

**Two Studies:
Working in Public**

by

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Abstract

Two Studies: Working in Public is comprised of release of an artist book and the presentation of several large-scale projections created from original recombinant video. Developed around research into generosity, maintenance, urbanism, and novel practices, this ambitious investigation of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* includes a generative video system; which sorts through source footage of the artist repairing public benches and playgrounds. The artwork also includes a self-published art book, showcasing the creation of new public benches in semi-scenic locations and temporary swing sets suspended from billboards around Vancouver. These works serve as exploration of experimental behaviour inside the urban environment, and interdisciplinary approaches to documenting these findings wavering between the ridiculous and the critical, attempting to both reconcile and taunt the way in which generosity plays a role in the practice of working in public. The release of the artist book *If It's Still There When You Go Looking* coincided with the one-night-only outdoor screenings in an exhibition at Simon Fraser University's Burnaby campus.

Keywords: contemporary art; generosity; maintenance; DIY; generative video; artist book

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Chapter 1.

Artist's Statement: Two Studies: Working in Public

1.1. Introduction

During 2013 and 2014 my research and artistic practice investigated generosity across media and disciplines particularly focused on working in public. This research is toward a novel practice, an interdisciplinary rehearsal that experiments in a tactical way with generosity, maintenance, urbanism, and artistic activism. The results of these experiments, exhibited in the group show *an exhibition*, reference a host of conceptual art practices, art activist happenings, social practices, and various elements of “maker” culture.¹ Questions about public and private space are explored through digital videos and photographs of maintenance I perform on public property as temporary urban revisions. Two different projects resulted from my thesis research into novel practices, generosity, maintenance, and urbanism. The first is a generative video software and large video projection, and the second is an artist book documenting urban revisions. These projects draw on ideas found in Ted Purves’ social practice and from traces of generosity mingling with acts of *détournement*. For Purves, generous acts occurring in our current hyper capitalist system actually serve as ‘blows against the empire’ because there is no fiscal exchange.² As a place for further investigation, this idea of an act of generosity working as a blow to the empire manifests in my work, first as gesture or a maintenance act, then as a gift, park furniture or an ad-hoc playground, and lastly, as a

¹ Maker culture as the particular sect of do-it-yourself movement that is concerned with technology existing as online communities and as small workshops, hacker spaces, and the occasional startup.

² Purves, Ted. *Blows Against the Empire*. 2004.

free book, a public screening, a set of working instructions, or a free download of the source material.

1.2. Chapter 1: Past Work and Trajectory

Prior to arriving in Vancouver, my practice was predominantly an exploration of sound, delving into DIY instruments and audio installations. This artistic practice was often interrupted and occasionally informed by an interest in music, in particular indie rock and the particular sub-genre of this music that depends on a community of like minded individuals to facilitate touring and affordable accommodations, most often resulting in a reciprocal exchange between bands who are relative strangers to each other. In a way, this community forms a minor entity, inspired by and perhaps sampling from, a major genre all the while actively remaining autonomous, inherently political and deliberately outside of the major.³

Additionally, and very much associated with this thesis research, my work often explores high and low technology, relationships between analog and digital systems, and the inherent failure of technology to represent our ideas. Ultimately, this work is ridiculous, humorously demanding the impossible from technology, and at once, attempting to convey another ideal. Throughout this work there remains a loyalty to the absurd, despite the fact that the subject matter is quite sincere and thorough, an exploration of dwindling public space and the absent state. This brings to mind Simon Critchley's notions of ethical responsibility paired with our own acknowledgment of humorous subjectivity, our ridiculous selves.⁴

³ Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. "What is a Minor Literature?" 1986.

Initially my investigation into minor literature (minor art) was prompted by "Returning on Bikes, Notes on Social Practice," an essay by Maria Lind comparing social practice to a minor practice in the art world.

⁴ Critchley, Simon. *Infinitely Demanding*. 2007.

1.3. Chapter 2: Video Projections

Mierle Laderman Ukeles became a huge influence for these projects based primarily on her early works and the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!* a beautiful ranting text and (rejected) proposal for a New York exhibition, published early in her career. Citing her pivotal work *Touch Sanitation*, my research into Ukeles' practice has been enriched by more recent writings on the overlapping space where art and activism meet. In Ukeles' practice we observe a generous approach to critical subject matter, a tactic that I have taken up in performances where I repair public property. The videos that I have made appear like a blunt reading of Ukeles' manifesto, an effort to make maintenance tasks more visible and to make art from maintenance tasks. Ukeles' "complaints," (perhaps they might be called tenets), become encouragement for a documented maintenance gesture. In a way, I'm expanding on her complaints and quietly documenting maintenance that aligns with my own complaints. I have my own simple rules for these source videos, I will repair public property; repairs should be simple; colours should call attention to the repair; and repairs should be documented on iPhones. These videos became the source material for original generative software that I have made, which will be exhibited as outdoor projections on May 8th.

Concurrently exploring technology, as I have been inclined in my past work, I was researching generative art; in particular, Philip Galanter's definition.

Generative art refers to any art practice where the artist uses a system, such as a set of natural language rules, a computer program, a machine, or other procedural invention, which is set into motion with some degree of autonomy contributing to or resulting in a completed work of art.⁵

Taking quite a few liberties, both with Galanter's definition and the investigation of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' manifesto, I programmed a digital video production system that incorporates some of Ukeles' tenets as rules to govern the procedures of the digital

⁵ Philip Galanter. What is Generative Art? 2003.

