and had people hold their noses as we walked down the Street picking up their garbage…But I don't care, it's an interesting job: We don't just pick up garbage, we're like engineers, we have to know how to handle all kinds of equipment. The public doesn't understand our jobs."[198] Even the short-lived commissioner, Anthony Vaccarello, seemed discouraged by the state of sanitation work, stating in 1976: "We are in a crisis situation in which our ability to provide a minimum standard of service is at or below rock bottom."[199] This lack of confidence from the top of the department's leadership filtered down to its rank-and-file. While New York maintained municipal control over its residential trash hauling, it was during this period that the threat of shifting to private contractors for collection began to emerge. It was believed that private haulers would keep costs down, which was appealing in the era of financial crisis.[200] Major private collection companies of this era also began a long-term process of consolidation, and by 1980 only three companies dominated the U.S. market.[201] While the city ultimately did not succumb to market pressure for privatization, the question continues to haunt the department to this day. Thus, the sanitation workers of New York were public employees at a time when government cutbacks and the privatization of all municipal services loomed large.

[197] All headlines from *New York Daily News*, 1979, box 46, folder 16, Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2019. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[198] Nemy, "And What Work Does Your Father Do?'" 40.
[199] Nathaniel Sheppard, "City Trash Pickups 'at a Critical Stage,' Officials Assert," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1976.
[200] Brian Kates, "Prof: Private sanit can save $," *New York Daily News*, July 31, 1979, box 46, folder 16, Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2019. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[201] Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 198.

When Norman Steisel was appointed commissioner in 1978, he confronted labor issues directly and made great improvements to both the morale and efficiency of the department. He involved the sanitation workers directly in the decision-making process and created rapport between the workers and department managers, in part by routinely promoting from within the organization.[202] With this newfound cooperation, the department was able to adjust from three- to two-men crews on most trucks, sharing the cost savings with the truck operators themselves. The department also automated the process of painting trucks and changing tires based on recommendations from workers themselves.[203] It is easy to understand why, when introduced to the artist brought on by his predecessor to create an artwork with the entire sanitation department, he was eager to promote Ukeles's work and granted her unprecedented access to the department. What both Steisel and Ukeles understood was that garbage was not only a technical problem or an environmental problem, but also a human one.

Ukeles was perhaps more attuned than others to the significance of labor in the garbage crisis. She was aware of this negative dialogue in the press and collected the sensationalist articles mentioned above as part of her research on the department. Beyond simply finding space for garbage, which was often limited by NIMBYism more than an actual shortage of land, the prompt and safe collection, distribution, and dumping of garbage relied on a large and undervalued pool of laborers. Despite their importance, "Environmentalists have come to associate work—particularly heavy bodily labor, blue-collar work—with environmental degradation…Nature has become an arena for human play and leisure."[204] This was the

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[202] Marc Holzer, "Productivity In, Garbage Out: Sanitation Gains in New York," *Public Productivity Review* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1988), 41-43.
[203] Holzer, "Productivity In, Garbage Out," 47. See also, Miller, *Fat of the Land*, 236. Ukeles gets a small mention by Miller as an unnamed performance artist brought in as part of Steisel's reforms.
[204] White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?'," 172-73.

summation of the state of events by Richard White in his 1995 essay, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work For a Living': Work and Nature." The essay would initiate a long dialogue on the relationship between work and nature in environmental history. White lamented the recent disdain he perceived from many environmentalists for laborers. He felt that, throughout history, how humans came to know nature was felt first and most profoundly through reshaping the land with their labor. His book, *The Organic Machine*, aimed to correct this deficiency by telling the story of how the Columbia River was shaped and reshaped by both Native American and Euro-American labor. Later scholars would address histories of coal miners, gold rushers, and copper smelters, all of whom formed a deep connection with their surroundings through their work.[205]

Scott Dewey, for example, has noted that while by the 1980s environmentalists and unions appeared opposed, labor unions had historically developed sophisticated support for environmentalist initiatives prior to their adoption in the mainstream environmentalist movement.[206] Up to the 1960s, most Americans viewed the conservationist and antipollution movements as distinct, and the transition into modern environmentalism marked the turning point at which these two causes became intertwined. However, union organizers anticipated this convergence in advocating for both wilderness conservation and the protection of workers from industrial pollution in the early-to-mid twentieth century.[207] As Christopher Sellers points out, it was in the context of the workplace in which the environmental health dangers of industrial

[205] Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).; Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).; Kathryn Taylor Morse, *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003).; and Laurie Mercier, *Anaconda: Labor, Community, and Culture in Montana's Smelter City* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
[206] Scott Dewey, "Working for the Environment: Organized Labor and the Origins of Environmentalism in the United States, 1948–1970," *Environmental History* 3, no. 1 (1998): 45.
[207] Dewey, "Working for the Environment," 47.

materials first became understood. The development of our understanding of workplace hazards in the first half of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for expanding this knowledge to incorporate the health of entire communities in the 1960s.[208] Ukeles entered this conversation at a time when the links between labor and environmental causes were seen as distinct, and she worked to recover the association between them.

American labor unions also believed that their organizing would result in increased leisure time among the working class, and therefore advocated for the protection of public parks and nature preserves for worker recreation. In the 1960s, the AFL-CIO argued that spending time in natural environs would be a "soul restoring spiritual antidote to the over-urbanized, over-mechanized society."[209] This alliance between labor and environmentalism was, however, shaken during the economic downturn of the 1970s. As workers realized their assumptions of continued growth and reliable employment were behind them, they became less forceful in their advocacy for both health and safety issues and wilderness protection in favor of working to simply keep the jobs they had. Simultaneously, the environmentalist movement began to question the values of economic growth and overly industrialized societies, leaving blue-collar workers behind.[210] Something akin to this alliance would return, however, with the development of environmental justice in the 1980s and after, which defined the environment as the places "we live, work, and play."[211]

The *Touch Sanitation* performance presaged, more than other environmental art of the period, the growing understanding of the intersections between environmental problems and

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[208] Christopher C. Sellers, *Hazards of the Job: From Industrial Disease to Environmental Health Science* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 2.
[209] Dewey, "Working for the Environment," 51.
[210] Dewey, "Working for the Environment," 58.
[211] Stefania Barca, "Laboring the Earth: Transnational Reflections on the Environmental History of Work," *Environmental History* 19 (2014): 18.

human social problems. In the 1980s, U.S. environmentalism underwent a considerable shift. While the movement benefited from bipartisan public and political support for regulation in the 1970s, during the Reagan years the federal government was openly hostile to the aims of environmentalists. During this period, a more activist, community-oriented brand of environmentalism appeared under the banner of environmental justice. Garbage would also become a central point of contention in this new era of environmental activism. Where it ended up, and whose neighborhoods it traversed on its way there, would become important causes of environmental justice movements. Ukeles in some ways anticipated this, but in other ways missed the mark. She did not account for the racial makeup of the department's laborers or the disproportionate siting of noxious facilities in poor neighborhoods or communities of color. This is despite the fact that protests over DSNY's unequal treatment of poor and minority communities had been occurring for at least a decade.[212] Additionally, one of the most well-known debates within the environmental justice movement was emerging during the time Ukeles was working with the DSNY. Mayor Koch restarted talks aimed at siting a new waste-to-energy incinerator plant in the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1978, and it received its first environmental impact report in 1984.[213] The neighborhood represented a community that was both

[212] Robert R. Gioielli, *Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis: Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 35. For example, in 1969, the Puerto Rican civil rights group the Young Lords organized the burning of garbage in the streets to protest the lack of trash pickups and street cleaning in their East Harlem neighborhood.

[213] First proposed in 1967, the waste-to-energy plant planned to be sited in the Brooklyn Navy Yard faced steep community opposition until it was abandoned altogether in 1995. Despite support from the Department of Sanitation, the state of New York, and both the Koch and Dinkins mayoral administrations, the plan for the incinerator was brought down by the decades-long intervention of local community groups. These groups were concerned about the impact of the plant's toxic emissions, especially dioxin, on human health. Opposition to the plant's siting in Williamsburg brought together two unlikely allies, Hasidic Jewish and Latino residents, who worked together to protest, lead marches, and flood town hall meetings about the project. This local support brought the project to the attention of national allies such as Barry Commoner, a well-known public scientist, who provided research to support the claims of the community organizers. Because of the success of this grassroots approach and the unexpected coalitions that it yielded, the story of the defeat of the Brooklyn Navy Yard incinerator has become a major success story in the history of the environmental justice movement. Sze, *Noxious New York*, 74-81.

economically and racially marginalized and was targeted to bear an unequal proportion of the costs of environmental protection while not receiving an equivalent amount of its benefits. To my knowledge, Ukeles was not involved in this dispute, thus revealing a blind spot in her overall project of engaging environmentalism and waste disposal with class and social issues in her work.

The *Touch Sanitation* Performance

Returning now to Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation* performance, I will center the performance itself within the overall project and Ukeles's "earthworkers" ethos. Ukeles's path through each of the fifty-nine districts was mapped out in advance, allowing her to greet every sanitation worker in the district, alternating between boroughs in a spiraling path through a series of ten "sweeps" [Appendix 2.D]. She began on July 24, 1979, and continued until June 26, 1980.[214] She worked in the same shifts as the sanmen and at varying hours of the day, allowing her to experience the full range of the workers' daily activities. She also, in some instances, worked what is called a "round robin," wherein employees with less seniority work two shifts with only eight hours off between them. For example, in sweep 8, on April 15, 1980, she worked 6:00 am to 3:00 pm, followed by another shift from 11:00 pm to 8:00 am.[215] The eleven-month duration of the performance allowed her to work in all four seasons, in both the extreme heat and freezing cold of New York City. This was an endurance performance. She described later the fatigue brought on by the work and even tears after some of those round robin shifts.[216]

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[214] Initially, she planned for the performance to take 3 months. However, the department, amid Steisel's reforms, underwent redistricting, forcing Ukeles to rework her itinerary several times to adjust to the new district boundaries.
[215] "Touch Sanitation Itinerary," 1980, box 3, folder 38, Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2016, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[216] "Typical Performance Day," 1980, box 48, folder 5, Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2016, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

Her daily activities were relayed to all employees through the department's telex system. Telex messages were sent out daily to each district and were posted on bulletin boards for employees. Her hand- and typewritten instructions detail what these messages said, "Good morning. The maintenance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles will begin Sweep 4 in Manhattan District 4 today to TOUCH SANITATION." This message was followed by instructions to post it on the bulletin board and read it at roll-call at the beginning of each shift. Therefore, even when Ukeles was not visiting a district, all the department's employees could track her movements. The messages are remarkably consistent, save for occasional notes on the progress of the performance, such as the halfway point. Ukeles employed seriality and repetition, a remark on the seriality and repetition of maintenance work itself. One consistency was that each announcement ended with the words "to touch sanitation." This phrasing clarified the title of the piece. The intended goal was to "touch" (verb) sanitation, rather than a consideration of "touch" (noun) sanitation. While, as I will show, the ritual of visiting each district was much more complex, the central aim was simple: to touch the city's sanitation system through the act of shaking hands with each of its workers.

Once Ukeles arrived at each district station, the performance generally involved three components: "Roll Call", "Handshake Ritual", and "Follow in Your Footsteps." I base my description of each of these components both on Ukeles's own typewritten document "Typical Performance Day" [Appendix 2.E] found in her archive as well as on the photographic and video documentation she directed.[217] The video footage was eventually compiled into two films, each about one hour long, that debuted at the *Touch Sanitation Show* in 1984, *Waste Flow* and

[217] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Typical Performance Day," box 48, folder 5, Mierle Laderman Ukeles Papers, circa 1960-2019, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. I was able to view *both Waste Flow* and *Sanman Speaks* thanks to the Sanitation Foundation.

Sanman Speaks. For "Roll Call," the artist spoke to the workers at roll call at the start of their shift. This speech likely paralleled that which she gave on her first day in Manhattan's first district, quoted above. In this speech, she explained why she was there, stated her thoughts on the importance of the work they were doing, and acknowledged that the sanmen were overlooked and unappreciated. Her speeches became more impassioned and aggressive as she spoke with more and more sanmen and heard their stories.[218] This practice has more in common with traditional performance than the other two components of the overall piece. Here, the artist/performer stands in front of a specific audience for a specific duration and performs what might be described as a monologue, meant to convey a feeling or emotion about the work that they do. The "Roll Calls" contained defined roles of audience/observer and performer/actor.

The "Handshake Ritual" is the most widely acknowledged component of the performance and provides its organizing structure. After roll call, Ukeles would shake the hands of approximately 40 sanitation workers a day while repeating the phrase "Thank you for keeping New York City alive!"[219] [Fig. 2.7]. The artist stated that she wanted to "fac[e] each one bodily"[220] while making the statement and that she did not want it to become "mechanical." She hoped to invest each encounter with meaning and value for both herself and the worker. Each worker would remove their gloves before the exchange so that there would be physical contact between the artist and the worker.[221] Ukeles would later say, "I felt I had absorbed eighty-five hundred volts of electricity through my right hand from shaking that many hands and that energy was residing inside of me."[222] It was this physical exchange, both tactile and gestural, that forms

[218] Ukeles, "Typical Performance Day."
[219] Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," 99.
[220] Montano, *Performance Artists Talking,* 454.
[221] Grace Glueck, "Art People," *The New York Times*, August 10, 1979.
[222] Montano, *Performance Artists Talking*, 455.

the center around which the rest of the performance turns. It links, materially, the body of the artist with the body of the worker and, symbolically, the body of the worker with the body of the public that he serves. When asked by a worker what kind of art she made, Ukeles responded, "This is the art! Right here—the touch!", as she enthusiastically shook the hand of his fellow sanitation worker.[223]

The statement "Thank you for keeping New York City alive!" also amplifies this bodily connection.[224] "Alive" signals that the city forms a being that can be said to be living. This living being therefore requires maintenance to sustain it, including the maintenance of waste removal. Just as individual human bodies rely on a natural process of consumption and the removal of waste and impurities, so too does the city. Bodies also form relationships with other beings, from the billions of bacteria occupying our digestive tracks to the plants and animals we eat to the other humans we rely on for community. These relationships are not supplementary to our survival but integral to it. The statement signals a kind of ecological thinking, acknowledging the similarity of sanitation work to the work of living. The repetition of this statement to each worker would add layers to its meaning, that each individual was to be praised for keeping the city alive but also that their work as a unit also has agency in this endeavor.

After meeting with the sanitation workers in their morning roll call and shaking each of their hands, Ukeles would walk with the workers on their routes and observe their daily routines. She sat and talked with them on coffee and lunch breaks. She picked up bits of "mongo" (items recovered from the garbage), which she saved for her planned exhibition. She toured their section offices and made note of their unsanitary conditions. Often, hundreds of men would be

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[223] Ukeles, *Sanman Speaks*, 1984.

[224] Ukeles would return to this statement in 2020, during the covid-19 pandemic, wherein she created a billboard in Times Square, New York City, with the words as a dedication to the essential workers maintaining the city while others were able to remain in their homes.

sharing a single shower, and much of the furniture in the break rooms was mongo. She followed the flow of the workers and the garbage from street clean-up to the back of the hopper to incinerators and marine transfer stations and finally to Fresh Kills. In general, she attempted to get a grasp on every aspect of sanitation work in the city, focusing her attention on the conditions for the workers.

