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‘Maintenance Art’ Puts Trash in Full View

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A retrospective for the Department of Sanitation’s official artist-in-residence, plus a planned installation at Fresh Kills Landfill



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The artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, on the future site of the work, which has been under way since 1989 and slated to open in 2018 or 2019. *PHOTO: MANSURA KHANAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By
ANDY BATTAGLIA
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As the official artist-in-residence of the New York City Department of Sanitation for nearly 40 years, Mierle Laderman Ukeles has found herself in some unusual scenarios: on trash trucks, in an incinerator, by the belly of a garbage barge.

But perhaps none has been more out of the ordinary than a trip last week to the former Fresh Kills Landfill, now a site of idyllic waterways, rolling grass and open skies.

“It’s a new kind of earth,” Ms. Ukeles said of the pastoral grounds on Staten Island that once comprised the largest garbage dump in the world. “It was degraded and would make people go ‘ewww,’ but now it’s going to be a safe, healthy park.”

Ms. Ukeles, whose survey of self-described “maintenance art” opened over the weekend at the Queens Museum, took time away from the show’s installation to visit a project that has occupied her for decades.

The project, “Landing,” calls for two sculpted mounds of dirt and grass, each about 100 feet long, plus a cantilevered platform that will extend out into open space above a scenic waterway. Little has been built, since navigating the layers of municipal approval has proved a laborious process.



A drainage structure at the former Fresh Kills Land Fill in Staten Island, which was once the largest garbage dump in the world and is being transformed into a park. *PHOTO: MANSURA KHANAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

When it is finished, visitors will have access to what the artist called the “ecological theater” of wildlife activity, as well as expansive views. From vantage points near the site, the naked eye can see industrial farms in New Jersey, the fast-developing Staten Island neighborhoods of Greenridge and Arden Heights and, in the distance, the lower Manhattan skyline.

Ms. Ukeles’s landfill project, under way since 1989 and slated to open in 2018 or 2019, is part of a larger proposal to rehabilitate the former landfill into Freshkills Park, with 2,200 acres of land making it nearly triple the size of Central Park.

It also draws on the work Ms. Ukeles has been doing since she became the sanitation department’s artist-in-residence. Her interests as an artist include issues of labor, waste and systems of maintenance that help make the modern world work, often with little attention or respect.

‘
The art is the easy part. It’s just getting people to fund it and do it—that’s what takes 20 years.
’
—Mierle Laderman Ukeles

For her piece “Touch Sanitation Performance,” Ms. Ukeles spent 11 months, starting in 1979, meeting and shaking the hands of every sanitation worker in the city, saying to each, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.” In other instances, she staged “work ballets” with choreography for groups of hauling machines and barges.

In 1983, for a piece called “Social Mirror,” she outfitted a garbage truck with a silver surface to reflect onlookers’ gazes back. Its message, Ms. Ukeles said: We are all implicated in the life of the trash we make.



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TRASH TALK: Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, center, in black, discusses ‘Landing,’ an installation planned for the new park at the former Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island. *PHOTO: MANSURA KHANAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