Galanter is often misread, interpreted as defining generative art as a medium that is not exclusively digital or married to new media. He has been trying to clarify the meaning of generative art for over a decade now. Instead, Galanter repeatedly attempts to clarify that he believes the term dates back before digital media.

system. In a way it teases Galanter's definition of generative art and also acknowledges, as Galanter proposed, a more rich history behind this genre including influences from conceptual art.

Using original software that I developed using MaxMSP, Jitter, and Isadora, the production system reorders the source footage of citywide repairs, generating a recombinant video. While similar software has been developed by the likes of Stan Douglas to undermine cinematographic and narrative tropes, the programming I have developed is meant to ring of Ukeles' maintenance frustrations.⁶ The software slowly clicks forward, 'maintenance is a drag,' depicting across a split screen, the incessant work tediously trading one task with the next. This deeper investigation into the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* also reveals a spirited optimism, and the software makes attempts to uphold this energy, the split screen and saturated matrices are implemented to liven up the process. The software employs random numbers in yet another attempt to keep the video stream lively, unpredictably choosing the order of the six videos while simultaneous calculations control screen splitting and video arrangement. These rules become abstract attempts to 'preserve the new; sustain the change.' Interpreted with a bit of cynicism, the software makes attempts to 'stay young' shifting its screens and refreshing the feed, skeptically attempting to keep the project 'groovy' perhaps. As the videos drag forward an active video count triggers changes in the grid, attempting to translate select observations from the manifesto and clumsily applying these translated complaints into the digital system. This further shifts control of the video streams, but the streams never end completely; instead the work goes on and the software attempts to 'show the work' again.

Lastly, the software light-heartedly extends Ukeles' critique of conceptual art, namely, the way that conceptual art claims pure development, but employs almost

⁶ Stan Douglas *Win, Place, or Show* 1998.

Douglas used a computer to reedit 6-minute video loops and seemingly endless reordered scenes. This work further questions the role of the audience and spectatorship; an argument between two characters on screen is never experienced the same way twice. The software I've employed attempts a much more lively shift over the course of its airings, a playfully responding to Mierle Laderman Ukeles' recommendation that we "keep the contemporary art museum groovy."

purely maintenance tactics. Inside of the final grid, a glitchy matrix that mimics the 9-up screen plays through its own set of maintenance videos. These are new .mov files that have been created by an original Jitter patch that also makes reference to Ukeles' manifesto, in particular her declaration: "Development systems are partial feedback systems with major room for change. Maintenance systems are direct feedback systems with little room for alteration." Interpreting the colours of the maintenance footage, Jitter objects manipulate the colour palette, add noise, and create a disproportionate matrix from these monochromatic selections. Then as a nod to the 'direct feedback system,' obviously language not meant for this context, the software notes the colour values of the edited video and attempts to correct a video mixer before sending a final video to *develop* a unique .mov file. For me, the video in the center of the grid is an effort to capture the attitude in Ukeles' words, a good-humoured, backhanded homage to conceptual art.

1.4. Chapter 3: Artist Book

The release of my first artist book, *If it's still there when you go looking* will coincide with events planned for May 8th as part of *an exhibition*. My book serves as documentation for months of do-it-yourself public art practices crafting swing sets and benches, which were placed in urban settings. The swing sets and benches themselves are built from discarded lumber found around construction sites around the city, then painted using economical mistint paint, assembled and placed back into the city serving as gifts but also as objects critical of hyper development and the pervasive neoliberal policies so consistently encroaching on the public sphere. The project is intended to engage with spaces and to find, make, or adapt spaces that might be sites for generosity and criticality. The book reflects my time in Vancouver and a practice of reimagining city spaces, in a way a series of questions asked both in the texts and through the objects. The benches and swings might be gifts given to neighbourhoods, and just as likely they are more biting critical gestures, which serve to détourne billboards, advertising spaces, and anywhere with a bit of a view.

The very designing of a book for me takes cues from the practice of Liam Gillick and his multidisciplinary approach. Gillick is most obviously an artist first; he also

designs books and appears to moonlight in a handful of other disciplines pertaining mostly to his own contemporary art community. My book, its title and the writing also, take influence from Miranda July, again a multidisciplinary figure who seems to effortlessly cross from medium to medium. *Beautiful Trouble*, a book of activist art terms and guides for a creative revolution, shapes the design of my book.⁷ I see my book as an object that is open to a host of varying interpretations; it is about looking, it is about taking action in the city, revaluing public spaces, examining the role of the artist, and negotiating a minor art practice. Just as I have applied a great deal of care in crafting swing sets and benches for these urban spaces, my book exhibits a different but obvious kind of care and attention; a collection of temporary, leisurely, even ‘ridiculous’ spaces. While these might be termed generous acts or gifts these spaces are simultaneously brooding with a critique of neoliberal public/private policies.

1.5. Conclusion

The culmination of this research will be a one-night exhibition held in the common outdoor space at Simon Fraser University’s Academic Quadrangle (AQ). A collection of new benches will permeate the large open space, providing a place to review copies of the free books left at each bench. Ad hoc swing sets will also be placed around the campus along a walking path that has been set between the AQ and three different projection locations. A static projection site inside the AQ where the software is running live, counters the exuberance of the shifting projection sites playing .mov files created by the ‘pure development’ software. Ultimately, this one night is a challenging viewing environment for this work, and this very planning is meant to further explore the bizarre intermingling of mediums and disciplines informed by dynamic research. This work reflects an ambitious study of cross-disciplinarity, a metamodernist sensibility, never balanced, but instead nervously bouncing between art history, between familiar art

⁷ Andrew Boyd. *Beautiful Trouble*. 2012.