While accompanying the workers in their daily routines, Ukeles would perform the third component of the performance, called "Follow in Your Footsteps." She would carefully observe and then repeat their quotidian gestures, such as leaning over to pick up a bag of garbage or twisting to empty a curbside garbage can into the truck [Fig. 2.8].[225] From video documentation of the performance, we can see these movements in action. Ukeles, much like the avant garde dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer, discussed below, performs these gestures with a certain evenness of effort. She appears to be "marking" the movements of the workers rather than attempting to recreate them. Marking is the process by which professional dancers perform choreography for rehearsal, without giving it their maximum effort which could risk injury or fatigue. Ukeles did not pick up any garbage or control any trucks (perhaps due to her limited status as "artist-in-residence" rather than a full-fledged employee). She did, however, "mark" their movements as if attempting to commit them to memory like choreography. She also took note, both through this marking and through verbal conversations with the workers, of the skill involved in these actions. In video documentation, she repeatedly comments on the difficulty of the task the worker is performing, either the strength involved in accomplishing it or its overall complexity. When speaking with a crane operator in the process of moving garbage from barges onto trucks at Fresh Kills, Ukeles observes him pushing buttons, pulling multiple levers,

[225] Phillips, "Making Necessity Art," 99.

signaling to his colleagues his next move, and awaiting their replies. She looks on with amazement and asks "So, you're doing six things at the same time?...That's talent!"[226] Similarly, she speaks to another worker about the skill required for lifting and loading garbage from cans on the street into the hopper of the garbage truck. The worker acknowledges this difficulty: "Legs and twisting movements, everything, you have to be smooth…all your motions have to be fluid."[227] The worker here is describing the expertise required to properly perform what is often described as "unskilled" labor. He describes his work as requiring smoothness and fluidity, much as a dancer might describe their movements.

Photographic documentation of "Follow in Your Footsteps" shows Ukeles, often clad in either green or pink painter's clothes, standing a few feet from a worker mirroring exactly their movements. One shows her walking just a few feet behind a worker, taking on his gait and arm movements, while another shows her crouching down in red sneakers as the workers lift bags of garbage from the street and toss them into their truck. In one photograph [Fig. 2.9], Ukeles, in bubblegum pink work pants and a dark green coat, stands beside a worker in a similar dark green DSNY uniform and wearing gloves and sunglasses before three garbage cans, filled to the brim with "material" (the sanman's word for trash). The worker appears to be lifting the lid off the can in the center, while Ukeles carefully mirrors the gentle twist of his torso and the placement of his hands and arms with her own body. She is turned away from the viewer, her attention directed at the body of the worker, while he is facing us, with a smile (indicating perhaps his amusement with either Ukeles or the fact that he is being photographed). In the background, we see only the distinctive white sanitation truck, cutting off further recession into space and framing the scene of these two figures within the larger field of sanitation work.

[226] Ukeles, *Waste Flow*, 1984.
[227] Ukeles, *Waste Flow*, 1984.

This facet of the performance likely took up the bulk of Ukeles's time with the DSNY, but often receives little note in scholarship on the piece. I argue it sheds light on the goals of the entire work. Rather than simply a gesture of goodwill, if we view the handshake alongside the work "dances" Ukeles performs on the streets, we can see that the piece is explicitly attuned to the tactile. Another gesture of reverence, perhaps a round of applause or salute, would not have allowed the artist to physically "touch sanitation." "Follow In Your Footsteps" highlights that the performance inherently relies on an embodied form of knowledge production, that somehow the work of sanitation in the city of New York cannot be fully understood without performing the movements of the workers themselves and making physical contact with those workers. In fact, in one interview, which Ukeles included in *Sanman Speaks*, a worker says just that. He states: "Nobody know[s] nothing about our job until they work with us. You gotta be behind the hopper, that's when you really understand the job… that's when you understand the job, when you work back there for one day, breathing it."[228] Their (material, fleshy, moving) bodies are inextricable from this system in the same way that the bodies of the New Yorkers who produce the garbage are also inextricable from it. By linking these two (with Ukeles as a stand-in for the residents of the city/beneficiaries of this labor) through the act of a handshake, she posits this touch (and the body as a whole) as the connection point between humans and one another as well as between humans and nonhuman nature. She also opens up the limits of the body beyond the boundaries of the skin. Bodies in Ukeles's practice are part of a constellation of beings, both human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, that make up our planet, arranged in configurations of varying scales, from the single human body, to the "living" city, to the entire planet.

[228] This worker is given quite a lot of screen time in the video, noting that the smells, sounds, and feelings of bodily exhaustion are also key to this understanding. Archival documents also show Ukeles herself making a note of this clip and ensuring its inclusion in the final cut of the video. Ukeles, *Sanmen Speaks*, 1984.

While we have seen that Ukeles in her initial communications clearly defined the work as a performance, it breaks with many of the conventions of traditional performance. For example, while a typical performance lasts one to three hours and takes place in a single location, this piece encompassed countless eight-hour shifts over eleven months, across all five boroughs of New York City. Thus, no single viewer or audience was able to view *Touch Sanitation* in its entirety. Furthermore, the sanmen became both observers and participants in the performance, and Ukeles herself implied that the entire city, everyone who aided in the creation of the garbage, was a participant as well. The roles of audience and actor were thus indistinguishable. Finally, the theatrical standards of clear linear development or narrative are also left behind. In a nod to both serial art and the repetitive nature of maintenance work, the *Touch Sanitation* performance consisted of a series of actions that were repetitive, monotonous, and ultimately unproductive—the first day of the performance was more or less identical to the last.

Following in the Footsteps of Yvonne Rainer and Postmodern Dance

In the "Follow in Your Footsteps" ritual, it becomes especially clear that Ukeles's work aligns with then-recent developments in post-modern dance that embraced tasklike movements and presented the body in its full weight and physicality. While it is uncertain what direct ties Ukeles had to the group of dancers and artists surrounding the Judson Dance Theater, as an artist in New York City in the 1960s and '70s, she likely was aware of their activities and she would later point to the leading Judson choreographer Yvonne Rainer in particular as an influence.[229] Bringing her work into conversation with the avant garde forms of dance being developed at

[229] Kari Conte, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Seven Work Ballets* (Amsterdam: Kunstverein Publishing, 2015), 13.

Judson allows us to perceive performance as essential to both the conceptualization and enactment of *Touch Sanitation*.

Yvonne Rainer (b. 1934) was instrumental in promoting this new form of dance and in organizing the Judson Dance Theater in the early-1960s where dancers such as Steve Paxton, Deborah Hay, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, and Trisha Brown all gathered. Within this fertile milieu, Rainer began to develop dances that denied both technical virtuosity and emotional resonance. Rather than highlight the dancer's unique abilities, Rainer's choreography highlighted everyday movements and the object-like quality of the body. The dancers in her performances wore street clothes rather than tights and leotards and embraced ungainly, awkward movements, sometimes enhanced by Rainer's instruction to carry heavy props.[230] The dances also denied the modernist ambition to convey heightened emotion through bodily movement but rather presented the body and its movements in its ordinary state. In her manifesto-like statement of 1965, Rainer sums up her strategy for a new form of dance: "NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe […] no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer..."[231] In some of her work, such as *We Shall Run* (1965), the choreography was meant to occupy the body just enough for the dancer not to be overly conscious of being watched but also simple enough to allow viewers to observe a passive body and its uncontrolled movements. In this piece, twelve dancers (some of whom were not professionally trained) ran a predetermined path around the stage for seven minutes, requiring just enough sustained concentration to complete the task but not so much control as to be aware

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[230] Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 5. These props were everyday objects. One of the most successful examples is her use of mattresses *in Parts of Some Sextets* (1965).
[231] Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73* (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 51.

of each movement individually.[232] Movement, therefore, allowed the audience to view the body in its natural state, how it unconsciously moves through and responds to the world.

Her piece *Trio A*, first performed in 1966 and originally titled *The Mind is a Muscle, Part I*, displays the key characteristics of her work and marks, according to many scholars, the beginning of her mature career [Fig. 2.10]. The piece is four and a half minutes long and features three dancers (in its first iteration these performers were Rainer herself, David Gordon, and Steve Paxton) simultaneously performing a series of movements that do not repeat. These movements are enacted continuously without pauses between them, giving the dance an overall evenness in tone and rhythm. Rainer writes about this piece in a 1968 essay titled "A Quasi Survey of Some Minimalist Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or An Analysis of *Trio A*." She states that she purposefully chose not to conform to the traditional dance "phrase," which consists of an early period of heightened energy and emotion, with a moment of pause that serves to focus the audience's attention, followed by a gradual lessening in intensity at the phrase's end.[233] In *Trio A*, rather, the performers maintain an even energy distribution, eliminating any hierarchy between movements and any sense of narrative progression.

The movements in *Trio A* at times share resemblances with the tradition of dance, but at others feel closer to everyday activities or work. None are clearly recognizable, but all have an easy familiarity. The dance does not feature any extraordinary examples of technical virtuosity or athletic achievement. The dancers' bodies do not hold the same tension one would expect in a

[232] Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 62-63.
[233] Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some Minimalist Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 266.

live performance but instead perform with a controlled but passive comportment. Rainer writes that the dancer's movements have the same "factual quality" as "one would get out of a chair, reach for a high shelf, or walk down stairs when one is not in a hurry."[234] Notably, she describes the movements as "worklike" rather than "exhibitionlike," as an individual occupied with a task and unaware of being observed. Unlike in her earlier work which instructed dancers to perform actual tasks, in *Trio A* Rainer instructed dancers to perform movements she would label as "tasklike," which art historian Elise Archias describes as "movement that produced an efficiently working body, one that moved evenly and with purpose."[235]Rainer here explicitly associates working movement with a unique type of bodily comportment, one less self-conscious of itself and more aware of its interactions with that which is outside of itself, i.e. the object being worked on/with.

This tasklike movement aligns with Ukeles's interest in mimicking the working body and highlighting ordinary movement as the subject of artistic exploration. Tracing the legacy of postmodern dance through to Ukeles's work in the late-1970s also allows us to note the ecologically minded approach of early practitioners of postmodern dance. Rainer and many other dancers of this era trace their early inspiration to training at Anna Halprin's dance deck in the 1950s and 1960s. Situated at the base of Mount Tamalpais near San Francisco, the dance deck was the setting of Halprin's influential and experimental dance workshops.[236] The deck provided a natural setting in which artists and dancers such as Merce Cunningham, John Cage, LaMonte Young, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Rainer herself congregated to engage in a laboratory-

[234] Rainer, "A Quasi Survey," 270.
[235] Archias, *Concrete Body*, 71.
[236] Ninotchka Bennahum, "Anne Halprin's Radical Body in Motion," in *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955-197*2, Ninotchka Bennahum, Wendy Perron, Bruce Robertson, Simone Forti, John Rockwell, and Morton Subotnick, eds. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 76.

like experiments with movement. Rather than formal training in dance technique, Halprin's workshops emphasized the exploration of the object-like qualities of the body, its ordinary processes, and its relationship to the space around it. Many of her exercises were intended to encourage participants to tap into the body's perceptive abilities and to engage with the natural world, such as *Branch Dance* (1957) in which performers responded to a large branch in their movements [Fig. 2.11].[237] While the scenic backdrop of the dance deck was replaced by the urban environment as many of these artists carried the lessons of Anna Halprin with them to New York City throughout the 1960s, the importance of the relationship between body and nonhuman other was instilled in them in this embryonic period.[238] Both Rainer and, by extension, Halprin laid the groundwork that allowed Ukeles to explore the body as a site of encounter with the more-than-human world. Rather than a site for the display of virtuosic feats of athleticism or a vessel onto which narratives and allegories are placed, the postmodern turn in dance favored an exploration of the objectlike qualities of the body: how it moves, how it exists in space, and how it encounters others, both human and nonhuman.

Viewed in light of Ukeles's reworking in the late-1970s, this tasklike antinarrative performance also carried the nascent possibility of social and political commentary beyond its ecological concerns. Rainer was also aware of this possibility, and, in 1970, she reinterpreted her *Trio A* performance as *Trio A with Flags*, in which six dancers wore only American flags tied around their necks. The combination of the American flag and the dancers' nudity was meant to

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[237] Perron, Bennahum, and Robertson, "Radical Bodies: An Overview," 35. See also Archias, *Concrete Body*, 57.
[238] Because Rainer associated her work with minimalist art, and especially that of her romantic partner at the time Robert Morris, it is sometimes seen as unconcerned with social issues and ethical concerns. When viewed in relationship to the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, however, it becomes clear that this story of postmodern dance fails to account for the full depth and breadth of its practitioners. Halprin, for example, was deeply invested in the power of dance and movement to promote self-understanding. Rainer, too, in the later 1960s and beyond was strongly opposed to American military aggression during the Vietnam War and used her dance to make statements to this effect.

oppose the censorship of protestors who had been charged with desecrating the flag and as a wider rebuff to American military aggression during the Vietnam War.[239] Despite the activist content in their work, Rainer and the other Judson dancers did not translate their work outside of the dance studio or stage. Ukeles redefines these limitations by bringing them into the street and performing alongside actual workers. Ukeles's "marking" of the workers' movements in the "Follow in Your Footsteps" component of *Touch Sanitation* reproduces Rainer's tasklike movements but extends the logic that subtends them. In aestheticizing the movements, making them unproductive and performed by an "artist" as opposed to a "worker," she recontextualizes them and elevates them. Like Rainer, she challenges hierarchies of movement that might view the work of the sanmen as "unskilled," not requiring the same level of technical mastery as the athleticism and grace of someone performing a dance number. This translates to hierarchies of how one relates to the natural world. Through their embodied knowledge, these workers have a profound relationship with the natural world that meets or exceeds those who only encounter nature in parks and preserves.

The *Touch Sanitation Show* Parts I and II, West Fifty-Ninth Street Marine Transfer Station and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (1984)

When considering how and where to exhibit the results of her years of collaboration with the Department of Sanitation, Ukeles, as per custom, spoke to the workers at DSNY. Some felt the community should come to them, while others wanted their work to be shown among the work of artists in a gallery space. Ukeles therefore decided to host the *Touch Sanitation Show* simultaneously in two venues, a DSNY Marine Transfer Station and her Soho gallery, showing

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[239] Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 53.

again the artist's talent for building bridges between disparate areas of interest and knowledge. The West Fifty-Ninth Street Marine Transfer Station was completely transformed into an immersive experience. Dedicated to the loading of refuse from sanitation trucks onto barges headed for the Fresh Kills Landfill, the Marine Transfer Station had not previously been open for public viewing. Inside the station, Ukeles arranged a series of trucks and outfitted them with audio recordings of her conversations with sanitation workers, calling it *Trax for Trucks and Barges* (1984). Also in the station, the artist cut into the exterior wall text that read: "NO MORE LANDFILLS/WHAT WILL WE DO WITH ALL OUR GARBAGE?/ WHERE? HOW? WHEN? RE—" [Fig. 2.12]. This series of questions again returns the project to questions of environmentalism. These questions cannot be untangled from her social message in recognizing the labor of the sanitation workers.

The *Touch Sanitation Show Part II,* held at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, featured screen-printed clocks and shift schedules covering the walls of the main gallery space beneath a transparent map of the city of New York [Fig. 2.13]. The show also featured recreations of two DSNY workspaces, one representing the "old" facilities, falling apart and mostly furnished with materials salvaged from garbage, and another representing the newer facilities, revealing the results of Ukeles's advocacy on behalf of the workers [Fig. 2.14].

