

# Democracy Is Empty

May 14 , 1997

**Doug Ashford** Over the years I've noticed that people tend to address only the sociological aspects of practices like ours. What I've always found really interesting in your work is how images of democracy are aesthetically engineered.

**Mierle Laderman Ukeles** The fundamental "A" in the alphabet of art is freedom. I think that's what unites all artists no matter what they do. Whether the artist engages social reality or pursues private expression, the value of artists resides in their ability to articulate freedom, and the power that comes from it, so that viewers can experience this sense of freedom in relation to their own lives. To do this, the artist has to have the courage to continuously redefine and reinvent art. And to this end, my approach has been to think of art as part of a social ecology. But when you work this way, you sometimes find yourself in pretty dreary situations—where instead of being given the opportunity to create work, you're given assignments by the curator, art institution, or a public art agency.

Luckily, in my recent experience at LAMoCA, I had a dialogue for more than two years with Julie Lazar and Tom Finklepearl, the curators of "Uncommon Sense." They brought critical questions to bear on my project without telling me what to do. Of course, at times artists can make such opportunities possible, too, acting in administrative or institutional capacities to help other artists realize their projects.

**DA** That's what a lot of artists and artist collectives did in the 1980s, I think. We found a sense of solidarity in the struggle to reinvent the ways cultural institutions are defined and operate. But in recent years museums have appropriated certain techniques from our practices in order to enlarge

**Doug Ashford**

**Mierle Laderman Ukeles**

their audiences, primarily in order to justify funding.

**MLU** I heard that sentiment expressed by many people at MoCA, including Richard Koshalek, the Director, who said that if the museum couldn't draw many more kinds of people, it would die. He said he was particularly interested in "Uncommon Sense" because it presented the museum as a public place that belonged to everybody. Together with the curators, he wanted many more people to think, "This is my culture, this represents me; I have a right to have a say in what goes on here. I'm connected. This is my museum."

But you're tying this institutional desire for inclusivity to the severely restricted funding situation as if museums are just being business smart: "We're losing our flow of revenue from one direction, so let's make it up in another way."

**DA** I don't want to be reductive, because you and I both know that museums are extremely complex institutions, with all kinds of people in struggle over different visions of the world, of art, and of themselves. I've had incredibly generative experiences with many museum professionals, so it's really not my intention to reduce them to one thing or another. But I do want to try to figure out why...

**MLU** Why institutions give you particular assignments now! Why someone inevitably says, "You should do this; you should do that." Usually, they want you to duplicate yourself, repeating old familiar projects.

**DA** Right. Perhaps the dilemma is nothing new...a particular mode of critical practice becomes accepted by mainstream institutions as another aesthetic category. And certainly there are categories for us now—community-based, socially-conscious, participatory, activist, political, collaborative, what have you. But when I see a mode of practice



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Touch Sanitation: Handshake Ritual, 1978-79, New York City (photos: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).

that I'm associated with serving social entities that I do not want to serve, I become confused and worried. For example, the way community-based art practice is now serving urban renewal agendas. This is related to what I sense is a very complex shift: as museums become more and more privatized, a lot of its products are becoming more "public."

**MLU** That reminds me of an experience I had in L.A. creating my piece *Unburning Freedom Hall* for "Uncommon Sense." Julie [Lazar] and I had a meeting with the community liaison of the Los Angeles Fire Department to get permission to work with firefighters on making what I called "Unburnings." But when we got there, we were told the meeting was canceled; however, they practically begged us to come back at the end of that same day. It turned out women and minority firefighters of the city were suing the L.A. Fire Department for job discrimination in recruitment and career advancement. This bombshell had just hit page one, and the community liaison office had all the media in town in their offices at that moment. But they hardly wanted to cancel a meeting with two highly public women! By the time we returned, the two officers heading the community liaison effort looked wiped out. I'm sure they just wanted to go home instead of talking with us about art, freedom, and how we wanted firefighters to make art. Then I said, "You know, there isn't a class action suit against the art world, but like any other institution in our culture, there are problems with women and minorities not being included enough in the art world, too." And as soon as I said that, they calmed down and didn't see us as their worst nightmare anymore. We were able to get down to business with them.