Regarded by the author as a “how to think” manual, this book contains updated terminology for activist practices along with cross-listed projects taking place in public space. Suggested practices include *Détournement/Culture Jamming*, *Guerilla Projections*, *Take Risks but Care*, and *Kill Them with Kindness* – all of which heavily influenced the text in the book as well as the work that took place as part of *an exhibition* on May 8th.

mediums and experimental practice, between high technology and the DIY, between neoliberal critique, the ridiculous, and the critical, ultimately, countless points.⁸ In what can only be anticlimactic, my research and the work inspired by these investigations continues to push the pendulum back and forth, cautiously surveying artistic practice and the larger cultural systems that define these merged practices.

⁸ www.metamodernism.com. *What is Metamodernism?* 2010.

“The metamodern structure of feeling evokes an oscillation between a modern desire for sense and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all, between a modern sincerity and a postmodern iron... between control and commons and craftsmanship and conceptualism and pragmatism and utopianism.”

Chapter 2.

Images and Documentation: An Exhibition



Image 2.1. Installation view: video projections and benches.



Image 2.2. Installation view: video projection.



Image 2.3. Installation view: traveling projection alongside a performance by Didier Morelli in the parking garage.



Image 2.4. If It's Still There When You Go Looking and additional handouts at An Exhibition.

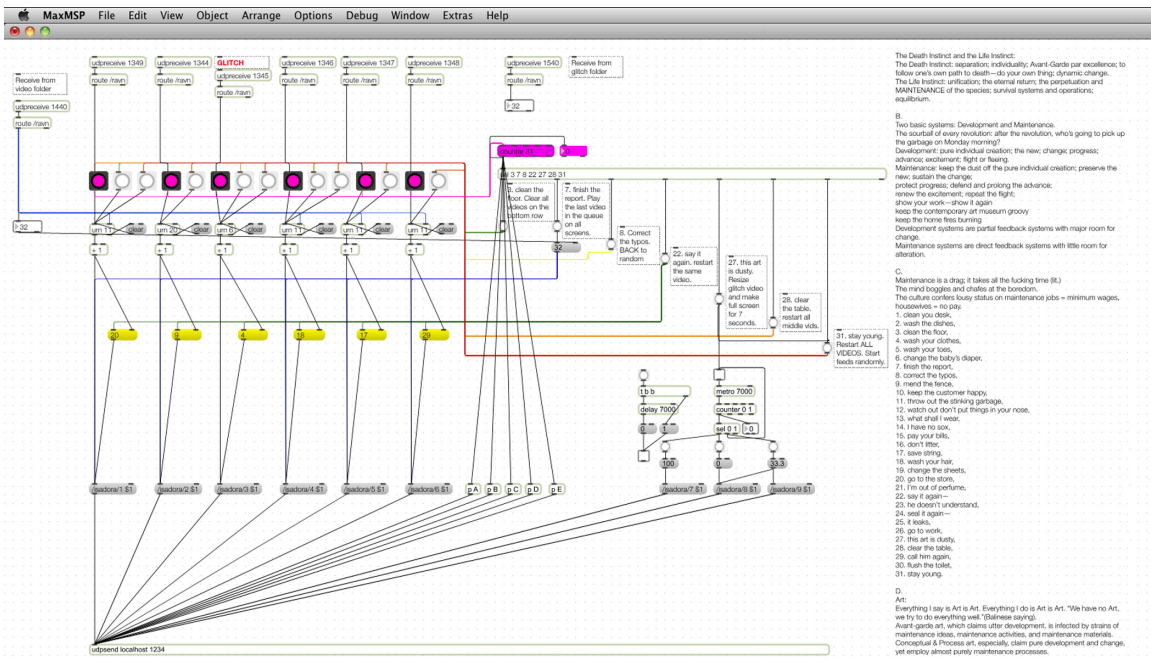


Image 2.5. Software screen shot: MaxMSP.