Ballet Mécanique

Another element of Ukeles's work with the New York City Department of Sanitation was the department's participation in the city's inaugural Art Parade in 1983. For the parade, Ukeles created a series of *Sanitation Celebrations*, all of which shared the aim of recognizing the service of the sanitation workers and incorporating the public into the work they do. The first was *The*

Social Mirror, a sanitation truck that the artist outfitted with tempered glass mirrors covering all its sides [Fig. 2.15]. As the truck maneuvered through the parade, residents of the city were able to see themselves reflected in the work of the sanitation department and ideally reflect on their role in creating the garbage the department was assigned to clean up. For the close of the parade, Ukeles created *Ceremonial Sweep*. Whereas typically the sanitation workers arrive after a parade is over and clean up the debris from the celebrations as onlookers are leaving, for the art parade the act of returning the streets to their original order was included *within* the parade, and city leaders and department administrators also took up brooms to aid in the clean-up [Fig. 2.16].[240]

Between these two actions was a choreographed "dance" of the department's street sweeper trucks titled *Ballet Mécanique for Six Mechanical Sweepers* [Fig. 2.17]. I will discuss this piece in more detail, as it reveals Ukeles's strong links to dance and her understanding that movement reveals connections not only between bodies but also between humans and the nonhuman world. After spending eighteen months researching the department, another eleven months greeting every sanitation worker in the *Touch Sanitation* performance, and a further nearly three years in preparations for the *Touch Sanitation Show* which would open the following year, by 1983 Ukeles was well-versed in the running of the Department of Sanitation and the many skills of its employees. Thus, when she was asked to create the grand finale for the first New York City Art Parade, she was excited to have the opportunity to show off the workers' virtuosity. She remembers riding the street sweeper trucks and being awed by the drivers' ability to maneuver narrow city streets, often with obstructions, including many illegally parked cars, blocking their way. Ukeles wrote, "So I promised myself that one day I would clear away the traffic, the double- and triple-parked cars, and let people see just how talented, coolheaded, and

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[240] Conte, *Seven Work Ballets*, 13, 20.

inventive these drivers were."[241] She decided to create a choreographed *ballet mécanique*, inspired by Russian constructivist and futurist dance and the 1924 Fernand Léger film of the same name. The film, like the performance, explores both the humanlike qualities of machines but also the machinelike qualities of humans.

To create the *Ballet*, Ukeles asked the department to send six of their best street sweeper drivers and she was offered three full days of their labor for rehearsal, along with six trucks. The department set up a rehearsal area in a training facility on Randall's Island. When the drivers arrived, they assumed Ukeles would be offering them explicit instructions. They were baffled when she asked them what they wanted to do. They were accustomed to the rigid, paramilitary structure of the DSNY where their shifts and routes were assigned by their supervisors. In this exercise, though, Ukeles wanted them to use their expertise and their creativity to develop the ballet together. She recalls the first meeting of the group. After she asked them what they wanted to do, she initially received only silence in return. She writes, "Inside my head, the meter was running, ticking loudly, and a voice was whispering, do something! [...]Then I said to myself, 'Keep your mouth shut. Don't say a word. They need to see that you mean it […]' Finally, after an eternity, one of the workers offered an idea."[242] Thus began the collaborative project of developing the choreography for the *Ballet*.

The drivers were given the entire width of Madison Avenue and a length of thirty-two blocks in which to work. The piece was limited only by the capabilities of the street sweeper trucks, which were set on three wheels and therefore could easily tip over. The drivers, though, knew these limitations intimately from their daily work and developed a set of five moves which were repeated every six blocks of the route [Fig. 2.18]. It is worth discussing the moves in some

[241] Conte, *Seven Work Ballets*, 21.
[242] Conte, *Seven Work Ballets*, 22.

detail to understand both their complexity and their relations with bodily movement. The first move was "Serpentine." The trucks drove two-by-two in a rhythmic curve from one curb to another. Moving the paired trucks alongside one another was challenging in itself, as the brooms could potentially get caught in one another, causing the trucks to capsize. The second move was "Crisscross," in which two groups of three sweepers closely passed one another as they diagonally crossed the width of the street. The third move was "Spider," a shifting movement in which the sweepers formed expanding and contracting lines as they moved along. The fourth move was "Face the Audience and Flex Your Muscles," in which the sweepers would face the audience directly, two on each side, while performing a routine of lifting, lowering, spinning, and tilting the sweepers' brooms. In a winking element of this move, the drivers at one point got out of the cab and waved to the onlookers. The fifth and final move, performed simultaneously with the fourth, was "Circles and Figure 8s in the Intersections." While four of the sweepers were doing the broom routine along the curb, two others were in the intersections of the streets doing fast circles and figure 8s, showing off the vehicles' speed and turning radius as well as the drivers' technical abilities. The piece began just before sunset, making the bright white sweeper trucks and their blinking lights particularly striking.

The choreography of the piece reveals its sophistication and its relations to postmodern dance. Each of the moves could be described as tasklike. The trucks are engineered and the drivers are trained to perform a series of tasks to accomplish a specific goal: cleaning the city's streets. However, in the *Ballet*, the trucks' capabilities were deployed for aesthetic rather than practical reasons. Their movements occupy the body enough to reveal its abilities but not enough to distract the viewer with a task being accomplished. They are meant to reveal the unconscious or unnoticed abilities of a body, in this case, the body of the truck as well as the body of its very

adept driver. Moves akin to a serpentine arc were performed daily by the street sweepers in the city as they avoided barriers and obstructions in carrying out their duties. The quotidian movements of the trucks were turned into a ballet, a dance. Whereas Rainer and her cohort at the Judson Dance Theater aimed to deemphasize the technical virtuosity of the dancers who performed their choreography, Ukeles wished to showcase the skills of the drivers for the DSNY. Movement becomes a way of knowing, of bringing something to the surface and acknowledging its value. In the context of the *Sanitation Celebrations,* these skills are brought to the attention of the public, the recipient of the services that they provide.

Conclusion

Waste Flow (1984), a video edited from footage of the *Touch Sanitation* performance and screened at the *Touch Sanitation Show*, traces the flow of garbage from the street, where both mechanical and human street sweepers gather it into the trucks, to the garbage trucks doing their routes, to the incinerator and marine transfer station, and through onto barges to Fresh Kills. Arranged like the passing of day, the video starts with workers beginning their shifts before sunrise and ends with the garbage heading to its final resting place at sunset. The closing sequence is a shot of garbage being redistributed within the landfill, but our view gradually becomes so narrow that we lose sight of the truck and are left only to watch trash agitating and forming massive waves. The rhythm of the video, its general lack of dialogue, and its long sequences of humans and machines performing their daily routines also recall traditions of dance. In one scene, at nearly mid-day, sanitation workers gather garbage from an alley [Fig. 2.19]. We see a truck from behind moving slowly through the alley. Two workers on either side pick up loose garbage bags and bins and effortlessly toss their contents into the hopper of the

truck. They alternate, first right then left, as the bags form graceful arches into the truck. This moment looks almost as if it must have been arranged for our aesthetic pleasure. Their movements are even and controlled. The results are predictable and steady. This elegant choreography, captured while Ukeles was following the sanitation workers on their routes, is emblematic of the connections between movement and environment created by *Touch Sanitation*.

That trio of workers, two in the street and one in the truck, formed part of the daily routines required to maintain our relationship with the planet. As environmental historians have pointed out, labor has the potential to provide a more intimate way of knowing the environment than leisure or recreation. It is in the process of working with nature that humans more fully comprehend its boundaries and limitations, as well as the power that humans wield over it. The sanitation workers knew the weight and dimensions, even the smells, of the materials that moved through the refuse collection system. They could see first-hand the accumulation of this refuse and the effects of dumping on the land and animal inhabitants of Fresh Kills landfill.[243] This knowledge, embodied in the workers themselves, can also be used to develop more sustainable ways of interacting with the planet. In turning away from the most studied white male superstars of ecological art and acknowledging Ukeles's important place within this field, we can see how the history of performance art and the history of ecological art intersected significantly. This intersection helps us to develop a more robust ecological consciousness, one not focused on the conservation of beautiful places but rather on ecological systems and relationships, the type of ecological consciousness most needed now to address the global systematic problem of climate change.

[243] Though, today even this connection has been severed as New York City's garbage is trucked to large, out-of-state landfills.

The connection between labor, class, and environment has recently reemerged as a central pillar in environmental organizing with the Green New Deal, which calls for a recentering of the U.S. economy to transition to 100% renewable energy through the support of government-sponsored projects on the scale of Roosevelt's New Deal programs of the 1930s. While this idea has circulated for over a decade, it gained wider recognition when freshman congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined with the Sunrise Movement in a sit-in in House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's office calling for a Green New Deal.[244] The Green New Deal, as sponsored by the Sunrise Movement, proposes curbing climate change through the creation of millions of union jobs, investing in racial and economic justice, and increasing democratic participation.[245] This task is not without its challenges. It rests on a tricky alliance between labor and environmental organizers. Ukeles's respect for and veneration of the everyday workers and their embodiment proved key to negotiating this performance and might have something to offer to this alliance today.

[244] Anthony Adragna and Zack Colman, "Ocasio-Cortez, Youth Protesters Storm Pelosi Office to Push for Climate Plan," POLITICO, November 13, 2018, https://www.politico.com/story/2018/11/13/ocasio-cortez-climate-protestors-push-pelosi-962915.

[245] "Green New Deal," Sunrise Movement, accessed December 30, 2023, https://www.sunrisemovement.org/green-new-deal/.

Chapter Three: Unity in Difference: Ecological Thinking in the Performance of Maren Hassinger

In a photograph from 1976 [Fig. 3.1], a performer is entangled in nylon strips that appear to either extend out from or menacingly cling to her. The performer, wearing a black dancer's leotard and balancing on her sacrum, turns away from the camera with an expression of interiorized concentration. Though the nylon wraps around her head, torso, and legs, she does not appear frightened. However, there is a sense that her enmeshment with this material is one she will not easily escape. She is performing with a work from Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* series, which even in its title evokes a response from viewers (the abbreviation "R.S.V.P." means *répondez s'il vous plait*, or 'please respond' in English). Made from used nylon pantyhose that the artist either found or received from friends, the sculptures are stretched, pulled, and weighed down with sand and other materials. The work plays at the limits of the material's tensility and mimics the body's ability to expand and contract. Nengudi staged performances to activate the sculptures by stretching and pulling them and intertwining them with living human bodies.

This photograph is widely circulated as a prominent example of the work of the sculpture's creator, Nengudi. Lesser known is the performer: Maren Hassinger. Hassinger and Nengudi have been close collaborators since the mid-1970s and would often work together in performing both with and without their sculptural works. Both trained as dancers and worked as sculptors in Los Angeles, eventually becoming part of Studio Z, an avant garde artist group that would gather at David Hammons's Los Angeles studio space. Both have also been neglected in scholarship on the art of the 1970s and 1980s. They worked in a postminimalist mode, using unconventional sculptural materials that reveal traces of their process. Their abstract work did not engage with the prevailing style of the Black Arts Movement, which aimed for more

figurative, colorful, and overtly political work. Their work also engaged with gender, but they felt similarly excluded from the mainstream feminist art movement of the time, which was primarily focused on supporting the work of white artists. Thus doubly marginalized, the pair offered support to one another and found community with other like-minded artists.[246]

While Nengudi is now receiving much overdue attention for her groundbreaking practice, Hassinger's work has received significantly less analysis. What scholarship does exist focuses mostly on her relationship with the artists of Studio Z and her other collaborators in the Los Angeles art scene. These artists were interested in exploring abstraction, spirituality, and racial justice issues in an environment that provided support and community for artists excluded from the mainstream art world. Among this group of artists, Hassinger is the one who engaged most explicitly with the natural world and the effects of industrialization. In an interview from 1982, she said, "My work will always center around movement and nature. I mean, what else have you got? That's the raw material--Nature."[247] In an artist statement from 1986, she wrote, "These pieces were made to express my reverence for nature."[248] In another statement from 1989, she stated, "[My work has] always been about movement and nature--movement as part of nature."[249] These are just a few examples of Hassinger's expressed commitment to the topic of nature in her work. Her sculptural and performance practice also attests to this commitment in its appropriation of natural forms, such as trees, branches, and leaves, and in its mimicking of natural morphologies, such as bunching, twisting, and curving.

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[246] For more on their relationship, see John P. Bowles, "Side by Side: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger," *Callaloo* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 400–418.
[247] Judith Hart Stone, "An Artist Looking for Dangerous Ground," *The Museum of California*, December 1982, 16.
[248] Lucinda H. Gedeon and Dianne M. Cripe, *Artists Select: Contemporary Perspectives by Afro-American Artists* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University Art Collections, 1986).
[249] Beryl Wright, *The Appropriate Object: Maren Hassinger, Richard Hunt, Oliver Jackson, Alvin Loving, Betye Saar, Raymond Saunders, John Scott* (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1989), 16.

Despite this professed interest and evidence in her work dating back to the mid-1970s, scholars of environmental art have taken little note of her practice. Hassinger, herself, even at times distanced herself from environmental readings of her work. In 1993, she stated, "But my work is not about going out and saying 'save the whales' or 'recycle.' It's really not about that."[250] The artist has taken the natural world as her primary, if not exclusive, subject matter for decades and yet in written statements appears to distance herself from the environmental movement. How can we reconcile this apparent contradiction? Furthermore, despite her dedication to the subject, historians of environmental art have taken little notice of her work. Both overt and more subtle forms of racism and sexism in the art world no doubt play a part in her exclusion from dialogues on environmental art, as does the interest among many scholars within the environmental humanities in universalism. In finding solutions to the extra-human problem of climate change and environmental collapse, some frame the problem as a monolithic conception of humanity working against a monolithic conception of nature. An acknowledgment that the natural world is not experienced evenly by all humans troubles top-down approaches to environmental problems. In this chapter, I argue that Hassinger's performance practice, which imagines unruly human-nature collaborations, can explode our limited conception of environmental art, inviting in not only the question of justice but also the possibility of reforming our concepts of the human and of nature, respectively. As such, Hassinger's performance practice represents the kind of overlooked environmental art most relevant now in a time of climate crisis.

Hassinger became a professional artist in the mid-1970s, a time when environmentalism had already become mainstream. The environmental movement of the early-1970s, following the

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[250] Lorraine O'Grady, "Maren Hassinger, Visual Artist," *Artist and Influence* 12 (March 1993): 28.

Civil Rights Movement and coinciding with fights for women's and gay liberation, merged broader 19th- and 20th-century concerns about the conservation of wild places with new attention to air and water pollution. The establishment of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and bills to protect air and water cemented the legacy of environmental activism of the era. However, in the early years of the postwar environmental movement, the unequal burden of toxic environments placed on communities of color was not only ignored but, in some cases, exacerbated by this legislation.[251] It would only be in the 1980s that a robust environmental justice movement would coalesce. Environmental justice groups emerged independently from mainstream environmental organizations across the country. Many were loose coalitions that sprung up to protest specific causes, such as the siting of hazardous waste disposal facilities. These groups, mostly grassroots, often women-led organizations, were less focused on saving wild lands or endangered species and more invested in the health and prosperity of their communities. Therefore, their concerns often overlapped with issues of housing, transit, and employment in urban areas. Hassinger's work is more closely aligned with the tenets of environmental justice than with mainstream conceptions of environmentalism circulating at the time. While her work is not about recycling or "saving the whales," she does present an advanced conception of human-nature interrelations that not only reflects the critical environmental issues of her time but also presents a model for how we might engage with issues of climate crisis and climate justice today. Mirroring the approach of environmental justice groups, Hassinger's practice is deeply collaborative, anti-hierarchical, and focused on the profound interconnections between humans and their environments.

