

Maintenance Works:
The Aesthetics and Politics of Collective Support

by

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Computational Media, Arts, & Cultures
Duke University

Date: _____

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of Computational Media, Arts, and Cultures in the
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Maintenance Works: The Aesthetics and Politics of Collective Support, investigates the cultural visibility and value of maintenance labor through a critical examination of American visual and material culture post-1969. Starting from the visual and performance practice of self-proclaimed “maintenance artist” Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her *Manifesto For Maintenance Art 1969!*, I develop a conceptual definition of maintenance as sustaining activity that occurs across scales, from the intimate labor of caring for bodies, to the collective, macro-scale problems of sustaining infrastructures and environments. I argue that with the gesture of assigning her own and others’ maintenance labor the status of “artwork” Ukeles’s work prompts a critical re-valuation of the visibility and social and economic value of maintenance that resonates with a host of historical and contemporary discourses on the gendered and stratified distribution of material and social reproduction, including Marxist-feminist approaches to care work, critiques of innovation discourse in science and technology studies, and discussions about the growing social and economic precarity wrought under neoliberal capitalism in recent cultural criticism and critical theory. At the center of both Ukeles’ project and these discussions lie important questions about the status, conditions, and social distribution of care and support: Who is doing it? How does it get done? How does it feel to maintain or be maintained? What happens when practices and structures of social

and material support fail, whether through immediate crisis or prolonged neglect? How do those affected find ways of maintaining otherwise? Each chapter of *Maintenance Works* approaches these questions by examining the visual and material culture around what I define as late 20th-century “crises of maintenance”: shifting economies of care and support, global environmental destruction, and institutionalized abandonment and neglect. The cultural objects I discuss span decades and genres, including land and environmental art, feminist and queer performance, and social practice. Through these material case studies I add important theoretical and cultural foundation to contemporary discussions on care, precarity, and sustainability across disciplines from queer and feminist theory to eco-critical humanities, to science and technology studies, and center the production and reception of artwork as sites for critical inquiry and knowledge production.