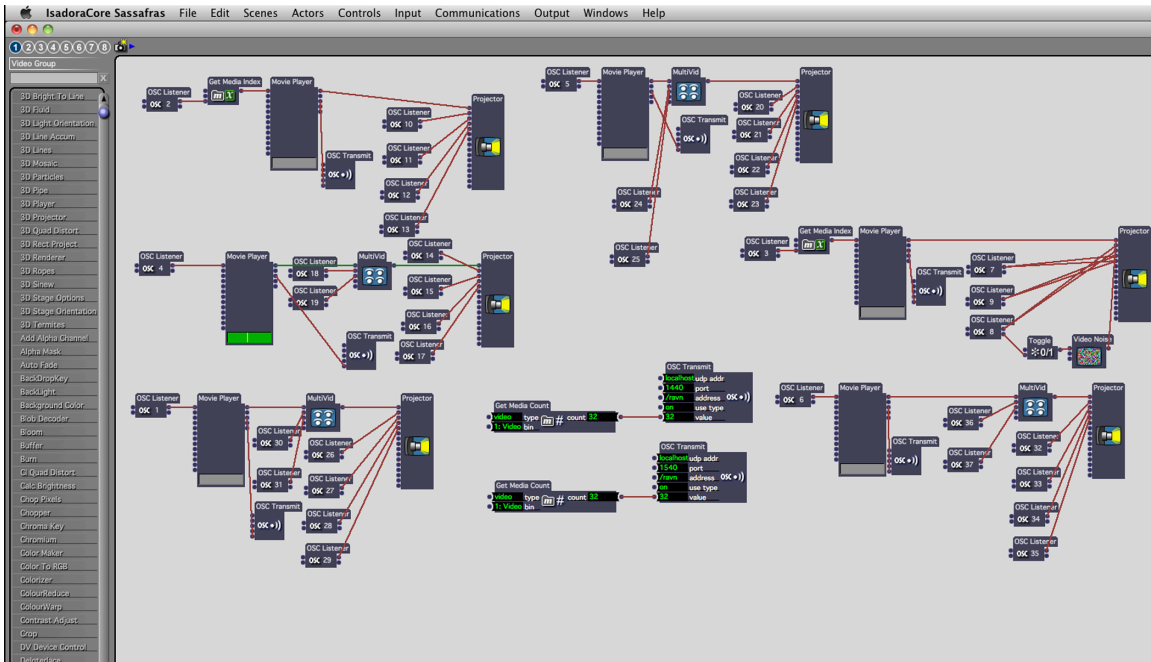


Image 2.6. Software screen shot: IsadoraCore.

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Appendix A.

Generosity in Contemporary Art, Maintenance, Urbanism, and Inferences to Novel Practices

In the pages that follow I will draw on artists and collectives to outline a manner of art making poised on generosity. I will look to artists working in the city, exploring themes of maintenance, repair, and the creation of temporary public space, all of which presupposes some form of generosity. Ultimately this research will explore the ways in which this thread of generosity found in recent art infers novel forms and practices. The purpose of this research is to both inform and locate my artistic practice and also to speculate on the forms that may follow. This exploration will anchor initially to Mierle Laderman Ukeles, focusing on projects that rise from her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*, which has guided her practice and influenced artists for the last four decades. At the outset I will acknowledge the Situationist International for their contributions to the vocabulary that I will take up in this research. Then, following Ukeles' influence I will trace a lineage through Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher, for their work on the collaborative platform *Learning to Love you More*, Didier Courbot for the DIY urbanism presented in *Needs*, and lastly I will look at the Rebar Group for their influence on generous urbanism as presented in their project *Park(ing) Day*.

Notes on Generosity

The small goodness from one person to (another person) is lost and deformed as soon as it seeks organization and *universality* and system, as soon as it opts for doctrine, a treatise of politics and theology, a party, a state, and even a church. Yet it remains the sole refuge of the good in being.⁹

As it is used in this paper, the term 'generosity' is understood as a concept that is not rigorously defined. In fact, the malleability of the word grants the term appeal in the art world and in urban settings. This is to say that, giving more than is expected, to call a thing *generous* and to mean this in a traditional sense, is a fairly non-descript way of

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*. 2006. pg 199.

explaining an artwork or gesture in the city where what is expected is never made explicitly clear and where giving more only begs further questioning on what is being given and to whom. To give more than, to be generous, is quite an intricate and possibly even a contentious negotiation. The very nature of an artwork, I am compelled to believe, is to re-evaluate and reconsider the aesthetic expectations and the ethical expectations of its time. The increased popularity of social practices in recent art responds to these ethical expectations, and we can analyze, on a case-by-case basis, the different forms of generosity present in these practices. This research however, is not overly concerned with social practice as it has come to be defined, instead this survey will anchor selectively to artistic practices, which may be called generous practices even if they do not garner critical prestige as 'socially engaged.' All this is to say that although I will not make an effort to cast a universal definition over generosity or generous practices, I am led to defend the concept itself as influential in evaluating art that engages the urban setting, participatory art, and even the generosity of art objects. It is this very openness of the concept that makes generosity such a meaningful component in a work, and each work or practice must be closely analyzed for its contribution to the discourse. In looking at the four artists I have chosen I will be putting this model to work, attempting to bring to light in their work a relationship to generosity, and working from that place of generosity, I will begin to connect each of these works through their contributions to novel forms and practices.

Additional Terminology

The Letterist and eventually the Situationist International contributed extensively to the vocabulary used to critique and identify recent art. Specifically employed is the term *détournement*, which should be elaborated on, first as Guy De Bord defines it as “the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu.”¹⁰ And second, as it has come to shape artistic activism in a society where spectacle is far more ubiquitous than Guy Debord could have fathomed. “Through *détournement* and related culture jamming tactics, we can reclaim a bit of autonomy from the mass-mediated hall of mirrors that we live in, and find artful ways to talk back to

¹⁰ Guy De Bord. *Definitions*. 1958.

the spectacle and use its artifacts to amplify our own voices.”¹¹ Of particular interest in this paper is the pairing of generosity and détournement in order to bring about something that is altogether different, a notion introduced by Ted Purves, which I will examine when considering the tactical application of generosity.¹²

Since so much of the work referenced in this paper concerns behaviour, gesture, and gifts that artists give the city, the Situationist International definition of the “dérive” is particularly useful as well. “A mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.”¹³ The dérive is an interesting component in the work of Didier Courbot and the work of Rebar Group as their projects take on good-natured, and sometimes absurd, models for behaving in city space and opening space for others to join in. The dérive becomes especially useful when analyzing the works that explore generosity in urban spaces, thinking in terms of the temporal nature inherent in generous acts and the proposed artistic practice.