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[251] Christopher W. Wells, *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018), 15.

In this chapter, I will focus on two of Hassinger's early performances: *High Noon* (1976) and *Flying* (1982). In *High Noon,* five performers and the artist ambushed the gallery where the artist's sculpture was installed and developed movement in response to the works on view. *Flying* was a collaborative performance piece meant to celebrate the West Coast debut of the *Afro-American Abstraction* exhibition. For Hassinger's contribution to the piece, the performers mimicked the flocking movements of birds. By examining these performances through the lens of the environmental justice movement, we can see how Hassinger engaged with environmental thought in ways far beyond mainstream environmental organizing. Environmental justice takes as its starting point that nature is not something "out there," but is instead part and parcel of everyday experience in human communities. Hassinger's *High Noon* performance examined the intimacy of environmental experience and upended strict binaries of human and nonhuman. Environmental justice activism also brought about new forms of organizing and engagement, often in the form of small-scale, grassroots coalitions. Similarly, *Flying* modeled forms of cooperation based on extra-human patterns, rethinking the role of collaboration in environmentalist discourse.

Scholarship on Hassinger's work has not yet sufficiently addressed these contributions to dialogues on nature and the environment. She was included in major group exhibitions of the past 50 years, including *Forever Free: Art by African-American Women* (1979), *Afro-American Abstractions* (1981), *Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum* (1989), *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (1990), and more recent major group shows such as *Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980* (2011), *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (2013), *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85* (2018), and *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* (2023). She was the first African American woman to have a

solo exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with her presentation of *On Dangerous Ground* in 1981. She also participated in the prominent artist residency program at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1984-85. Despite this consistent, high-profile level of exposure, Hassinger did not have gallery representation until 2018, when she was picked up by Susan Inglett Gallery in New York.[252]

She has received modest representation in scholarly books and journals. The exhibition catalogue for her 1991 show at the Hillwood Art Museum featured an excellent essay by Maurice Berger. Berger summarized her practice to that point and provided a nice analysis of her performance piece, *Voices* (1984), discussed below. Journal articles on her work have appeared sporadically, including a piece by Maureen Megerian in *Woman's Art Journal* in 1996, a write-up on her collaboration with Senga Nengudi by John Bowles in *Callaloo* in 2016, and a recent article comparing her work to that of another sculptor, Mary Ann Unger, in *Woman's Art Journal* in 2021.[253] The most sustained discussion of her work comes in the context of her participation in the Los Angeles art scene of the 1970s. Hassinger is given ample attention in Kellie Jones's *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (2017) as part of the constellation of artists surrounding Studio Z. These mentions provide an adequate introduction to her work, but like the many exhibition catalogues in which she is featured, they fail to delve deeply into her practice and its relationship to the 1970s and 80s environmental movement.

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[252] Victoria L. Valentine, "Maren Hassinger Is Now Represented by Susan Inglett Gallery," *Culture Type* (blog), June 6, 2018, https://www.culturetype.com/2018/06/06/maren-hassinger-is-now-represented-by-susan-inglett-gallery/'.

[253] Maureen Megerian, "Entwined with Nature: The Sculpture of Maren Hassinger," *Woman's Art Journal* 17, no. 2 (1996): 21–25. John P. Bowles, "Side by Side: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger," *Callaloo* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 400–418. Stephanie Sparling Williams, "Where the Body Ends: The Work of Maren Hassinger and Mary Ann Unger," *Woman's Art Journal* 42, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2021): 3–11.

Born in Los Angeles in 1947, Hassinger's path to becoming a professional artist was somewhat circuitous. She initially enrolled at Bennington College to study dance but was told she was not of the caliber to matriculate into the dance program. She was instead offered a position in the sculpture department, which she accepted.[254] The sculpture department at Bennington was heavily influenced by art critic Clement Greenberg and the dominant abstract style.[255] While this was influential for her artistic development, the artist developed her mature style in graduate school. She enrolled at UCLA to join their sculpture program but was again denied a place. The department recommended she instead join the new fiber program headed by Bernard Kester, and it was while developing her thesis in this program that she discovered what would become her primary sculptural material: wire rope.[256] Wire rope is made from strands of steel twisted together to form a material strong enough to hold up suspension bridges yet flexible enough to be used in a pully system. Hassinger appreciated the material's similarity to fiber—the way it could be woven and wound—but also its resemblance to traditional sculpture—its ability to be soldered and to hold its shape.

While pursuing her education in these other media, Hassinger continued to study dance as a sort of amateur-professional, sometimes taking up to four dance classes a week taught by followers of Lester Horton.[257] After her MFA program, Hassinger became involved with Studio Z, and the group met, sometimes weekly, at the warehouse-like studio of artist David Hammons where they organized dance performances and workshops on dance technique for other artists.[258]

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[254] Lorraine O'Grady, "Maren Hassinger, Visual Artist," *Artist and Influence* 12 (March 1993): 22-23.
[255] Wright *The Appropriate Object,* 16.
[256] O'Grady, "Maren Hassinger," 24-26.
[257] Wright, *The Appropriate Object*, 18. Maren Hassinger, video chat with the author, May 25, 2022.
[258] Lorraine O'Grady, "Maren Hassinger, Visual Artist," 25.

It therefore made sense that, when opening her first major exhibition after completing graduate school, she would activate the work with a performance.

Meeting the World at *High Noon*

In 1976, Hassinger was invited to exhibit her work in a two-person exhibition with the painter William Mahan at the ARCO Center for Visual Arts, an art gallery that had recently opened in a downtown office building.[259] The exhibition featured her sculptural works hung from the gallery's walls and on the floor, while Mahan's paintings were hung on a wall in the back of the gallery. The sculptures represent Hassinger's early investigations into wire rope. She used minimal interventions to transform its industrial appearance into natural forms. For example, in *Interlock* (1972) [Fig. 3.2] the rope is bent into a graceful curve and unwound at its ends to create an organic form. Another wall sculpture reflecting a merger of the industrial and the natural is *Dry/Flow* (1976) [Fig. 3.3]. In this work, the wire is completely unwound, and only its curvilinear form reveals the trace of its previous arrangement. Hung just above the wire is a denuded tree branch whose natural downward slope is mimicked in the wire forms. The pairing proposes a matter-of-fact comparison of the two materials. Snaking across the floor of the gallery was *Loci: This Way Now* (1976) [Fig. 3.4], a large arrangement of wire rope that rises, falls, and cuts unexpected paths across the space of the gallery.

These works reflect Hassinger's study of Minimalism and the emergence of Postminimalist tendencies in the art of the 1970s. The works' placement on the floor rather than on a pedestal, their limited manipulation of materials, and their lack of narrative and illusionism

[259] "Hassinger and Mahan to Show Work" Press Release, July 28, 1976, box 1, folder 7, ARCO Center for Visual Art Records, 1976-1984, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. The show ran from August 10 to September 18, 1976.

all point to a debt to Minimalist forerunners. It may seem odd that Hassinger would have been influenced by Minimalism, since she was trained in the late sixties at Bennington College, then deeply under the sway of anti-Minimalist critic Clement Greenberg.[260] While Hassinger may not have learned about Minimalism at Bennington, she was exposed to this work after her move to New York soon after graduation. She said later that she appreciated Ronald Bladen's work, particularly its "relation to the human body in its sense of motion and reach."[261] It is productive to think about Hassinger's work within the legacy of Minimalism as she began her career in its immediate aftermath, and many of its implications were still being sorted through when she showed these works and activated the exhibition with her performance, *High Noon*. Hassinger's Postminimalist sculptures at the ARCO Gallery, all created between 1972 and 1976, reflect the legacy of Minimalist ideas in the 1970s. The sculptures maintain the horizontality favored by Minimalist artists like Donald Judd. Their groundedness intentionally rejects anthropomorphizing, or at least reference to a kind of static, upright humanity that can be viewed as separate from its surroundings. Hassinger's materials, too, reflect Minimalism's interventions. Like Judd or postminimalist artist Eva Hesse, whom she credits as a particular influence, Hassinger relied on industrially made materials and subjected the material to only subtle manipulation.[262] However, Hassinger favored organic forms rather than rigid geometries, and the appearance of the wire rope connotes a kind of flexibility that results in a responsive rather than imposing appearance. Furthermore, the works defied what might be perceived as a quiet or detached relationship to the viewer in much Minimalist art. Instead, they protrude uncomfortably

[260] "Interview with Beryl Wright," c. 1988. Maren Hassinger Papers, 1955-2018, box 1, folder 12. Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. Greenberg favored instead the more expressive models of figures like Anthony Caro and David Smith, both of whom had also briefly taught at Bennington.
[261] O'Grady, "Maren Hassinger," 25.
[262] O'Grady, "Maren Hassinger," 24.

into space, dissolve stable forms, and cross boundaries between nature and art. Such hybridity is heightened in her performance with the works.

Hassinger's ARCO show received lukewarm praise in the press, with one reviewer commenting that the show is a "well-made example of easy-going, highly professional abstract art…"[263] Another commented that the work was "massless, sometimes meaningless." However, this reviewer did pick up on one key element: the artist's intention to capture motion in sculptural form. She wrote, "The *appearance* of Maren Hassinger's works connotes sculpture. The *reality* is movement."[264] For the works in the show, the association between the natural and the industrial was complemented by references to movement. The gentle curve of *Interlock* might suggest a back bend or perhaps two arms crossed in front of a torso. The angular zig-zagging of *Loci: This Way Now* denotes quick movements up-and-down or side-to-side. These allusions would crystallize in her later works, such as *Whirling* (1978) or *Leaning* (1980). The implied movement of the works presents the human body as part of a dynamic world that is responsive and constantly in flux. Her activation of these works in performance allows for an even more refined articulation of the sculptures' potential for shared embodiment.

During the run of the exhibition, Hassinger arranged a performance with several collaborators, titled *High Noon* (1976), that modeled the artist's ideal reception of her sculptural work. As she had done with Senga Nengudi's nylon sculptures, Hassinger presented a model for how to interact with the work, or at least how to imagine an interaction with the work, even if decorum and gallery rules prevented it. The performance was documented in a series of photographs by Adam Avila. These still photographs only capture glimpses of the performance

[263] William Wilson, "Sculpture With a Poetic Fiber," *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1976.
[264] Sandy Ballatore, "Hassinger and Mahan: Works in Transition," *Artweek* 7, no. 29 (September 4, 1976), 4. Emphasis in original.

and in some instances leave us with more questions than answers. From my discussions with the artist, comparison with her other work, knowledge of her dance training, and this documentation, I will piece together as much as possible the different elements of the performance.[265]

Starting at noon and lasting roughly thirty minutes, the performance was staged in the exhibition space with a group of four other performers, including friends, fellow artists, and those she met in her dance classes. Hassinger's husband at the time, the writer Peter Hassinger, and fellow performance artist Louie Lunetta were among the participants. Each performer is barefoot and in street clothes. Some will eventually remove parts of their ensembles, such as a hat or a jacket, and use them as props in the performance. Hassinger wears a tight black top and loose-fitting dark pants, appearing the most like a modern dancer of the group. With the music of Spanish flamenco guitarist Manitas de Plata providing a structure for its rhythm and timing, the performers were instructed to improvise their movements in response to the sculptures on view. A large tree branch that was not part of the exhibition was brought in as a prop and used in a variety of ways. The performers were given little specific direction, and each moved freely, at times engaging with one another. While the piece was not rehearsed, the performers, who all new each other, were able to coordinate their movements based on their shared training and by following Hassinger's lead.[266]

In the first phase of the performance, each performer engaged in movements individually or in pairs. In one photograph, we see Lunetta crouching on his bent right leg with both his left leg and arm extended to the side dramatically. His left arm is raised and his left wrist is twisted upward [Fig. 3.5]. This movement appears to respond to the sculpture just to his right, *Loci: This*

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[265] All photographs provided by Susan Inglett Gallery. Based on a contact sheet of these photographs, I was able to determine the order in which they were taken. "Contact Sheet for *High Noon,*" 1976, box 3, folder 27, Maren Hassinger Papers, 1955-2018, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
[266] Maren Hassinger, interview with the author, May 25, 2022.

Way Now, which similarly features dramatic, angular movements. In this section of the performance, many participants chose to work from the floor, reacting to the two large floor sculptures that formed the centerpiece of the exhibition. Performers played with upward movements, such as Peter, in the background of this photograph, who sits on his knees and bends backward reaching his arms up behind him. The sculptures formed the basis for their bodily movements.

Beyond mimicking the forms of the sculpture, this type of floor work was also common in the dance technique of Lester Horton. For several years, Hassinger had taken classes with students trained by Lester Horton (1906-1953), including the younger sister of Carmen de Lavallade, one of Horton's most notable protégées.[267] Horton's technique was free, energetic, and physically demanding. He emphasized bodily awareness in his teaching and tailored movements to the dancer's individual abilities.[268] Towards the end of his life, Horton consolidated his teaching methods into a set technique that was disseminated by his students Alvin Ailey and James Truitt, which now forms the basis for dance training across the world. The technique emphasizes physical strength, mobility, bodily awareness and, rather than aimed at a particular style of dance, is intended to prepare students to work in any style.[269] It incorporates lunges, lateral movements, swings, floor work, and movements that isolate different body parts. Hassinger and the other performers were trained in this technique, and evidence of this training can be seen in the photographs of *High Noon*, as the performers jump quickly from

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[267] Horton's dance company was the first integrated dance company, with African American, Asian American, and Latinx performers all playing large roles in the company. He also brought international attention to the dance community of Los Angeles at a time when New York dominated the dance world. Horton's dances incorporated inspiration from a variety of global dance traditions including Native American, African, Asian, and Polynesian dance. Hassinger studied with Yvonne de Lavallade. Maren Hassinger, interview with the author, May 25, 2022.
[268] *Lester Horton (1906-1953): Genius on the Wrong Coast*, directed by Lelia Goldoni (Distributed by Green River Road, 1993), 24:39.
[269] Marjorie B. Perces, Ana Marie Forsythe, and Cheryl Bell, *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1992), 6-7.

the floor to upright positions, employ strength and balance, and share in Horton's spontaneous and free expression.

Lunetta's dramatically extended pose reflects inspiration from the Horton technique. His left wrist departs from the diagonal angle of his left arm and bends sharply to the ceiling. The isolation of discrete body parts was another commonplace of the Horton technique. Wrist and ankle movement were particularly emphasized, based on Horton's study of East Asian and Indonesian dance.[270] His weight is gracefully balanced on his bent right leg and his spine is parallel to the floor, showing the strength and balance training of the Horton technique. Lunetta's left arm and leg stretch far away from the body, exploring the body's spatial limits. Bella Lewitzy, another notable Horton dancer, once said, "Lester's technique was spatial in its emphasis, so it tended to reach outside the body."[271] This background in the Horton technique granted the performance a foundation of strength and balance while leaving ample room for experimentation and improvisation.