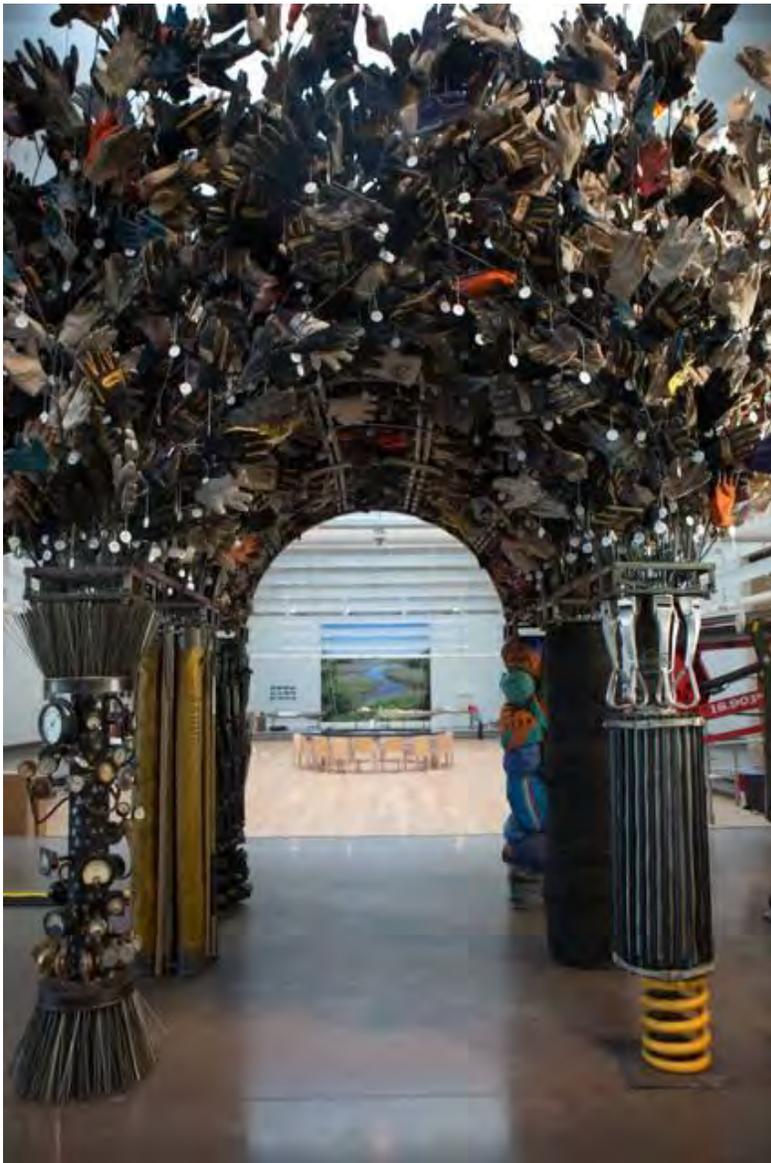
The Queens Museum show, on view into February 2017, includes photo and video documentation of such works, plus sculptures and installations related to art that has taken shape across a kind of active civic canvas.

“There are many ways to look at this kind of art, but the basic idea is the art is social,” said Tom Finkelpearl, commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, which is administering the “Landing” project as part of its program Percent for Art. “She makes an interactive space, and the space—that’s the artwork.”

The design process for “Landing” is largely approved, after years of proposals presented to the sanitation department, the Department of Parks & Recreation and local Staten Island municipal bodies, among other agencies.

“The art is the easy part. It’s just getting people to fund it and do it—that’s what takes 20 years,” said Ms. Ukeles, underestimating by nearly a decade the time devoted so far.

Costs for construction, according to the sanitation department, are estimated at \$1.3 million, to be carried out while work on the larger Freshkills Park takes place in stages over years and decades to come. Ms. Ukeles will lead a public tour of the “Landing” site as part of the Queens Museum show on Nov. 20. The whole of the park is expected to be completed around 2036.



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‘Ceremonial Arch,’ made from hundreds of dirty work gloves and other materials is part of the career retrospective ‘Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art’ at the Queens Museum *PHOTO: MANSURA KHANAM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Reminders of the location's past as a landfill remain, such as extraction wells that mine gas from decomposing trash. But they have been dwindling with time, since the site stopped accepting garbage in 2001. The towering mounds of waste were capped long ago with plastic membranes and topped with about 3 feet of different soils, to promote growth of grasses and trees that have taken over the landscape.

"See how they wiggle? They capture the light," Ms. Ukeles said of sun-streaked trees called quaking aspens that, like everything in her beloved sanctuary, excited her artistic mind and eye.

Now the waterways in view from the "Landing" spot are home to herons and, in certain months, migrations of baby eels.

"Look at the views," said Phillip Gleason, the sanitation department's assistant commissioner of waste-management engineering and a longtime ally of Ms. Ukeles and her art. As if seeing the bucolic idyll for the first time, he added, with a sense of wonder, "Where are we?"