Repeatedly I will trace terms through contemporary art history to compare and contrast how many of these practices have changed, but also to point to and amplify the ways in which new or novel present-day art practices grow from inferences that may be observed in past artistic practice. After all, this is also my intent, to point out how generosity in present day art infers new amalgamations, détournments, in novel practices to come. Much like the recent resuscitation of Situationist lingo, Michel de Certeau’s writing from the 1980’s has experienced some notoriety in the field. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he lays out an influential precedent for understanding *tactics*.

A tactic is a calculated action, determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy... Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time--to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation, to the rapidity of the movements that change the organization

¹¹ Zach Malitz. *Détournement/Culture Jamming in Beautiful Trouble*. 2012. pg 28.

¹² Ted Purves. *What We Want is Free*. 2005. pg 27.

¹³ Guy De Bord. *Definitions*. 1956.

of a space, to the relations among successive moments in an action, to the possible intersections of durations and heterogeneous rhythms, etc.¹⁴

I will again and again suggest that generosity is a type of tactic, or may be used as a tactic, and generous acts should consider this relationship to immediacy and the shifting demands of a favourable situation. This is especially useful for thinking about generosity as a term used to identify with and analyze projects on a case-by-case basis, looking to the tactical application of generosity as well as its altruistic necessity. In analyzing these artworks we must acknowledge how the generosity in an action or in an object both reflects a certain kind giving, and may also suggest a more tactical meaning. We can take up the ideas put forward by artist and educator Ted Purves here and note that inside a capitalist system, a system dominated by economic exchange and contract, generous acts serve also as “blows against the empire.”¹⁵ Generosity is more than a charitable act; in fact, I think that generous acts must be practiced in a tactical manner, lest that generosity lends itself to instrumentalisation, leaving practitioners vulnerable to the unpredictable conditions of a system adverse to such a liberal exchange. Stan Goff writes succinctly in *Beautiful Trouble*: “Tactics, are action(s) in a constant state of reassessment and correction, based directly on observations of the actual environment...tactics make an ally of unpredictability.”¹⁶ In making this ally, this may also open some running room to focus on altruistic acts and to make more space for further generosity; the tactics are in service to kindness. The model of uncertainty, and this notion of creating an ally may also serve as an appropriate model for imagining novel art practices, modes in favour of unpredictability.

Lastly, and with some effort to remain brief, I should state that I am attempting to imagine how the generosity and exchange found in contemporary art practices and present-day modes may contribute to emerging forms of art. In a way these could be called ‘new forms’ or they might be types of ‘new media,’ but I will be writing about these practices and forms as ‘novel.’ Possibly alluding to the novelty, or the potential for these

14 Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 1984. pg.37-39.

15 Ted Purves. *Blows Against the Empire in What We Want is Free*. 2005. pg 27-44.

16 Stan Goff. *The Tactics of Everyday Life in Beautiful Trouble*. 2012. pg 268.

practices to embrace absurdity or peculiarity, and taking for granted that the novelty will wear off, these practices re-edited, remixed, reimagined, recombined, détourned, undermined, or replaced by practices and forms more fresh, more novel.¹⁷ They are short-lived stages for rehearsal, temporal objects, momentary gifts, but they originate in an earnest process and conceivably a lifetime of work, by which the artist is always negotiating expectation and generosity in an effort to facilitate innovative forms that will push art along.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time. The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs (equal) minimum wages, housewives (equal) no pay. Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby's diaper, finish the report, correct the typos, mend the fence, keep the customer happy, throw out the stinking garbage...stay young.

Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials. Conceptual & Process art, especially, claim pure development and change, yet employ almost purely maintenance processes.¹⁸

These words were published in Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*, "a treatise on work, service, home, life, and art that called upon service workers, of all kinds to change the world through routine maintenance."¹⁹ The last forty years of her work have reflected the views put forth in this early manifesto, her interdisciplinary art practice includes performances in the gallery, object making, public

¹⁷ I'm further tempted to use the word "new" in describing these practices, I want to acknowledge the catalog of writing on new materialism. Particularly Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn when they state, "new" in the sense that it is an attempt to 'leap into the future without adequate preparation in the present, through becoming, a movement of becoming-more and becoming-other, which involves the orientation to the creation of the new, to an unknown future, what is no longer recognizable in terms of the present.'

Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. 2012.

¹⁸ Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!* 1969.

¹⁹ Nato Thompson. *Living As Form*. 2012.

art, film and photography, relational works, and choreography for heavy machinery. Her work is ripe with the everyday, negotiations of boredom, and interventions into the commonly accepted role of the woman in a household and workplace, and a rechristening of work. While there are obvious hints of generosity in each of her works, I want to focus primarily on *Touch Sanitation*.

This project is possibly Mierle Laderman Ukeles most renowned piece to date. Between 1977 and 1980, following her appointment as the (unpaid) Artist in Residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation, *Touch Sanitation* was performed and documented in various locations around New York City. Notably, for eleven months during the project, the artist set out to shake hands with, and personally thank each sanitation worker on staff in New York City; *The Handshake Ritual* included eight thousand-five hundred of these ceremonies. As they shook hands the artist said to each service worker: "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." In the documentation from the project we are shown the protagonists in the dump, posing, (perhaps only the sanitation worker has posed, perhaps they are both posing, but I prefer to believe the artist is not posing), the sanitation worker in uniform, looks to the photographer, Ukeles looks to the sanitation worker, the work continues on behind them, the work is never done. Here is where the pose matters, and I believe why this image has served as promotional material and source material for countless conceptual art nods; the artist is not looking to the documentarian, but to the worker, to this seldom acknowledged labourer that Ukeles has dedicated her life's work to recognizing in a critical, thoughtful, and generous manner. Much in the same way that generosity at large seems to exist outside of our present day system, to properly recognize and appreciate the undervalued labourers of that system is its own variety of generosity. Calling attention to class divides and the labour discord was a means of raising awareness contributing to a wider public conscience, and while it has come to be problematic among several critics scrutinizing

social practice today, this goal of raising awareness was quite a generous intention in *Touch Sanitation* in 1977.²⁰