Another photograph of the performance [Fig. 3.6] shows Hassinger building movement from the floor. Reclining on her back, the artist raises her right leg straight into the air, while holding the tree branch over her body with straight arms. A felt hat the artist was wearing appears to have just fallen off her head as it touched the floor. The image captures a single moment in which the artist and tree branch are locked in a battle. At this point the branch is the dominant force, pushing the artist to the ground in a defensive position. In the background of this image, Hassinger's friend from dance class (hereafter referred to only as "Diane") reaches out from her position. In the background of another photograph [Fig. 3.7], we see Diane coming to

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[270] Perces, *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton,* 7 and 185.
[271] Quoted in Perces, *Dance Technique of Lester Horton*, 7.

Hassinger's aid, who now bears a wide smile and seems to be swinging the branch to the side. The moment of tension created with the branch quickly shifts to a moment of joy.

In yet another photograph, the branch again plays a key role in the performance's development [Fig. 3.8]. We see Hassinger's other friend from dance class (hereafter referred to only as "Doug") face up, with his feet and hands on the ground and his back arched high in the air. Hassinger, kneeling close to him, places the branch over his midsection with its spindly end reaching into the air. The arching of the torso was another signature of the Horton technique, one Doug had surely practiced in dance classes. He also would have learned to play with pushing his balance to its limits. Lewitsky wrote, "Tipping off balance and holding as long as we possibly could. Falling to and holding just a hairbreadth off the floor. These were the kinds of things he would explore."[272] In addition to pushing the body to the point of instability, here Hassinger and Doug incorporated the branch into their arrangement. The two performers attempted to create an impossible stacking of the organic, imbalanced branch on top of the curved human body, suggesting a tentative relationship of balance and harmony. The branch's placement at his navel also recalls an umbilical cord, implying a strong connection between the human and the nonhuman. It cannot be sustained, though, as it is only held together precariously through Hassinger's intervention.

While dancers, including those in the Horton School, often incorporated props to add depth to their movements, Hassinger's *High Noon* performers incorporated both the sculptures and the tree branch into their movements in an unusual way. They allowed the branch and the sculptures to have a sense of agency over their movements. In this case, the human figure becomes akin to a pedestal or support for the branch. We can see how Doug strains to reach the

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[272] Perces, *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton,* 3.

level of stability that a pedestal enacts without perceivable effort. On the other hand, the tree branch, with Hassinger's assistance, stands upright, taking a position of superiority in opposition to the horizontality of its human counterpart. In reducing his body to an object, an object of even lower status than a tree branch in this arrangement, Doug contemplates the ability of objects to hold their shape, respond to gravity, and support other objects. In upsetting hierarchies of being, albeit in a playful manner, this work challenges long-held beliefs about the status of objects and their place within human experience.

Like much performance art of the period, Hassinger's performative activation of her work upends divisions between the subjects and objects of art.[273] Cultural critic and scholar of performance studies Uri McMillan terms this technique "performing objecthood" and charts the strategy in performance art by Black women artists in particular. McMillan argues that this kind of performance can "reimagine black objecthood as a way toward agency."[274] For example, in discussing Adrian Piper's *Mythic Being* series, McMillan argues that, in adopting the characteristics, mannerisms, and self-presentation of another, imagined person, Piper was able to reveal the falsity of fixed forms of identity and imagine "new forms of being."[275] Many performances by Black women artists have engaged with this kind of shape-shifting. What performance studies scholar Daphne Brooks labels "afro-alienation acts" allow marginalized performers to make "strange" stereotypical markers of identity that confine subjects by their racial or gendered background, thereby opening up new subjectivities.[276] Artists such as Lorraine

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[273] See for example the discussion of this topic in Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America.* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 124-27. "[T]he enactment of transformations and role playing enables a self-determined and reciprocal play between the limiting binaries of subject and object positions that feminists and others have sought to expose and undermine in and through performance."
[274] Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9.
[275] McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 125.
[276] Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3-5.

O'Grady, Howardena Pindell, Coco Fusco, and others have all performed in various guises or as different personas or characters, altering their appearance and mannerisms to mimic those of others. As art historian Cherise Smith argues, "Enacting 'others' allowed them to expand themselves and their own subjectivities."[277] In moving out of one's subjective position and exchanging it for another, even if temporarily, these artists were able to forge new connections to others and challenge the rigidity of taken-for-granted identity categories.

In Hassinger's performance, she presents herself not in a human persona, as these other artists did, but rather as an (art) object. In shaping her sculptures into anthropomorphic forms and shaping her body into her sculpture, she probes the relatedness of humans to their nonhuman counterparts. In making strange the association between the performer and the sculpture, she rattles ontological boundaries between human and nonhuman that appear fixed in liberal humanist understandings of "Man." Hassinger and her fellow performers' attempts to make themselves object-like dovetails with more recent dialogues on the status of objects and their agency. Materialist thinking of the last two decades, sometimes called New Materialism, has reinvigorated an interest in objects and their power to shape our world. Theorists like Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett have developed approaches to objects that emphasize their agency and existence outside of human comprehension. For example, Jane Bennett, one of the leading voices of these theories, argues for "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."[278] In these recent theories, objects have become infused

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[277] Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 17.
[278] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

with a capacity to intervene in the world and have an existence outside of human recognition not previously imagined to be available to them. Bennett argues that recognizing the agency of non-human forces could have important real-world impacts. She writes, "[T]o *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally […] is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility."[279] There is something ecological to imagining the nonhuman world as more than lifeless and inert matter. A more attentive relationship with the nonhuman is required if humans are no longer the only actors that have the power to shape their world.

In applying a New Materialist emphasis on the power and agency of objects to this work, I, perhaps too liberally, apply McMillan's terminology in arguing that some performers chose to perform *as* objects, actual stuff rather than an abstract concept of an art object. This strategy does not come without risk, however. As McMillan has also noted, blurring the lines between human and object is a particularly loaded move for racially marked performance artists.[280] Hassinger's object performance risks reinforcing an all-too-easy association of the Black body with a commodity object in the shadow of the transatlantic slave trade. As art historian Valerie Cassel Oliver writes, "The Black body carries within it signifiers and markers that are deeply rooted in historical narratives." However, she notes that these signifiers also, "embody the transcendence, evolution, and complexities of that same body…"[281] It is thus perhaps *because* of these historical significations that performance by Black artists so often challenges rigid conceptions of identity. Historically placed outside of the boundaries of subjectivity, gender, and even full humanity,

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[279] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10.

[280] McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 7-8. For more on agency, or lack thereof, in Black performance during the time of chattel slavery, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[281] Valerie Cassel Oliver and Bill Arning, eds., *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2013), 10.

Black women subjects are confronted with the flexibility of these categories. As McMillan contends, "[T]heories of object life become deeply fortified when Black women's performance work is recognized as a key player, rather than an aberration, in interrogating the dense imbrications of beings, objects, and matter."[282]

Scholars have argued that New Materialist thinkers have overlooked that their theories, while robust, have a much longer history in indigenous, non-Western, and diasporic cultures. For example, as art historian Huey Copeland summarized, forms of materialism were already present in black studies scholarship: "a critical orientation toward the sensible rooted in the historical production of black flesh—suspended between sexes and genders, animate and inanimate, person and thing, animal and machine, agent and material—[…]underlines the porousness of ontological categories as well as the brittleness of Western culture's epistemological foundations."[283] Exploring the legacies of chattel slavery in contemporary understandings of the human, many Black studies theorists build on the foundational work of Hortense Spillers and her groundbreaking essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987). In this essay, Spillers redrew the boundaries of gender around racial categories, revealing how gendered norms such as patrilineal succession and divisions of labor were never extended to enslaved subjects. Due to this history and its reverberations in the present day, the category of black womanhood has never been fully encompassed by femininity or the feminist movement—it is, in a sense, "ungendered."[284] Beyond unseating the primacy of gender in conceptions of the human, her conceptual division of *bodies* and *flesh* explores how these dynamics are placed onto bodies. For Spillers, a body is a particular form of humanity that includes the full rights and

[282] McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 10.
[283] Huey Copeland, "Tending-toward-Blackness *," *October* 156, no. Spring (2016): 143.
[284] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 68.

agency of personhood. Flesh, on the other hand, is the "zero degree" of humanity before it is encoded with gender or even subjecthood, most clearly and most violently embodied in the form of the enslaved person.[285] The flesh is therefore a site of abjection but also a site of radical and subversive possibility.

Building on this critique, Alexander Weheliye argues that the concept of Man is "synonymous with the heteromasculine, white, propertied, and liberal subject that renders those who do not conform to these characteristics as exploitable nonhumans."[286] Weheliye here rejects monolithic conceptions of the human that automatically include all *homo sapiens*, acknowledging that historically not all humans were given equal access to this form of liberal subjecthood. From this perspective, he asks, "[W]hat different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?"[287] The critique of humanism offered here does not require projecting humanlike qualities and agency onto nonhuman objects, but rather builds on the perspective of those traditionally denied access to the full rights and privileges of being human. This perspective allows for the dismantling of rigid conceptions of humanity and an acknowledgement of the slippery boundaries between human and nonhuman throughout history. It also, to quote Spillers again, "would necessitate that black women be in the conversation."[288] Hassinger's voice, therefore, is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the shifting tides of environmental art in the 1970s and 1980s.

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[285] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.
[286] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 135. He also develops the categories of the human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman and argues that racialization is foundational to these categories.
[287] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 8.
[288] Hortense Spillers et al., "'Whatcha Gonna Do?': Revisiting 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book': A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, & Jennifer L. Morgan," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 1–2 (2007): 300.

Bringing Hassinger's work into dialogue with recent revisions of the concept of the human from the perspective of Black studies and Black feminist scholars allows us to see the inherent risk in her provocations towards objecthood but also the possibilities engendered by her moves to interrupt perceived boundaries between the human and nonhuman. Hassinger's work also adds a specifically ecological element to these dialogues. While many of these scholars engage with posthumanist, new materialist, or animal studies critiques, they do not make a specifically ecological argument. Could surrendering the equation of "human" with the liberal humanist conception "Man" open new forms of human-nonhuman exchange that are more ecological, i.e. based less on hierarchical chains of being and more on receptivity and exchange?

One possible line of inquiry might follow the subversive potential of the *High Noon* piece, particularly as it was displayed in the next section of the performance. After they engaged in paired or individual movements mimicking the sculptures, the performers moved out of the exhibition space and into the administrative space of the gallery, which was housed in a large office building and shopping center [Fig. 3.9]. Hassinger has described this performance as being "confrontational."[289] The images, however, paint a picture of a performance that might be more aptly described as spontaneous, experimental, or even humorous, as many photographs capture performers with wide smiles. However, the relationship between the performance and its setting broke out of the norms and guidelines of a traditional art exhibition in more ways than one. First, while Hassinger and the performers had planned the piece and brought along a photographer, they did not make any formal arrangements with the gallery for a public performance. The gallery staff was, in a sense, ambushed by this action.[290] Next, in moving the performance outside of the space of the exhibition and into the administrative spaces, Hassinger again bristled

[289] Maren Hassinger, interview with the author, May 25, 2022.
[290] This explains why no formal announcement of the performance is available in the archive.

against decorum. Wielding the tree branch, Hassinger and one other performer encircled a round desk at the gallery's entrance. Eventually, Hassinger paused to flash a wide smile and mug for the camera with the unwitting staff member at the center of their movements. The staff member's expression here is loaded with meaning. Her forced smile and sideways glance suggest a clear discomfort or at least confusion about the activities around her. While Hassinger looks loose and leans comfortably against the desk, waving her right hand freely behind her, the clerk is stiff, unable to even turn her body entirely towards the photographer. She has been made a part of the performance, and now its documentation, unwillingly. A bystander in the background of the image who is perhaps awaiting assistance from the clerk has a much more comfortable posture. She tilts her head slightly and smiles at what must be an unexpected infusion of entertainment into her day, in contrast with the clerk's apprehension. Perhaps it is the object just to her left that adds to the tension. Hassinger bears the tree branch like a weapon, holding it firmly in her left hand just over the head of the clerk. The incorporation of the natural element adds to the work's strangeness and, evidently, the gallerist's unease.

The work's title *High Noon* compounds the confrontational subtext. Based on the title of the 1952 Gary Cooper Western of the same name, it conveys the sense of a battle, as high noon is the time in Western movie tropes when two enemies meet for a showdown. The film's narrative centers around a local marshal, Will Kane (played by Cooper), who awaits the return of a murderer he helped to convict. The film unfolds in real time as the protagonist anxiously awaits the noon train that will bring his adversary—and an inevitable confrontation—to town. Quick cuts of clocks appear throughout the film, and the anxiety of the characters increasingly heightens as the time ticks closer to the twelve o'clock hour. This subtext in the title of Hassinger's work adds intensity to the free-wheeling movements of the performers and a sense

of an impending clash. The conflict between humans and nature is reaching the point of boiling over.

The undercurrent of confrontation in the performance may also have been heightened due to the gallery's sponsorship by an industrial giant and location in the office towers only recently erected to commemorate its dominance in the field. In speaking with me, Hassinger downplayed any protest against the ARCO company specifically in the work's meaning. However, I feel there is enough evidence to suggest that this site, as a stand-in for a broader corporate and industrial system, can add to our reading of the performance. The ARCO Center for Visual Art was located in the Atlantic Richfield Plaza, a towering downtown complex housing offices and a shopping center that had been completed in 1972. The twin 52-story buildings housed the headquarters of the Atlantic Richfield Oil Company and were the tallest buildings in Southern California at the time.[291] ARCO was a brand associated with oil drilling and gasoline stations, of which it had 22,000, making it the third-largest gasoline retailer in California.[292] By the 1970s, gas stations and oil companies had a poor reputation as the entities that pumped fuel into the smog-producing vehicles that lined Los Angeles' streets and highways. The company had even used its patronage of the arts in its advertisements to mollify this negative public image. A two-page ad in *The Los Angeles Times* in 1972 stated, "If you live in Los Angeles, you … probably have some feelings about oil companies, automobiles, the environment, corporate responsibility, and related issues."[293] The ad then went on to list the company's contributions to the community, including

[291] John D. Weaver, "L.A. Grows Up," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1972.
[292] Robert A. Rosenblatt, "Arco Flies from Atlantic to Rich Field of L.A.," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1972, 67.
[293] Atlantic Richfield Company. Advertisement. *The Los Angeles Times West Magazine*, October 1, 1972, 35. Despite these public attempts at environmental responsibility, the company sponsored the Stanford Research Institute whose research aimed to shift the blame for smog away from gasoline-powered cars. Chip Jacobs and William J. Kelly, *Smogtown: The Lung-Burning History of Pollution in Los Angeles* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2008), 73-74.

environmental clean-up initiatives and its support of the arts [Fig. 3.10]. The ARCO Center for Visual Art, which opened in 1976, was only its most recent attempt at improving public perceptions of the company. Hassinger's sculptural work commented on the type of industrialization represented by oil companies like ARCO, and activating these sculptures with movement further increased their combative potential.