You see, I wanted to make common cause with them, to address certain issues as problems of the entire culture. I guess what I'm saying is that museums can offer opportunities for making connections like this. In her review of "Uncommon Sense" in the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith wrote, "How sad when artists and curators hate the museum and hate art." But she got it totally wrong. No one loves art and reveres the possibility of the museum more than the group of artists and the two curators of "Uncommon Sense."

**DA** I've always been resentful of the institutional critique

label, because in the end I want to have conversations with people about what art does—how objects affect people, how experiencing or collecting them changes their lives, how we find coherence of meaning and a sense of identity through objects.

**MLU** I would say that artists in general are optimists, because we think meaning can be found in material expression. But because you and I address social systems, I think our belief in the power of material forms generally goes unnoticed. And contrary to what most people might assume, I think one of the best places to experience this power is often in art institutions, in museums. Also, where is the best place to picture the stupefying geometry of democracy? What institution can best represent the idea that everybody has equal access and ownership of this culture? I think it could be some kind of museum.

**DA** Do you really think so? What about the Continental Airlines wing of the so-and-so museum, or the Temporary Contemporary, which is now a Geffen space? What does that mean to viewers, do you think? Or should we not even worry about it?

**MLU** I don't know. What I am really talking about is sort of a spiritual concern, this idea of everybody having ownership of culture.

**DA** Not necessarily having *possession* of it, though. Their names are not on it.

**MLU** Yes, of having possession. You think that's naive?

**DA** No, I don't think it's naive because I agree that museums are ultimately public places. Even as you represent social systems in public places, you seem to want to keep the museum as a space reserved for other forms of social interaction, like reverence and respect, almost as a kind of religious expectation. Actually, I've always been struck by the language you use to describe social formations and political discourse. It's the kind of language that one would normally associate with mystical occurrences, forms of ritual

and discovery.

**MLU** The fact is I'm interested in questions that religions ask: "What is the purpose of life? What is the meaning of my existence? Does every person have equal value? Who's responsible for evil in the world?"

In Jewish mystical thought, there is a story about vessels. In the beginning, before the creation of our world, there was only perfection. The Divine was everywhere and everything was conceived as a series of perfect vessels. Then the Divine, in a willful act of love, constricted itself, withdrew, in order to make room for the world to come into being—a world of freedom and free choice, to be ever and always recreated by people. But in the act of constriction, in the great loving act of self-withdrawal, there was a shattering of these perfect vessels. And the shards, the remnants, the little shattered pieces of the vessels are now everywhere in the world, and each fragment is filled with a divine spark of the original divinity that was everywhere. And it is our job to repair these vessels, to make the world whole and perfect again.

The image is that of an originating trauma, but the point is that human beings have the power to fix things, to repair the world. My piece in L.A., *Unburning Freedom Hall*, was an attempt to "rebuild" Freedom Hall, which was burned down in 1838 four days after its completion. It was built as a "temple of free speech" by a coalition of women, African-Americans, and abolitionists so that issues of women's equality, abolition of slavery, and Native American rights

could be discussed openly and plans for change articulated. It was a dream come true for many. But after four short days, the building was destroyed—another vessel was shattered. So I tried to ignite the sparks of this forgotten story, to reenact the original coalition's process, moving throughout the city, gathering a coalition, to raise the possibility of rebuilding it again. The process of rebuilding freedom has to be undertaken by many, working together. Questions can be posed forever individually, but answers have to be built by many many people. No one can do this alone.

**DA** But do you know how atypical it sounds for an artist dealing with social formations to speak about things in metaphoric ways that resound with mystical thought? I think it's great that you don't describe your work only in sociological or aesthetic terms. Your story of the vessel reveals how an artwork can reverberate between a particular mystical tradition and an idea of representing society.