It is worth noting that Ukeles studied international relations at Barnard as an undergraduate. In fact, her short but impressive political career included a textbook (her thesis) and a trip on Air Force One as one of Kennedy's delegates sent to what would become United Republic of Tanzania.²¹ This is not to call into question the altruism of Ukeles performances, but to acknowledge that just as feminism, labour roles and identity politics sing in her work, generosity can also be recognized as part of a political performance. Of course, I believe that there is a type of virtuousness at work in *Touch Sanitation*, but I also believe that the generosity serves as an armament, a tactical weapon in delivering an unmistakably political message. In this form of recognition, inside the exchange between the artist and the sanitation worker, a minor system is created which inevitably resists the major system at work. Creating that unexpected minor space is positively a generous act.

In the same way that Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work infers an early brand of social practice or even relational aesthetics, I think we may read even more into her work. Her commitment to the idea of maintenance art is indicative of a shift that I think characterizes the more highly regarded forms of social practice. For Ukeles, these long forms are built into the medium, built into her willingness to work with institutions, to remain as an unsalaried artist in residence, and to remain loyal to her projects and her views. In the three years of *Touch Sanitation* generosity presents itself as a particular component in Ukeles' performance of recognition; in calling attention to the everyday in a way that is unexpected, and exceeding what might otherwise be a brief gesture with the exceedingly repetitive performance of gratitude and appreciation.

²⁰ Grant Kester writes extensively on this subject in his book *Conversation Pieces* (2004) and Claire Bishop also addresses issues around raising awareness, in her book *Artificial Hells* (2012). However, each of these critics is focusing on more recent developments in art practice, and it seems inappropriate to apply their criticism to a different time and a different type of practice.

²¹ Michael Miller. *The Political Past of Mierle Laderman Ukeles*. 2013.

Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher

Miranda July is intimately related to the legacy of Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Her films are intimate portrayals of personal struggle, love, identity, and the bonds we form with each other. Her work taps into the feminist sensibility so very prominent in Ukeles' work, and similarly the acknowledgement and in fact central characteristic in much of the work, the recognition for the other. Much of Miranda July's work is about the exchange between participants, or in her films, the exchange between her characters. Maybe it is obvious, but Miranda July loves her characters and it the affection comes shining through whether those characters are participants or stand-ins (actors) for the exchange she is orchestrating. Her projects work toward a particular type of reciprocal generosity, where projects are co-created between artist and audience and the generosity of each party benefits the work itself.²²

The collaborative effort of Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher on *Learning to Love You More* (2002-2009) serves as a good example for this kind of reciprocal generosity. Over the course of several years, the artists conceived assignments that were posted online. These were usually in the form of rather simple prompts, fairly specific, leaving some room for surprise. For instance, assignment number eight called on participants to "Curate an artists retrospective in public space." Using only black and white printouts, participants were to print or Xerox the work of an artist, whether living or dead, however famous or infamous. Then they were to "hang" the show somewhere public and write a curatorial statement, and finally participants were to submit a photograph of the exhibition and the statement. By participating, the audience became co-producers in the work, via their responses. Their e-participatory platform catalogued and archived responses to prescriptive prompts, voluntary assignments. As an artwork, this participatory platform predated a prominent shift on the Internet at large, perhaps inadvertently, this type of cataloguing served as an inference to Web 2.0. The same 'user-generated content' that defined the participatory model of *Learning to Love You*

²² Mary Jane Jacob. Reciprocal Generosity in What We Want is Free. 2005. pg. 5.

More has become the widely accepted standard across the World Wide Web, one that opens web content to interactivity and collaboration.²³

In addition to creating these assignments, July and Fletcher also managed to provide small grants for some of their participants. *Learning to Love You More* effectively falls in line with a proper dictionary definition of what it is to be generous, “showing a readiness to give more of something, especially money, than is strictly necessary or expected.”²⁴ This gesture effectively extended the exchange, creating a clear form of recognition for their participants, the co-creators following the simple assignments and exceeding the artist expectations. Past the award that some participants received, the no-application necessary process for the grants meant that every submission to the project was being looked over, recognized. Julia Bryan Wilson summarises the project well when she writes, “It runs on an economy of generosity, not coercion or exploitation.”²⁵ It is more than a readiness to give more money, to ‘pay’ for projects; it is a readiness on the part of the artists to cherish the work of some participants and to value all contributions with a review process and inclusion on the site.

Didier Courbot

The work of Didier Courbot, at least formally, and arguably conceptually as well, could be a direct descendent of Ukeles maintenance art. His project *Needs*, has been shown around the world as large photographic prints documenting his own neighbourhood repairs and decorations – maintenance and making space in the city. The photographs in this series may well reflect a more fine art version of what Gordon Douglas has coined as “do-it-yourself urban design...creative practices aimed at ‘improving’ the local built environment without permission in ways analogous to formal efforts.”²⁶ Where Gordon Douglas proposes this term and work in terms of collectives across North America working toward urban intervention and neighborhood

²³ Though coined in 1999, the term “Web 2.0” was not popularized until late 2004, two years after the inception of this project by Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher. Wikipedia contributors, “Web 2.0.” 2013.