Los Angeles's natural penchant for smog, and its decades of attempts to control it, make it a unique setting for a discussion of human-nonhuman interaction. The first major smog event in Los Angeles occurred in the 1940s, and the Los Angeles County Air Pollution Control District was formed to tackle the issue, the first of its kind in the nation.[294] Throughout the coming decades, officials in Los Angeles and the state of California, urged on by political pressure from groups like "SOS" (an acronym meaning "Stamp Out Smog"), set about finding ways to reduce smog without upsetting car-loving Angelenos and the powerful local oil industry. They settled on targeting the Detroit automakers and, in 1970, passed legislation requiring all cars sold in California to be fitted with catalytic converters to limit exhaust emissions.[295] In the meantime, area doctors and health officials became convinced that the city's dirty air was detrimental to residents' health, noting that by 1963 rates of emphysema were four times higher than they had been a decade earlier.[296] Professional athletes in town for sporting events also quickly noticed the lung-choking air, and children's sports leagues were forced to create rules limiting outdoor games during times of heavy smog. In 1974, just after Hassinger finished her MFA at UCLA, a major smog event in which ozone reached .51 parts per million settled in the area, causing then-governor Ronald Reagan to urge people to limit all unnecessary travel.[297]

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[294] Jacobs and Kelly, *Smogtown*, 37.
[295] Jacobs and Kelly, *Smogtown*, 190-194.
[296] Jacobs and Kelly, *Smogtown*, 204.
[297] Jacobs and Kelly, *Smogtown*, 245.

That the environment posed a direct threat to human health, and that this threat was amplified by human activity, was therefore inescapably clear to Hassinger who had grown up in Los Angeles. As environmental historian Christopher Sellers states: "Smog presented powerful new reasons for Angelenos to suspect an alarming porosity and vulnerability of their bodies to environmental toxins."[298] The era of Los Angeles' smog epidemic coincided with the consolidation of the mid-twentieth-century environmental movement in the United States. Unlike earlier twentieth century movements for conservation or sanitation, the environmental movement integrated these two interests and shifted their focus to more urban and suburban areas. The postwar environmental movement was also more popular than earlier sanitation or conservation organizations had ever been, with the first Earth Day bringing out millions of participants in 1970. What was unique about this moment was that rising industrial pollution meant that threats to the natural world were also threats to the human body. Boundaries between nature and humanity, and even the boundary of the human body itself, became more porous.

Against this backdrop, Hassinger created a performance piece in which bodies, (art) objects, and (natural) objects intermingled in a lively play of similarity and difference. In modeling their bodies into forms of sculpture, the performers destabilized strict dichotomies between human and object. By responding in equal measure to their props as to other performers, they implicitly understood a form of agency in the nonhuman. And, in testing the limits of their bodily awareness using the Lester Horton technique, they experimented with the objectlike qualities of their own bodies—their weight and balance and how they respond to external stimuli. Through the lens of twenty-first-century new materialist theory, we can see how this leveling of difference provokes an ecological commitment far in advance of much environmental

[298] Christopher Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 210.

art of the period. That certain bodies had, throughout history, passed as objects in the form of commodities provided the grounding on which new models of object life might come into existence. The final phase of the performance also signaled a relationship to later environmental justice thinking and its focus on collaboration and coalition-building.

Upon returning to the ARCO gallery's exhibition space, the final phase of the *High Noon* performance appeared to be frenzied, as participants removed items of clothing and began to use them as props. The piece culminated in the group holding hands and dancing in a circle around the denuded tree branch, now including another ARCO employee who witnessed the event and spontaneously joined in [Fig. 3.11].[299] Photographs show that Lunetta held on to one end of his denim jacket while Hassinger held the other. Peter Hassinger and Doug hold a sweater that had been worn by Doug. Hassinger's fringed shawl also became part of an exchange between two performers, Doug and Diane. The dancers used these impromptu props as links between them, points of both struggle and connection. Where once the performers were moving together only sporadically and in pairs, now the performers have united in joyful and spontaneous movement. They turned their backs, twisted their hips, and flung their arms wildly around the branch, all while flashing wide smiles. These movements combined with joyful facial expressions give a sense of almost ecstatic joy.

The overall structure of the performance runs counter to modern, Western representations of nature in its incorporation of multiple performers. Early modern and modern Western landscape painting often features only single or paired human figures if humans are included at all. This individual experience of the natural world, in which a lone (usually male) figure stands

[299] This is similar to the ending of Hassinger's performance *Voices* (1984), discussed below. At the end of the performance, all performers held hands and circled the performance area. The repetition of this tactic shows its importance to the development of the piece.

against the intense forces of nature, is one that still resonates as the ideal meeting point between human and nonhuman. Hassinger's piece, however, is catalyzed by a shared experience. The relationship between each performer and the tree branch was determined by the movements of the others. The relationship between the performers also makes a statement about Hassinger's views on collaboration and coalition-building in environmental thought. The performance did not consist of a series of predetermined steps or movements but was rather an invitation for each performer to respond to the works on view in their own way. This freedom of choice was important to Hassinger. She aimed for the piece to be open-ended and spontaneous. She said:

> I think that there's a relationship to the way I treated this performance and the performers and the way that I treat materials. I'm aware that materials have a mind of their own, and I'm working with their mind. Just like these people who said they were willing to do a performance with me at high noon at ARCO had minds of their own. I set up the situation and they applied their thought and body to it.[300]

This is clear from the photographic documentation. Each performer moved initially either alone or in pairs, mimicking the sculptural forms with their bodies or arranging silly vignettes with other performers. They followed Hassinger's lead as the piece's organizer but felt free to improvise and adapt the piece to suit their bodies and rhythms. In coming together for the conclusion to the piece, they maintained their individuality while also acknowledging their reliance on one another. The performers worked in concert with one another to achieve their aims. In this piece, Hassinger depicts the relationship between humans and their environment as embodied, intimate—at times tense—but always collaborative. Theorist Mel Y. Chen also points in this direction. They argue that scholars of feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial theories have long used "animacy hierarchies" to describe relations of power (i.e. relations of "objectification"

[300] Maren Hassinger, interview with the author, May 25, 2022.

and "dehumanization") without questioning the hierarchies that subtend them.[301] They remark, "[M]any of the theoretical discussions about objectification invoke inanimate or less-animate matter as well as animals as generalized standards of comparison […] In fact, many contemporary discourses continue to disavow, if not simply ignore, the possibility of significant horizontal relations between humans, other animals, and other objects."[302] In not only acknowledging the agency of objects but also bringing them into collaborative entanglements with the human performers, Hassinger's performance models a more horizontal relationship between humans and nonhumans that might also translate to relations of power among humans.

Another work from this period, *Ten Minutes*, advances these ideas. Like *High Noon*, *Ten Minutes* (1977) [Fig. 3.12] employed tree branches and a group of dancers. It was choreographed by Hassinger and staged in front of a live audience at David Hammons' Slauson Avenue studio on April 10, 1977.[303] *Ten Minutes* was a more formal dance piece, presented as part of an evening of performances for invited guests. In a way, *High Noon* might be seen as a rehearsal for the more refined *Ten Minutes*. The piece included six performers, not including the artist herself. Her then-husband, Peter Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, and friends from her dance classes participated. The dancers wore loose-fitting white pants and shirts and danced barefoot. Upon entering the performance space, the performers set up a perimeter in which to work based on the measurements of a human body. One performer, Peter Hassinger, lay on the floor with his arms and legs outstretched while the others laid down tape to demarcate a square based on these measurements [Fig. 3.13]. Once the perimeter was established, the performers, each bearing

[301] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 42-50.
[302] Chen, *Animacies*, 50.
[303] Maren Hassinger, interview with the author, May 25, 2022. Hammons had a large studio space and allowed other Los Angeles artists to use it even after he spent most of his time in New York. This evening of performances was organized by the person left in charge of Hammons' studio in his absence, who invited her to contribute a piece.

denuded tree branches, engaged in improvisational movements both individually and in tandem with one another. The piece lasted only ten minutes, and, while the group had rehearsed the piece, there was no strict choreography to follow and the piece was not accompanied by music. Movement was made in response to the dancer's feeling and with a consciousness of the limitations of space and other moving bodies around them.

Despite the simple parameters of the piece's set-up, the dancers engaged in a wide variety of movements and explorations of the boundaries of the body. The group members jumped straight up into the air, stretched their arms out wide at many different angles, and lay on the floor with outstretched arms [Fig. 3.14]. At other points, they engaged in more personal explorations of space. In Figure 3.15, one dancer stands upright with arms by his sides in the corner of the performance space, while another crouches down. Nengudi raised her arms out from her sides as if to explore her wingspan, while other performers lay on the floor in various bodily arrangements.

For portions of the performance, tree branches were employed to add another dimension to these spatial experiments. Some of these movements were coordinated, such as the phrase in which the performers held their branches over their heads and moved in a small circular formation [Fig. 3.12]. Others appear more investigative, such as when each performer held their branch at differing angles, alternately crouching down or rising up on tiptoes to navigate the space [Fig. 3.16]. The performers appear intensely focused on their movements. Each must remain aware of their own body, their branch and its unique features, and the bodies and branches of those around them. Hassinger has stated that the piece was meant to express a

relationship with nature and described the dancers as acting as a "continuation of the objects that [they] were holding."[304]

This is most visible in one compelling photograph of the dance [Fig. 3.16]. Each dancer attempts to navigate the confined space of the performance area while holding their designated branch. The dancer must incorporate the weight, balance, and size of the branch into their perception of their own body's spatial position. They must also account for both the bodies and branches of the other performers so as not to collide with them. Their goal was to move through the space fluidly, intentionally, and true to their own expression without interrupting the movements of any other dancer or branch. We can see each approached this task uniquely. Some chose to raise their branch over the heads of the other performers, recognizing the branch's length and the particular weight distribution of its two unequal ends. One dancer on the left side of the performance area raises his branch vertically, while another to the right does so horizontally. Nengudi, in the central background, also holds her branch above the heads of the others but seems to play with this balance by holding the branch at its thinnest point, observing the subtle downward pull of its other end. Other dancers, such as the one in the center, choose a more grounded path. This dancer crouches down holding the branch diagonally in front of her. Two others keep to the outside of the central grouping of dancers, angling their branches towards the outer edges of the performance space. Looking closely, we can see that the dancers are also engaging in an intricate collaboration [Fig. 3.16a]. Nengudi and another performer grasp opposite ends of one branch, while her left arm loosely grasps the branch of another dancer, as if they are trying to move together while also maintaining a hold on their branches. Their delicate

[304] Maren Hassinger, interview with the author, May 25, 2022.

maneuvering between dancer and branch alludes to the wider relationship between humans and their environments.

In carefully stripping away all elements of the space and scaling it to the human body, the dancers are left only with bodies and branches. They explore the entire height, width, and depth of the space allowed to them. How they navigated the space was up to their individual decisions, but those decisions were constrained by the decisions of others and the qualities of the branch they held. These constraints are a metaphor for a broader relationship to the natural world, which is dependent on the concrete limitations of natural resources and the fluctuations of social systems and individuals within those systems. Only by acknowledging both sides of these limitations can the space be feasibly navigated, and, even with our best efforts, points of conflict still arise. The relationship is temporal as well. There were moments in the dance when all dancers acted in harmony, while in others they engaged in individual action.

This freedom of action is notable in both *High Noon* and *Ten Minutes*. Rather than imposing dance phrases and timed movements from above, as is much more typical in even the most modern dance tradition, Hassinger offers freedom of movement within a set of specific limitations. Each dancer does not know what the other will do and must therefore be aware and responsive to the other dancers as she moves. At times, they form coalitions of two or more; at others, they explore movement individually. The dances model a startlingly unique approach to environmental action and community. Togetherness and shared goals do not equate to uniformity. It is rather in their diversity of movements that the dances accrue meaning. Additionally, the dancers themselves are quite diverse. Women and men are equally represented, and no gender was given any unique direction. The groups are both racially mixed as well, with both Euro- and African-Americans represented. Finally, the groups are diverse in training. Some,

like Hassinger and Nengudi, were "trained" dancers, while others were artists or writers whose movements were less informed by dance tradition.[305] These coalitions model the tricky ways we inhabit space. Even given the same goals and constraints, humans all navigate the world differently. These performances make space for this difference, particularly in terms of our relationship with the natural world. The natural world, in tandem with human intervention, was becoming increasingly threatened due to pollution, as was clearly exemplified by smog in L.A. The push and pull of the relationship between humans and their environments mirrors that within human relations with one another. In acknowledging this continuity, we are better prepared to address points of contention in both.

Hassinger's approach here seems to reinforce recent calls for a new materialist approach to art history that is more attentive to racial formations and marginalized identities.[306] Hassinger, since the mid-1970s, has been exploring the boundaries of human and nonhuman relationalities inspired by her sense that nature was losing its hold in the modern world. Furthermore, as Bennett would argue, in acknowledging the slipperiness of these categories, she proposes a more ecological relationship with the object world. She created a performance in which the bodies of the performers and their sculptural counterparts intertwine and interact in a way that cannot be said to be only a relationship of control and submission. Hassinger's antihierarchical performances imagine a world in which hierarchies among forms of humanity are also leveled.

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[305] I consider both Hassinger and Nengudi as trained dancers because of their many years of taking dance classes. They were not part of professional dance companies, but Hassinger at least had attempted to do so. It is perhaps due only to racial bias that Hassinger was not more accepted in dance circles and offered opportunities to pursue this training as a career. See Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 246-47.

[306] Most recently in Christopher P. Heuer and Rebecca Zorach, eds., *Ecologies, Agents, Terrains*, Clark Studies in the Visual Arts (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Clark Art Institute, 2018), particularly Rebecca Zorach's contribution to this volume, "'Welcome to My Volcano': New Materialism, Art History, and Their Others."

Taking Flight

In 1982, Hassinger came together with three other artists from the Studio Z group, Senga Nengudi, Frank Parker, and Ulysses Jenkins, to develop a performance meant to celebrate the West Coast debut of *Afro-American Abstraction* in Los Angeles. The exhibition, curated by April Kingsley, originated at P.S. 1 Contemporary Arts Center in Queens, New York, (now MoMA PS1) and brought together nineteen African American artists working in an abstract mode, including Sam Gilliam, David Hammons, and Howardena Pindell. Black artists in Los Angeles experienced a lack of recognition for their work in mainstream art institutions. Therefore, a major exhibition devoted to Black artists working in abstraction, many of whom were working in Los Angeles, was certainly cause for celebration. Hassinger and her collaborators titled the performance *Flying* to represent the movement of the exhibition from the East Coast to the West [Fig. 3.17]. It premiered during the exhibition's Los Angeles opening reception just outside the venue for the exhibition on the exterior façade of the Municipal Art Gallery, and the nearby park grounds of Barnsdall Park in which it was situated. The performance lasted roughly an hour and consisted of a series of dances, videos, and live music. Hassinger's primary contribution to the collaboration was the conclusion of the piece, in which the performers mimicked the movements of birds while a film of flying birds was projected onto their white clothing. This element of the piece cues an ecological reading of the work. The place of nature in human society is central among the performance's themes. While this work has been subject to modest representation in scholarship on the Studio Z group's activities, closer attention to its engagement with nature will provide us with a deeper understanding not only of the group's interests but also of the wider dissemination of ecological thinking in the United States in the 1980s.