**MLU** In fact, the reason I used glass as the primary material in *Unburning* was because, as you said earlier, meaning is manifest in the material world. Glass can be shattered, devastated, lose all form, but it can also be reconstructed into a new whole.

**DA** And those forms can be used to change the actual interior space of the museum. The spatial use of an institution can become a metaphor for people's ability to represent themselves in a different way.



Left and right: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, RE-SPECT, 1993, Givors, France (photos: courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).

**MLU** Or to experience change. I consciously put myself in a position to deal with some of the hardest issues in our society—what to do with our garbage, how might we transform a place that's completely poisoned and degraded by our own waste, how might these places become available to us again? Placing myself in the sanitation department, where these questions never go away, is a way for me to keep myself in the real. If our dreams can be expressed in material form, then I want to place myself where the material is completely degraded. I want to deal with the landfill. That's the center of reality; that's where I try to locate my work.

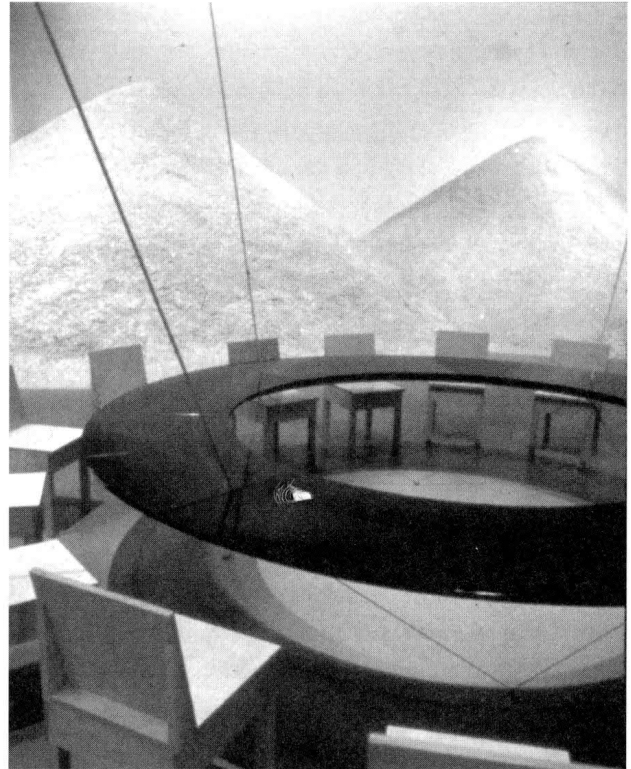
**DA** But you know how mystical it sounds, don't you? All this redemption? That out of the shit comes saints...out of a state of total degradation comes...

**MLU** Of course! But I don't think it's all that different from what artists have been doing forever.

**DA** Your work works because of the way materials and language connect directly with people's understanding of themselves. And what I'm most hopeful about is that this kind of practice can be understood as a poetic rendering of the *possibility* of new social formations, rather than simply a prescription for redistributing existing social formations. Your *Maintenance Art* performances at the Wadsworth Atheneum [see pp. 8-14 in this issue], for instance, wasn't just about getting that museum to change its ideas about how labor is organized within its confines. It created a set of correspondences between people's private and public lives and an understanding of the relationship between them.

**MLU** The museum space can make such correspondences very clear. That's why I think the museum can be a democratic place. Democracy doesn't have to be stupid and base. It can be whatever we want it to be.

**DA** You know how scary that is? It means people have to allow themselves to go into areas that are not necessarily known beforehand. It shows democracy as a kind of a void, a void that is defined by struggle. This is a very difficult



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Unburning Freedom Hall (detail)*, 1997, Los Angeles (photo: Lyle Ashton Harris; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).

idea for politicians, bureaucrats, and media people—that democracy is an empty space that is being constantly shaped, filled, contested, emptied.