²⁴ “generous”. Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press. 2013

²⁵ Julia Bryan Wilson. *A Modest Collective*. 2007

²⁶ Gordon Douglas. *Do-It-Yourself Urban Design*. 2013/2014.

beautification, he stresses a form of localism, which is simply not at play in Didier Courbot's work. Instead, *Needs* treats the city more generally, and we observe Courbot fixing and building around the globe. There is something more at work, something more romantic in the work and in the documentation. Through his roaming locales his work brings to life a very distinct and sweet manner of generosity. It is not the same reciprocal generosity that manifests in *Learning to Love You More*; rather generosity exists in the objects, in the sculptural forms reacting to public space. The photographs in the gallery serve as an abstraction, they pull the viewer into a different headspace and into a different time, but the photography remains loyal to the intention of the object. The public space needn't be familiar for us to see kindness in the form, and that form is alive with gesture, the interpretation of *this* urban environment, leaving behind an indexical gift.

The generous characteristic at work in *Needs* is perhaps more closely connected to the *dérive* than any of the projects surveyed in this essay. It is an experimental way of navigating the city, repairing the broken benches and the guardrails. There is occasionally an exchange, for instance fixing some persons bike tire in one of the photos, but many of the photos give us a sense that these neighbourhood decorations and repairs go to anonymous recipients. In fact, we could say these are gifts to the neighbourhood, or perhaps to read them as gifts is an improper reading and instead these sculptures and photographs give us an entry point into the generous potential of the gesture that went into their conception.

Rebar Group

The Rebar Group is an art and design studio based in San Francisco designing and facilitating projects in urban settings. Their most well received work to date has been "Park(ing) Day," an initiative to rent out a metered parking space and through guerrilla tactics, convert that space into a common space reminiscent of a public park. This project, which has grown enormously, now as an annual global event, hinges on the collectives' ideas around what they have coined as 'generous urbanism.' As published in the "Park(ing) Day Manifesto" generous urbanism is:

The creation of public situations between strangers that produce new cultural value, without commercial transaction. This isn't to say that money doesn't play a role in

the execution, since materials may still be bought, and grants or commissions distributed. However, the ultimate value is produced independently of commerce. It is possible to call this activity art production (“art” being a convenient category for cultural goods which are ends in themselves), but there are no absolute “consumers” or “producers” for this type of art...²⁷

As I have done throughout this investigation, I believe it is necessary to also acknowledge that the “creation of public situations” may occur via the object, including art objects. This clarification is necessary for criticizing the tone in which Rebar (much like Ted Purves) write on the gallery. They champion their project merely for existing outside of the gallery, supposing their art is especially unique or somehow allows for a more perfect social exchange since it occurs outside of the gallery.²⁸ This distinction between gallery artist or collective and artist otherwise, is not as important to me as I believe artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Didier Courbot do a fine job of carrying forms of generosity through urban situations and settings into the gallery and back; put simply generosity does not depend on distance from the institution.

On the cover of their manifesto, Rebar includes a bit of marketing language ripe with inference to novel forms, the page reads, “User-Generated Urbanism and Temporary Tactics for Improving the Public Realm.”²⁹ Much of the success of *Park(ing) Day* has experienced can be attributed to a tenacious Internet presence, including the publishing of manifestos, a highly designed website and frankly, the pace of Internet journalism when a quirky or sweet project comes along. For me, their work serves as an example working toward Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncombe’s notion of the Ethical Spectacle; a form of spectacle which follows parameters for remaining open, participatory, transparent, realistic and utopian.³⁰ The whole of which is its own sort of détournement, seeking to rework, if not completely upend, the spectacle which we have been so unsuccessful in destroying since Guy de Bord’s call to action fifty years ago. The task then is to utilize and manipulate those media outlets, those same forms of

²⁷ Rebar. The Park(ing) Day Manifesto. 2012.

²⁸ Blaine Merker. Taking Place. 2010

²⁹ Rebar. The Park(ing) Day Manifesto. 2012.

³⁰ Stephen Duncombe. Dream. 2007.

communication, the channels that inundate us with advertisements and propaganda of all sorts, and to flood those same channels with an honest, hopeful, participatory, and emancipatory kind of spectacle.

Inferring new forms from Rebar hints at a practice working toward the ethical spectacle. Their e-distribution model has grown *Park(ing) Day* to a global event of over nine hundred and seventy five parks as of 2011, and we should acknowledge that generous urbanism gains a fair degree of notoriety by way of its contributions to the spectacle. A tactical model of generosity is always in play where spectacle is concerned. The open form that the collective has facilitated opens up wider distribution and these parking space interventions are fairly photogenic, easy to understand, relatable, the project has a broad appeal. The form is similar to the *Learning to Love You More* project with a deeper focus on the heterogeneous city, a type of collective *dérive*. It's an interesting experiment to imagine a practice that might interweave the whimsical or poetic personality of Courbot's *Needs* with the far-reaching delivery model of Rebar's *Park(ing) Day*, raising interesting questions on the eccentricities that characterize each project, and further pondering whether these quirks are compatible.