The piece marks a turning point in Hassinger's practice. In the 1980s, Hassinger's practice became more open to the world. She began to expand beyond abstraction and to address social concerns more directly. She began to experiment with video and incorporated narrative into her performance work, such as in *Voices* (1984) discussed below. These aspects of her work would continue well after the temporal focus of this chapter. There may be several overlapping reasons for this shift. First, Hassinger met Ulysses Jenkins and began to collaborate with him and Senga Nengudi, as well as other artists, dancers, and musicians associated with his Othervisions studio, a space for artistic collaboration that Jenkins had begun with a small grant from the NEA. This collaboration was a fecund time for Hassinger and Nengudi. Second, the landscape of environmentalist thinking was beginning to shift in this era. The first wave of popular environmentalism of the 1970s was ending, and the Reagan era brought about new challenges for the movement both from within and from the outside.

The 1980s mark a turning point in the history of U.S. environmentalism. As early as 1970, activists, sociologists, and scientists saw connections between the concerns of the environmental and civil rights movements. For example, ecologist Wilbur Thomas Jr. published an article in *Proud* magazine in 1970 that discussed the great environmental harms facing the mostly African American residents of urban areas, including lead poisoning, proximity to toxic industrial sites, and disease spread by pests.[307] Despite this initial promise, mainstream environmental groups largely sidelined these concerns and instead focused on a race-blind approach to environmental issues. The result was a series of legislative gains, including the Clean Water Act (1972) and the establishment of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

[307] Wilbur Thomas, Jr., "'Black Survival in Our Polluted Cities,' 1970," in *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Christopher Wells (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 99–103.

(1970), that not only ignored but, in some cases, exacerbated the unequal burden of toxic environments placed on communities of color.[308]

Some cite the year 1982 as the beginning of the environmental justice movement, as it was in September of that year that the PCB protests began in Warren County, North Carolina.[309] These protests sprung up after federal environmental administrators chose to site a toxic waste disposal facility in the county despite local opposition to the project. Protestors were concerned about the adequacy of the facility to prevent the chemicals from leaching into the community's groundwater and for the economic problems that could arise from the siting of such a facility. They also argued that the choice to build the facility in a mostly poor, African American county was racially motivated. After years of legal battles, protesters lay in the middle of a highway to stop trucks containing toxic soil from entering the landfill [Fig. 3.18].[310] Several prominent civil rights leaders were among the protestors, and the publicity of these events brought about the term "environmental racism."[311]

A similar grassroots movement sprung up In Los Angeles in 1985 in response to the proposed siting of the Los Angeles City Energy Recovery (LANCER) Municipal Waste Incinerator in the Central Avenue Corridor. A group of citizens, led by Robin Cannon and Charlotte Bullock, formed the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles (CCSCLA) to protest the siting of the facility. The group's primary concern was the health risk of the facility's projected emissions, both from the incineration taking place there and from the increased vehicle traffic caused by trucking the waste to and from the facility. The group contacted national

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[308] Christopher W. Wells, *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018), 13-15.
[309] Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 19.
[310] "Carolinians See Governor in PCB Landfill Dispute," *The New York Times*, October 10, 1982.
[311] Eileen M. McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 3-5.

environmental organizations but was told that the issue was one of "community health" rather than the environment.[312] Despite this, they successfully stopped the project's construction and laid the foundations for further grassroots environmental activism in the city.[313]

Environmental justice groups came together for the first time in 1991 for the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC. One outcome of this gathering was a document entitled "The Principles of Environmental Justice," which declared the universal right to a clean environment and mentioned reproductive rights, sovereignty for Native peoples, and greater political participation. In the preamble to this document, its authors addressed the history of environmental problems in their communities and traced this history back "500 years" to the first encounters between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade. They also link the creation of a more environmentally just society with "political, economic, and cultural liberation."[314] Environmental justice activism continues today. Based on his experience as a climate policymaker in California for nearly fifteen years and as someone who grew up in a low-income, Latino community and witnessed protests against environmental injustice firsthand, Michael Méndez categorizes present-day environmental activism into two, overarching approaches: "carbon reductionism" and "climate change from the streets."[315] More traditional environmental groups approach policy-making from a utilitarian perspective, favoring market-based solutions that do the most good with the least change to existing structures. "Climate

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[312] Sonya Winton, "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 344.
[313] Winton, "Concerned Citizens," 343-349. Co-founder Robin Cannon recalls her participation in the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program in the 1960s as initial training for how to engage with community-based organizing.
[314] People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, "The Principles of Environmental Justice," in *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Christopher Wells (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018), 180–82.
[315] Michael (Michael Anthony) Méndez, *Climate Change from the Streets: How Conflict and Collaboration Strengthen the Environmental Justice Movement* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 15.

change from the streets" approaches, like those of many environmental and climate justice groups, however, are more willing to consider aggressive policies that are localized and intended to benefit those most vulnerable to environmental threats. He states, "Carbon reductionist approaches are seen as separating climate change from political and socioeconomic factors and, most importantly, the human scale."[316] While Méndez is writing from the perspective of the twenty-first century, in which climate change is the overarching issue addressed by environmental groups, his description of the two factions of environmental organizing could also be applied to earlier eras of this movement. Mainstream environmentalist groups in the 1970s and 80s also sought out policy change at a national level that would combat air and water pollution and species extinction. They also worked alongside industry groups to achieve modest, incremental improvements, at times in opposition to more radical changes. They also approached environmental issues as universal, ignoring how they are experienced differently across race, gender, and socioeconomic groups.[317] The emergence of environmental justice, therefore, altered not only which the issues considered relevant to environmentalists, but also catalyzed an alternate approach environmental activism and policymaking.

While these events were subsequent to the *Flying* performance, they suggest an overall shift in the climate of environmental action in the 1980s. Concerns about toxic pollution and the location of toxic dumps were primary and the promise in the early moments of the environmental movement of alliances between civil rights and environmental activists reemerged. In addition to the palpable environmental problems in Los Angeles in the form of smog, more insidious threats from toxic chemicals and unequal access to clean environments and green spaces informed the

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[316] Méndez, *Climate Change from the Streets*, 25.
[317] Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 29-30.

work of Hassinger and her collaborators in this era. Her work, however, does not take a one-dimensional view of environmental issues. These concerns are just one part of larger systems of oppression.

Against this backdrop, the *Flying* performance reflects the collaborators' thoughts on the contemporary place of nature in society and Hassinger's unique contribution to these dialogues. In this performance, the experience of diaspora and the search for connection with an ancestral African heritage are intertwined with contemporary issues of technological development and the relationship between humans and nature. I read the piece as divided into three "acts": past, present, and future. The piece began in the "past" with drumbeats from local musicians. Ulysses Jenkins and Frank Parker, on a balcony above the performance area, moved from left to right and mimed the paddling of a canoe [Fig. 3.19]. Below them, Hassinger and Senga Nengudi pressed their bodies against an exterior wall and moved from right to left in short, jerky movements [Fig. 3.20]. Flattened against the wall and contorting their bodies angularly, the pair acted as living hieroglyphics.[318] Hassinger and Nengudi's movements connect the piece with both ancient Egypt and the broader African continent as well as their artistic forebears of the Harlem Renaissance who also adopted Egyptian forms in their work. Parker and Jenkins, just above them, reenacted the Middle Passage and the many smaller and larger migrations that make up the diasporic history of Black Americans.

As the piece moved into the "present," a trumpeter played while Hassinger and Nengudi walked up a hill carrying slats from window blinds as if they were objects of religious devotion [Fig. 3.21]. Then, Jenkins and Parker wheeled out a television, surrounded by candles, and lit sparklers. The television was placed precariously atop an upturned trash can resembling an ionic

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[318] D. Francine Farr, "Civilization and Nature," *Artweek* 13, no. 18 (September 4, 1982): 4.

column before playing a video created by Jenkins of Parker's moving eye [Fig. 3.22].[319] Jenkins addressed the audience with a microphone, asking them to approach the television with offerings. The present is depicted as a time of art and dance, with the trumpeter playing and Hassinger and Nengudi dancing, but also a time of almost fanatical worship of technology and consumerism, represented by the television altar and the mass-produced blinds that doubled as ritual objects.

The final section of the piece, which centered around the "future," presented a model for what a possible future might look like. In this section, the performance shifted from the architectural space of the art gallery's façade to the area of the park grounds. The performers all held the blind slats and danced around the trees in the area, at one point forming a circle around a single tree and using the slats to connect their bodies like radii emanating out from its trunk [Fig. 3.23]. Then, the performers put down their props and began to dance as a film of flying seagulls was projected on their white clothing [Fig. 3.24 and 3.25]. Here, the future is represented as approaching a more unified relationship with nature and with one another.

This aspect of the performance was primarily Hassinger's contribution, and, as in *High Noon* and *Ten Minutes*, she proposes models of being in the world that challenge traditional Western thought.[320] Rather than performing with objects, however, this work is much more invested in performing in community with other people. The performers each enacted bird-like movements, such as raising and lowering their outstretched arms and jumping in the air. They also moved like birds as a group, imitating a flock of birds in flight by arranging themselves in formations like lines and diamonds. This ornithological reference was reified by the film of birds

[319] Ulysses Jenkins, telephone interview by the author, October 4, 2022
[320] Maren Hassinger, *Los Angeles Goes Live: Performance Art in Southern California 1970-1983*: Oral History Interviews Transcript, interview by Jennifer Flores Sternad, August 13, 2010, 5.

projected onto their white clothing, linking the movements of the performers with those of actual birds in flight. The dancers both approximated the movements of birds individually but also came together to reenact the synchronous movements of flocking birds. A contemporary review of the performance highlighted this aspect of the piece. Francine Farr wrote, "They gracefully coordinated their movements, turning, swooping and gliding as a unit without losing their separate expressions of 'birdness.'"[321] The group came together to attain a common goal without giving up the individuality of each member. This pattern reflects those of bird flocks. Her reference to animals, as illustrated in chapter one, signals a break with strict boundaries between human and animal worlds and reveals points where humans can learn from their animal counterparts. Their movements could be read as an act of biomimicry, or adapting natural patterns in the service of solving human problems.[322] In imitating the flocking patterns of birds, the artists modeled a type of group behavior that emphasizes coordination and adaptation among a set of individuals. Flocking enables birds to share information and combine their resources. Groups of birds can all be scanning for predators or prey at the same time and share that information with other group members. Geese also fly in "v" formations to use less energy. This strategy can be a model for human behavior.

Biomimicry has also been taken up in the context of contemporary environmental organizing by adrienne maree brown, who marshaled this concept in her 2017 book, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Simultaneously theory, self-help, and guidebook for social justice organizing, *Emergent Strategy* illustrates how to take models from nature and apply them to activist work, particularly the environmental justice work brown participates in.

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[321] Farr, "Civilization and Nature," 4.
[322] This term was coined by Janine M. Benyus and is now widely used in the fields of engineering, design, and architecture. Janine M. Benyus, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*, 1st ed (New York: Morrow, 1997).

One of the key elements of her strategy is the intentional adaptation of patterns and behaviors from the natural world. For example, she keenly observes the behaviors of groups of animals that move together, such as birds, fish, or bees, and adapts them to human organizations. She writes,

> Here's how it works in a murmuration/shoal/swarm: each creature is tuned into its neighbors, the creatures right around it in the formation...Each creature is shifting direction, speed, and proximity based on the information of the other creatures' bodies...Imagine our movements cultivating this type of trust and depth with each other, having strategic flocking in our playbooks.[323]

Brown argues that social movements must be adaptive, constantly sensing changes in the communities they serve and responding to those changes accordingly. They must also appreciate that each member's strengths are amplified when brought together in the group.

While Hassinger and her collaborators did not yet have access to the language of biomimicry or brown's writing, these ideas sharpen our understanding of this performance. We can view the performers' imitations of flocking birds not only as an allegory for the movement of an important exhibition from east to west but also as a model for responding to the issues presented in the piece, namely, a disconnection from nature and an overreliance on technocratic solutions. Each performer had to simultaneously embody the feeling of a bird in flight, conceiving themselves as a creature capable of flight and metaphorically capable of moving beyond one's present circumstances into an imagined future. They then also had to cultivate a deep awareness and sensitivity to the movements of the three other performers and respond in turn to changes in their movements and behaviors to maintain the group's status as a cohesive unit.

[323] adrienne m. brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017). Brown's theories are based on an expanded reading of Octavia Butler's speculative fiction, particularly *The Parable of the Sower* (1993). Brown was also an editor for the anthology *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015), a compilation of studies of Butler's work and their application in the present day.

In doing so, the performance also presaged more recent theoretical understandings of matter itself. Feminist Theorist and Physicist Karen Barad's theories of agency (what she terms "agential realism") rest on the assumption that entities do not exist prior to their relationship with other entities. It is only in connection with one another that boundaries between objects are formed. She calls this form of relating "intra-action" as opposed to interaction, which would indicate a relationship between two separate beings that exist outside of their interaction. She writes, "It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful."[324] Thus, there are no individuals, and things only come to matter in their relations with other things, including humans. This model of matter implies a dynamic world full of entities in flux, constantly being created and recreated as they come into contact with one another.

The foursome demonstrated in microcosm a potential structure for social justice organizing based on the maintenance of the individuality of the organizers and the communities they serve while also cultivating strategic connections to attain a broader goal. This framework differs dramatically from the hierarchal structures of the so-called "big ten" environmental groups of the time, which sidelined dissent in favor of a monolithic approach to attaining sweeping environmental gains. This performance took place just as this approach was fracturing in public dialogues, as it became increasingly clear that the results of environmental protection gained from top-down organizing would not be spread evenly across different social groups. During this time, individuals and communities began to explore small-scale, ad hoc responses to local issues rather than relying on national or federal agencies to step in on their behalf.

[324] Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 139.

As in Karen Barad's onto-epistemology, the movement acknowledges that the body is inseparable from its environment, and both have the power to shape and define the boundaries of the other. Barad writes that, in a traditional humanist understanding of the world, "Man is an individual apart from all the rest…A distinct individual, the unit of all measure, finitude made flesh, his separateness is key."[325] Rather, in Barad's account, humans are immanent to the world, a world in which matter is not mute but is rather agentive, constantly shaping and being shaped by its relations to other matter.[326] Therefore, change is made by multiscalar relationships that emerge from local conditions and continuously shaped by the interactions of individuals rather than by universal, all-encompassing directives. Likewise, Barad acknowledges that "Knowing is not about seeing from above or outside […] Knowing is a matter of intra-acting."[327] Thus, the embodied knowledge of those most affected by environmental injustice is equally generative to the scientific knowledge of experts. Returning to Méndez's language, rather than attempting to see and create change in environments from a distanced, transcendent perspective, environmental justice works from within— "from the streets"—to employ experiential and embodied knowledge to action scaled up from relations among individuals in their local contexts. He describes the environmental justice approach as, "participatory, embodied, and experimental."[328]

This description could fit easily over Hassinger's contribution to the *Flying* performance. It was participatory: there was no hierarchy among performers, each contributed as an individual. It was embodied: the performers used their bodies to mimic nonhuman beings and responded in turn both to their context and one another. Finally, it was experimental: each performer was free to move in ways that felt authentic and expressive, and, as a group, they proposed a radical

[325] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 134.
[326] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 139.
[327] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 149.
[328] Méndez, *Climate Change from the Streets,* 16.

unwinding of distinctions between humans and their nonhuman, flying counterparts. As in *High Noon* and *Ten Minutes*, Hassinger's performance practice proposed new ways of being in the world that are attentive to the body's interaction with both human and nonhuman others. Responding to similar pressures and shifts in environmental thinking as those that catalyzed the environmental justice movement, Hassinger employed the body's embeddedness in the world and its interactivity with others as a powerful tool to model new worlds in which the environmental, the social, and cultural were intertwined. Hassinger presented a world in which humans and nonhumans are intimately entangled with one another. The execution of the performance reiterates nascent ideas about collective responses to injustice. Unlike most dance performance, which is choreographed by a single person, each artist was able to make their own contribution to the larger whole.[329] The performance itself also allowed for a kind of unity through difference, as performers at times enacted their own individual movements but came together at others. Furthermore, the representation of the future presented in the piece proposes a fundamental interconnectedness of political, economic, and cultural freedom with a closer connection to the natural world.