**MLU** Is that how you understand the art enterprise—the endless articulation of that void?

**DA** That sounds wonderful to me, but I'm also trying to figure out why certain artistic and curatorial practices that describe themselves as democratic, driven by the rhetoric of equality, empowerment, enabling, the community, etc., often aren't. I think it has to do with the fact that the conception of democracy that those practices embody is one of a fictional fullness, a fantasy of social coherence, which isn't really the way things work. Then again, I don't want this idea of the void to be understood as a purely neutral, abstract model of democracy either, because obviously we each enter into the struggle already situated in some way.



**MLU** Now I want to ask you a question. You said earlier that people don't realize how much artists like us actually love material objects. How much we believe in their power to express desires, values, fears, etc. So what is the difference between such expressions and the kind of expression available through commodified objects, which often translate into "you are what you buy or have"? Isn't there a tricky relationship here?

**DA** There is, isn't there? Having been taught to understand such social conditions from a Marxist standpoint, I used to perceive commodity culture as flatly disallowing the potential of individuals to be free. But I no longer think it is so one-dimensional. Human potential *is* reduced in terms of labor, but I don't think one can predict how consumers react to culture, as commodified as it might be. What I would like to think is that even within a culture overrun by consumerism, there remain unregulated areas for the articulation of radical self-determination. Which is to say, I don't think we are what we buy. Or if we are what we buy, we are what we buy in ways that are not necessarily as simple or predictable as they might seem. Art objects are commodity forms, sure, but they are not just that. Society invests in them other levels of meaning; they accrue new and different meanings over time.

Which leads me to questions concerning the historicizing of the kind of art practices that you and I have been involved in for over a decade, as well as their institutionalization beyond the museum. On the one hand, I think it's extremely important that ideas that we have, and have had, about art practice become part of mainstream art history and cultural discourse. The ideas should become available to those who did not experience the works directly so that they can be generative for the expansion of new practices. In this sense, I think it is crucial to become historicized within an academic context. On the other hand, I have a sense of revulsion about the prospect of such historicization.

**MLU** Because in that translation, people drop off critically organic parts of the practice. Our work, unfortunately, is understood most often as community fix-up assignments or self-esteem workshops. But it's so much more complicated

than that. See, we assume as artists that the fullness of perception that we invest in making an artwork in all its detail is, or will be, reciprocated by the viewer.

**DA** The kind of reductivism you're speaking of is evident in arts education, too. For instance, out at University of Southern California, there is a specialized graduate studio program in public art now; at Carnegie Mellon, graduate students are required to do community-based art projects as part of their degree program. Which all sounds fine, even progressive. But I also think such institutional curriculum changes can serve to produce more "professional" artists, who have specialized training. So that a particular mode of practice is rendered a career track.

**MLU** Well, when I started making art, I was motivated by a desire to address the myriad social, political, and cultural problems around me, to fix them. It might have been arrogant and self-righteous, but I was convinced that everything could be fixed up in ten, fifteen, twenty years—in my lifetime anyway. In looking back, I see how arrogant so many of us were. Now I feel I don't know how to fix hardly anything. But despite my more realistic sense of agency, I still can't stand a lot of things.

When I talk to a high school kid, for example, and see what she can imagine and make, I see a powerful young person full of potential. But then I discover that no one has taught the same terrific kid how to read or write, that when she gets out of school she will be lost in this culture. It's heartbreaking; I can't stand that. I see places in Los Angeles that got burned down and never rebuilt. I can't stand that either.

**DA** I don't think most people can stand that. I think many of us walk around with a profound sense of terror, anxiety, and maybe even despair in the face of some of the more pressing social problems in this country. Carrying such feelings, what do you think happens when, for instance, a person encounters you on the steps of a museum, washing them on your hands and knees?

**MLU** Or sitting with vastly different kinds of people around a

table, smack in the middle of the museum, talking about building peace? I think they see beyond the sense of nihilism and futility; they see a possibility, which becomes tangible because of one person's effort. And that is what art can be. I have had enormously significant experiences with artworks that have immeasurably increased my pleasure of living. And we need to have more of that.