Notes and Assumptions on Parameters

In a series of essays edited and published with artistic activism in mind Andrew Boyd writes, "Simple rules can have grand results." It is a bit of a happy accident that Boyd uses an experiment in computer science to illustrate his point. In this "experiment on 'emergence — complex global behavior can arise' unplanned and unprogrammed 'from the interaction of simple local rules.'"³¹ While Boyd may be utilizing this experiment simply to illustrate a useful tactic in organizing participatory work, I see a deeper inference here, the suggestion of a closer relationship between these notions alive in activist art and the constructions of new media works. The very nature of digital forms hinges on simple rules. A line of code or even a Boolean expression is just the application of a simple rule, of course these forms are increasingly complex, and likely

³¹ Craig Reynolds. *Boids, Background and update*, 1986 - <http://www.red3d.com/cwr/boids> from an experiment quoted in Andrew Boyd, "Simple rules can have grand results" in *Beautiful Trouble*. 2012.

appear even more complex to those of us outside of the discipline, but the principle remains the same, simple rules produce grand results.

In the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*, Mierle Laderman Ukeles lays out rather simple guidelines both proposing an exhibition and defining her artistic practice. It is not a new method obviously, even when she wrote the manifesto in 1969, there was nothing novel about characterizing ones practice with a manifesto. However, this frame provides an interesting foundation to spring from, her work becomes regimented in a way; a series of tasks rigidly imposed ripe with theoretical direction, but also leaving room for natural shifts. Setting these rules in her manifesto still leaves plenty of room for surprises. In these surprises everything ties together, if only for the fleeting moment of that surprise. The tactical nature of urban design, generous urbanism, the chance characteristic of working with participants, each component lends to a space for surprise.

Understandably we may trace these rules and parameters to conceptual art, or to properly tease the lineage we might look to generative art and notice that these rules and manifestos serve as close substitutes for the constraints of an autonomous system. They are procedural inventions that contribute to or result in an artwork.³² However, where generative art is typically not connected to ideology or movement, I want to suggest that the parameters defining a generative artwork are more purposeful and can relate to the source material more thoroughly. Working from this definition though we may start merging these forms together. A détournement in which we expect generosity from generative software, a program that reflects on social practice, or an artwork that employs the same rules in process as the rules employed to generate a final work of art. These innovations may appear quite absurd initially, forcing the square peg through the round hole, creating software that follows the rules of a manifesto, or that traces the path of a *dérive*. Inside of the suggestions I am also imagining a system by which we might test these ideas more thoroughly, attempting to amplify bits of surprise – reordering our expectations and pushing this tool for abstraction to help us uncover the potential generosity that might be inside an artwork.

³² Galanter, Philip. *What is Generative Art?*. 2003.

Famed art critic Nicolas Bourriaud wrote, “the aesthetic challenge of contemporary art resides in recomposing (the) montage: art is an editing computer that enables us to realize alternative, temporary versions of reality with the same material (everyday life).”³³ In a way, I think that this effort to craft temporary versions of reality with the same material must begin to interact with the very media that Bourriaud is comparing them to. It is not in any way revolutionary, but could benefit from a measure of generosity via détournement. It is not so innovative, and maybe there is no form to be had, but a mode for thinking about the machine that makes art and the machine that is art as two things that may be reordered or completely dissolved into one another. The purpose of such an experiment is a familiar purpose for the artist, an effort to create something original, something novel.

Closing Thoughts

I fall in line with Elyse Mallouk when she writes, “Instead of policing boundaries, we should be trying to expand the language with which we discuss the social in art so that we can become more able to see it, more prepared to understand the particular and varied kinds of relations present when a public gathers around an artwork.”³⁴ The purpose of this research is not to prescribe new forms, but to speculate on novel practices, the very significance of which may be in their novelty. Their usefulness is found in their openness and their brief conception, quickly revised, reimagined, détourned, and reconstructed to better serve a larger initiative. If I might borrow from the metamodernists, this is its own kind of *oscillation*, between that moment in the artwork and a life of work.³⁵ Implications gleaned from Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Miranda July, Didier Courbot, and Rebar group collectively suggest a temporary working model for conceiving a novel practice. Forms that are generous and ethical in their delivery, which garner a sense of openness both in interpretation and through participation, and forms

³³ Nicolas Bourriaud. *Precarious Constructions*. 2009.

³⁴ Elyse Mallouk. *The Generous Object*. 2010.

³⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. *Notes on Metamodernism*. 2010.

Note, this is not the same sort of oscillation that characterizes the metamodernist approach, but it is the oscillation between two poles that may help to characterize some of these artists, of which they have anchored firmly to Didier Courbot. Perhaps it is also interesting to note that both the Metamodernists and Stephen Duncombe call attention to making the impossible possible, an interesting connection between the different theorists at work in this essay.

that negotiate setting and media in a way that is not defensive and reeling but proactive and productive, innovative – always in flux and reimagining where the next instance will emerge. And in many ways we must be responsible for continually evaluating and redeveloping these practices and forms, this may very well be a lifetime of work.

Kill them with kindness and then show your work, open up, get ready for the long form, distribute widely, regroup, show your work again, keep the home fires burning, give a lot, exceed expectations, make more kindness, make space, this is a rehearsal, keep it short, rename, détourn, and share.

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Appendix B.

If It's Still There When You Go Looking

Description

A 5.5" square perfect bound book that serves as documentation for months of do-it-yourself public art practices crafting swing sets and benches, which were placed in urban settings. The swing sets and benches themselves are built from discarded lumber found around construction sites around the city, then painted using economical mistint paint, assembled and placed back into the city serving as gifts but also as objects critical of hyper development and the pervasive neoliberal policies so consistently encroaching on the public sphere. The book was made available for free as an edition of seventy-seven perfect bound soft covers. The PDF is also available for free online.

Filename

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