Voices

I will conclude with a discussion of a unique performance work directed by Hassinger, *Voices* (1984/85), which again offers a critique of ecological thinking divorced from social considerations [Fig. 3.26]. Unlike much of Hassinger's earlier performance work, *Voices* incorporated narration and movement, hinting at the place of language in our understanding of the natural world. The piece premiered at the Woman's Building in 1984 and was performed

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[329] Ulysses Jenkins, telephone interview by the author, October 4, 2022. Jenkins described the collaboration as: "When we collaborated, we not only shared the ideas but the actual concepts we were performing as well."

again at California State University Los Angeles in 1985. The setting for each was a small, darkened gallery. The cast included a conductor as well as six other performers, each of whom played the role of a different theme. The themes were “Survival”, “Intolerance,” “Nature,” “Consumerism,” “Aging,” and “Message.” In a version of the performance from 1984, fellow artist May Sun acted as the conductor, while in 1985 Hassinger herself played that role.[330] In the 1985 version, the floor of the gallery was covered in dried leaves, adding both a tactile and auditory component to the viewer’s experience. When viewers entered the performance space, a television was playing video clips edited together by Ulysses Jenkins. These clips were a news report from Connie Chung describing the launch of the space shuttle Discovery and reports of the crash of a B-1 bomber plane that was being tested to carry nuclear weapons.

As the television fell silent, the actors walked on stage and stepped up onto makeshift pedestals. The conductor then signaled to each actor to recite short monologues one by one. Some of the monologues referenced an undefined danger, which had either already passed or was still to come. Survival, speaking slowly, said, “It was very hard to find food. We learned to flourish in the hardest places. Well, anyway, we survived, but things had changed. We all knew we were beginning again.” Message stated with urgency, “It’s too late for all this now! There’s no time. Do you remember a tree in a field at dawn?” Consumerism, played in both versions by Senga Nengudi, calmly narrated what sounds like a manual for an unidentified household appliance. A “gizmo” that will become “indispensable” once you own it. Intolerance described a mysterious other. She stated hesitantly, “These people are okay, even though they’re different. They must be different—I don’t recognize any of them. However, they seem to be talking and breathing and walking upright. They’re okay I guess, I guess…” Others made more direct

[330] Program for *Voices*, 1984, box 3, folder 5, Maren Hassinger Papers, 1955-2018, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. Hassinger was in New York in 1984 as artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

references to the natural world. Nature, played in both versions by Jenkins, quoted the southern gothic author Walker Percy saying, "Some Walker Percy: 'The wind smells like trees. The weeds smell like iron. Just remember music, love, and the dream of summer. It was October and the wind blew lightly from the north.'" [Fig. 3.27] Aging recalled her childhood experiences of nature and contrasted them with forecasting the weather as an adult. "When I was little I used to lay in the grass, and I'd look up and the clouds would be animals or clowns, or anything. Now when I look up, I forecast the weather: sunny, smoggy, foggy."

After each gave an individual monologue, they all joined in and recited their monologues at the same time, eventually stepping down from their pedestals and moving throughout the performance area in a cacophony of narrative and movement. The actors then began to recite the monologues of the other characters, further confusing their messaging. Then, the whole cast linked arms and circled around the television set, now playing news reports again, while they shouted the lines from Walker Percy, "The weeds smell like iron! The wind smells of trees!" Finally, they passed a boom box from one person to another. The boom box played a recording of Hassinger saying "I want to remember how the fields and trees look at sunset or dawn."

The lines from Walker Percy quoted in the performance are from his 1971 book, *Love in the Ruins*. Hassinger noted Percy as an influence on her thinking. In an interview from 1993, she stated "I liked the Romantic outlook of Walker Percy. Nature was depicted in decline…Often characters would be driven crazy by their alienation from nature, I felt."[331] The novel is a work of comic speculative fiction set in a world in which the social trends of the 1960s are taken to their extremes. The main character, Dr. Thomas More, is an aging, alcoholic doctor who believes that chaotic forces in the world are coming to a head and the only way to prevent catastrophe is

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[331] O'Grady, "Maren Hassinger," 28.

to reconcile the two opposing forces in the human psyche: “angelism” and “bestialism.” Angelism is the desire for abstraction, to see oneself as separate from the world as an objective observer, while bestialism is one’s base need for happiness derived from pleasures of the flesh. More’s hometown, Paradise Estates, is also threatened by the intrusion of the natural world in the form of creeping vines and animals. The vines quite literally crack the foundations of the town, but most residents prefer to direct their attention to political squabbles and the latest consumer products.[332] The residents of the town have attempted to contain nature within manicured golf courses and enclosed patios. On the outskirts, however, is a swamp where a sort of maroon community of social and political outcasts congregates. The swamp serves as a foil to the carefully managed community and a reminder that nature can never be entirely regulated. Nature appears in the novel as threatening, biding its time until the town’s downfall. The two lines Hassinger selected from the text, “the wind smells like trees,” and “the weeds smell like iron” suggest an intermingling of humans and nature and the sensorial perception of smell, hinting at an embodied appreciation and awareness of the natural world. Hassinger’s work, like the novel, does not present the natural world as benign or existing only for human use and appreciation. In her work, nature threatens, resists containment, and is a fickle but necessary planetary companion.

The characters in *Voices* relate individual social problems, such as consumerism, intolerance, and the marginal place of nature within society. As in *Love in the Ruins*, however, the development of the piece reveals the interconnections of these problems. The overlapping of the characters’ speeches in *Voices* and their switching of roles criticize the rigid separation of the environmental and the social. They are interrelated and, eventually, the distinctions between

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[332] Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time near the End of the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), 9-10.

them topple as the actors' voices and bodies overlap. Aging, who comments on the smoggy weather patterns, Survival who speaks of an impending threat, and Intolerance who distrusts an unknown other are all linked. These individuals are also connected to broader national and international developments as evidenced by the video news reports that opened the piece.

Like *Flying*, *Voices* posits links between social and environmental problems and proposes collaboration and integration as an alternative. Although this work is less dance-like and more theatrical than her earlier performances, its repetition and cacophony confound the typical narrative development of theatrical productions. The piece prompts viewers to consider how the repetition of certain language and narratives about humans and their environments reinforces the conditions of the narratives in the world. It also gives nature an important place within the social landscape and suggests that alienation from nature is both caused by and leads to other social ills.

Conclusion

By recognizing that Maren Hassinger's work is deeply concerned with environmental issues, we also learn that the environmental art movement of the postwar period was far more diverse in its concerns than we have previously acknowledged. Hassinger presented a world in which bodies and objects are intimately entangled with one another, constantly negotiating in response to other beings, both human and nonhuman. Her *High Noon* performance revealed the agentic capacity of objects, while in *Ten Minutes* the dancers modeled in microcosm the interplay of bodies and nature in space. As evidenced by Los Angeles' constant battle with smog, the natural world had the power to intervene in human affairs in unpredictable ways and bodies are more porous than previously believed. In the 1980s, the foundations of mainstream environmentalism were shaken by the development of the environmental justice movement,

which sought to change not only what issues were prioritized but also how organizers approached environmental activism. Alongside this shift, Hassinger and her collaborators, too, were creating nonhierarchal and experimental collaborations aimed at finding alternatives to a colonialist relationship with the environment. They sought answers both in the African past and in the models from the animal world. These models opposed universalizing approaches to alleviating environmental harms in favor of decentralized coalitions based on local issues. This approach resonates today as the burden of industrial toxins and now climate change falls unevenly on low-income and communities of color, such as those in Flint, Michigan, and "cancer alley" Louisiana.

Coda: Afterlives of Eco-Performance

As this dissertation has shown, the era of the 1970s and 1980s was a ripe period for the development of forms that were responsive to the body and its entanglements with nonhuman nature. Rising awareness of the effects of pollution and other toxics on the body, notably the unequal distribution of those effects, catalyzed a new understanding of our intimacy with the nonhuman world. Artists of the time built upon a more general interest among postwar artists in the responsive body and integrated it with these new environmental concerns. Through eco-performance, artists were able to distill environmental concerns that were dispersed in both time and place in the form of the receptive body. They also used their bodies to explore the porous boundaries between humans and their others as well as among groups of humans. Their work opened up the limits of environmental discourse to include the social situations in which environments are embedded, acknowledging the strong ties between one's experience of the environment and gender, class, and race.

While unique to their time, these models carry lessons for the artists of today, a time when the social and the environmental again seem inextricably linked. The interlocking threats of climate crisis again pierce a worldview that would present humans as outside of the world and able to master its forces. As sea level rise, fires, floods, and storms grow in both intensity and range, the threats posed by the natural world feel increasingly personal, especially to those who are most vulnerable to their effects. Contemporary artists like Kiyan Williams, A.K. Burns, Jamilah Sabur, Wangechi Mutu, and others have engaged with the entanglement of bodies and environments in their work. I will briefly present an example of two works by Mutu that engage with an eco-performance method in the twenty-first century.

Wangechi Mutu: From Cleaning to Throwing

Born in Nairobi, Kenya and trained in the United States, Mutu (b. 1972) is most well known for her elaborate collages, but she also works in sculpture, animation, and, as I will discuss here, performance. Her work often features hybridized femme or feminized subjects that interact and/or intersect with various plant, animal, and fungal beings in fantastical landscapes. In the early performance work *Cleaning Earth* (2006) Mutu explores the relationship between environmental and social forces [Fig. C.1]. In video documentation of this piece, the artist, dressed as a domestic worker, works on her hands and knees to scrub a rectangular patch of dirt behind her Brooklyn brownstone.[333] Using only a small bucket and scrub brush, she repetitively moves the dirt around in alternately sweeping and circular motions, with no perceivable effect on the surface she is working. While its effects are unclear, the effort of this labor is visible. Viewers perceive her apparent fatigue as the performance unfolds over twenty-five minutes and her energy gradually lessens.

Mutu's efforts to clean the earth recall the work often done by women to rehabilitate desecrated landscapes and reorient society away from an exploitative relationship with nonhuman nature. Figures like Wangari Maathai (who worked Kikuyu, in the region of Mutu's family heritage) aimed to remediate landscapes that had been deforested due to colonial agricultural and military practices. Maathai's organization, the Green Belt Movement, encouraged rural women to plant seedlings in exchange for a small payment, and she later won the Nobel Prize for this work. Black feminist scholar and ecocritic Chelsea Mikael Frazier writes that Mutu's work, "makes clear the indispensability of routinely occluded *black-fem* bodies to

[333] Wangechi Mutu, "The Power of Earth in My Work," in *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa*, ed. Karen Milbourne (Washington, D.C: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2013), 95.

the stabilization of the economic and material order on Earth."[334] Mutu's performance of embodied labor in *Cleaning Earth* illuminates this undervalued labor and the intensity of its effects on the women who perform it. The expenditure of energy in the performance of this labor is clear, and yet its effectiveness is stifled by systemic barriers.

While *Cleaning Earth* offers a powerful, yet bleak diagnostic, her performance *Throw* (2016) speaks back to women's disempowerment [Fig. C.2]. In this work, a performance at The Contemporary Austin, the artist flung a black, pulpy material made from a stew of magazine pages mixed with ink onto a white wall. She wore a black, floor-length gown and gloves that simultaneously enhanced and subverted her femininity. Photographs of the action reveal that she used the strength of her entire body—at times crouching down or leaping into the air—to forcefully lob the material onto the wall. Mutu stated that the piece was indebted to women's protests globally, especially those from parts of the world in which protest, especially by women, is punished harshly.[335] Kellie Jones writes of this work, "This specific and deliberate gesture […] constitutes the refusal of sublimated status, of the colonized subject, or the bounds of sexuality and gender, and is empowered by figural complexity."[336] The work takes up the embodied gesture and its relationship to material to powerfully combat the position of both women and nonhuman nature as subordinate to the demands of colonialism and patriarchy.

Mutu's practice illuminates how the legacy of eco-performance circulates in contemporary art. Her work carries forward some of its key elements, while greatly expanding the practice to incorporate a more globally connected and forward-looking perspective. The

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[334] Chelsea Mikael Frazier, "Thinking Red, Wounds, and Fungi in Wangechi Mutu's Eco-Art," in *Ecologies, Agents, Terrains*, ed. Christopher P. Heuer and Rebecca Zorach (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2018), 184.
[335] Ian Bourland, "Wangechi Mutu Talks about Her Work in 'Blackness in Abstraction' at Pace Gallery," *Artforum*, July 2016, https://www.artforum.com/columns/wangechi-mutu-talks-about-her-work-in-blackness-in-abstraction-at-pace-gallery-229978/.
[336] Kellie Jones, "Survey," in *Wangechi Mutu* (New York: Phaidon, 2022), 90.

influence of Mendieta, whom Mutu points to as a particular influence in her artistic development, can be seen in the way the works investigate the merger of the body with land and their anticolonial worldview.[337] Mutu's depiction of ongoing, unproductive labor in *Cleaning Earth* recalls Ukeles's interest in maintenance work, and both artists suggest a close connection with the natural world through embodied labor. They also foreground historically undervalued labor, particularly that of women. In *Throw*, Mutu calls to mind Hassinger's investigative approach to the formal relationships between bodies and material as well as her interest in developing alternative modalities for engaging in ecological thinking. Where Mutu and other contemporary artists depart from these forebearers is in their interest in speculating on climate futures. Climate crisis forecloses the possibility of continuing to maintain current systems and ways of living. The future brought about by this inevitable change may exacerbate current inequalities or offer opportunities for new, more just ways of coexisting on the planet. Either way, the future will not resemble the present, and artists like Mutu fabulate on what a reinvented world might look like.

Conclusion

While necessarily limited in scope in both time and geography, this project opens the door for future research on the embodied experience of nature in art across other periods, both in more recent but also more historical work, and outside of the United States. It also broadens the category of environmental art to incorporate both more diverse artists and subjects. It is my hope that future scholarship will continue this effort and consider artists whose work intersects with, for example, urban infrastructure projects, housing, food systems, and the many other points of

[337] Wangechi Mutu, An Oral History with Wangechi Mutu by Deborah Willis, September 24, 2013, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2014/02/28/wangechi-mutu/. "In the States, I remember moments where things blew my mind. When I first learned about Ana Mendieta, that was just like, wow. Mendieta fascinated me, that there was this legacy of who she was and when she came and this power in her work. At the same time there is very little evidence of her anymore."

connection between environments and social systems. This type of thinking is more necessary than ever as climate crisis threatens every aspect of human society and threatens to intensify existing inequities to maintain systems that are ultimately unsustainable. By understanding the approach of artists, and particularly those working in eco-performance, we are better prepared imagine alternate possibilities for being human in the world today.

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