**DA** For me, the goal is to try to model those experiences and to figure out how political establishments and institutional developments devalue or invalidate certain aesthetic practices. Efforts to bind aesthetic value with social formations was, and still is, deemed less valuable than individuated private experience, the kind that supposedly requires priestly interpreters for mediation. My art involvement with Group Material in the early days tried to address this condition and to say that the museum is exclusive, not neutral.

**MLU** Do you think the museum can *ever* be neutral?

**DA** No, because it reflects the social relations that produce it.

**MLU** "Uncommon Sense" was based on the notion that it can be a neutral place for everybody.

**DA** Get out of here!



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Unburning Freedom Hall* (detail of "Unburnings"), 1997, Los Angeles (photo: Lyle Ashton Harris; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).

**MLU** Is it arrogant to say that I am making such a place neutral?

**DA** Yeah, because to say the museum is neutral is to reinforce the hidden ideology and politics that the museum embodies. Come on, we know museum collections not only reflect values of the dominant culture, they institutionalize them.

**MLU** But this exhibition attempted to say that the museum could be something else besides the sum of all those things. That it could be a place that's filled with voices of the people coming into it. A meeting place, a forum.

**DA** I'm very worried about this conversation.

**MLU** You are?

**DA** Well, I don't know how I fit into it anymore. I feel that the idea of a democratic forum is too easily manipulated. Look at the "town meetings" that Ted Koppel convenes regularly on television, which only reinforces the status quo through spectacle. Such forums present a false sense of inclusion, as if they really provide a space for collective thinking. But they're only *displays* of democracy. That's what I'm worried about—artists creating spectacles that replace real participation.

When Group Material organized the four-part exhibition "Democracy" at Dia in 1988, we tried to address the issues that the artworks were addressing through "town meetings." We had discussions with teachers and other participants on the status of education, for example. But in his essay for the book *Democracy* (1990), David Deitcher criticized these town meetings. He rightly questioned our expectations. Did we think that the walls of the Dia Art Foundation would roll up and somehow our conversations would spill out into the street to have impact on public discourse?

**MLU** My hope in L.A. was that democracy would get a shot in the arm around my peace table, an empty place to be completed by other people coming forward. I participated in several peace talks, and at moments when people sat down



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Unburning Freedom Hall*, 1997, Los Angeles (photo: Lyle Ashton Harris; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.).

to make observations, adding their voice to those of others', it really did become...something happened there. My fantasy was that we could make a significant contribution to peace by bringing together different groups from Los Angeles who normally don't speak to one another. And that this would be possible in a museum because it is a neutral place. You think that's false?

**DA** I don't know. You seem to be saying that you don't really care if the neutrality of the museum is false or not—that you'd rather deal with the symbolic value of that neutrality. That is, the museum may be determined by all kinds of social relations and uneven power dynamics, but as an artist you're going to take up people's perception of it as a neutral space and push the limits of the institution's capacity to fulfill its self-definition.

**MLU** That is what I'm saying. Is that good enough? I think what I'm really saying is that reality is more complex than what we can analyze of it; there is a level of symbolic power that is as much alive as anything else. I have been disappointed that my piece at MoCA did not engender a major

shift in "peace-building" in the museum. I thought it could, but I don't think it did partly because not that many different people actually go to museums. So, what I think now, several months down the road, is that you have to believe in the power of smaller, incremental gestures that can build into a larger artwork. You can see a bit of this in the video portion of *Unburning Freedom Hall*—people have genuine responses and made genuine works. There is a big difference between thinking that hoards of people are going to stream into the museum to discover themselves and having faith that they themselves will create a picture of a democratic shift to become a more peaceful city.

**DA** That is as beautiful a fantasy as the one many people now consider archaic—the disruption of power through spontaneous collective action. The point is that the institutions we're trying to change are so tremendously complex. They reconstitute our resistance in reflecting and representing our critical efforts. But the idea of trying to make symbolic models for the possibility of such transformations for an audience is terrific.