

## Production

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## Side Effects

Read the enclosed leaflet carefully. Side effects may include: nausea, restlessness, stomach pain, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, vomiting, weight loss, weakness, inability to concentrate, disorientation, visual disturbances, feelings of helplessness, memory loss.

Flung into an act of endurance care, indeterminate in length, kind people told me, 'Don't forget to look after yourself too.' They said, 'You'll be no good to your partner if you make yourself ill as well.' They said, 'You have to be strong.' Life had become a series of clichés. I must stay positive, I needed to eat something, I should get some sleep. Two steps forward and one back, highs and lows, go home and try to rest.

The morphine made you hallucinate fruit. You asked me if plum season had finished. I told you that you'd only been in hospital for two days, don't worry, you'd be out and eating plums again soon. But then the clocks slipped back an hour, the sun got lower, you lay under fluorescent lights, nil-by-mouth, and missed the trees lose their leaves.

Each day I repeated the journey to the hospital to see you. Muscle memory guided my body, which was intoxicated with a potent blend of exhaustion and giddy wide-awakeness. It became a durational performance.<sup>1</sup> My body was a stage for the rhythms of fear: a faint drone persisted inside my skull; my heart beat like a trapped bird. I held tight to the rigid routine of visiting hours, when time snapped pragmatically into focus with medication rounds and blood pressure checks and lulls of activity where nothing, bad nor good, happened.

Through those warped weeks I carried a bag that became heavier with its accumulations: torn plastic packets of half eaten snacks, a ragged box of indigestion tablets (fast effective relief), lumps of tinfoil-wrapped chocolate (intense, bitter), melted and reset into new configurations. Earplugs (safe, soft and comfortable), tissues (infused and soothing), anti-bacterial gel (clean, fresh, lightly scented). A newspaper, days then weeks out of date, unread. A wooden takeaway fork, prongs entwined with hair and fluff. Multi-vitamins (for general wellbeing), painkillers of various types. Muscle rub (warming relief), calming temple salve: essential oils blended into a useless promise of a restful night's sleep. Two identical laminated cards with the address and phone number of the ward. Numerous hospital leaflets that provided the answers to all possible questions except the only one that mattered.



Your body, newly filled with tubes, holes and incisions, ins and outs, was temporarily reduced to mechanical functions that could be observed, measured, tested and recorded. A body being artificially maintained. Really it was the hospital staff who were maintaining you, carrying out the repetitive daily labours of care; I could do so little. I realised later that my bag of stuff was the only thing I could do. Day after day I carried that bag, as if those futile objects might stop me floating away.

Much later, I tipped the bag's contents on to our bedroom floor, surveying its topography. I threw most of it away and put a few things back where they belonged. Gradually the body and mind archive their traumas; we maintain ourselves.

In this publication bodies appear in motion and stillness. Resting bodies, labouring bodies, repeating bodies, healing bodies. Bodies in relation to landscape, machine and animal, as conduits and veneers. Exhausted bodies, enduring bodies, powerful bodies. Solitary and collective bodies, practical bodies, bodies that expose oppression, that make erased histories visible: bodies searching for new values.

#### **After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?**

'Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time,' wrote Mierle Laderman Ukeles in her 1969 *Maintenance Art Manifesto*.<sup>2</sup> Ukeles had recently become a mother and found herself feeling disconnected from her work as an artist. Writing 'in a cold fury,' she continued: 'I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now separately) I "do" Art.'

In the manifesto she drew a distinction between 'two basic systems: Development and Maintenance,' equating development with ideas of 'pure individual creation,' newness, advancement and progress, whereas maintenance involves 'keeping the dust off the pure individual creation,' sustaining change, conserving and repeating. Her descriptions of maintenance are the language of care and repair, in contrast to development as a constant and unsustainable cycle of production and consumption.

A shift in the value of Ukeles' own labour – domestic, reproductive, creative, physical and emotional – was complete when she declared: 'My working will be the work.' All of the work

she already did every day was now art. Using the manifesto – an avant-garde form which had been frequently used by white, male artists to proclaim their own genius – she overturned the assumption that artistic freedom depends on originality and to be original you must never repeat yourself.<sup>3</sup>

Initially she put her manifesto into practice at home, photographically documenting the mundane details of her day: dressing her children, doing the laundry, sorting the socks. Then in 1973 she made public her transformation of labour in a series of performances at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, US. There she carried out tasks usually done by the museum's cleaners and security guards: polishing display cases and locking and unlocking galleries and offices. Through her "power" as an artist Ukeles had transformed a display case into art. It must now be cared for by a conservator, a worker of a higher cultural status – but probably no greater skill in display-case cleaning – than the maintenance worker. Her simple gestures had disrupted the hierarchical systems of value that govern museums and galleries, making visible their ironies and fictions, including her own position within them.

The articulation of value is most evident in the objects a museum chooses to display – and not display – which construct and perpetuate particular histories, thereby excluding others. These decisions have wide-ranging implications for how we understand the past and its many unfinished histories of slavery, colonialism and patriarchy. The past is never just behind us: it affects the present and therefore the future. As James Baldwin and Margaret Mead put it: 'What we call history is perhaps a way of avoiding responsibility for what has happened, is happening, in time.'<sup>4</sup>

Ukeles' maintenance performances at the Wadsworth Atheneum culminated in *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* and *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside*, in which, over eight hours, she cleaned an internal courtyard and the exterior entrance steps of the museum. In the black and white photographs that document *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, we see Ukeles on her knees, dressed in t-shirt and jeans, scrubbing the steps of the building. This everyday action is chore and ceremony in Ukeles' hands. Washing, as an ancient ritual of preparation, cleansing and transformation, becomes a critique of the institution and the wider western art world.

In this physically exhausting performance, Ukeles' gestures are those of essential work of care and maintenance that have happened forever without being valued.<sup>5</sup> Through Ukeles' solo



act of cleaning, the body of one Jewish woman is a conduit for invisible labour carried out by many bodies beyond her own.

### Dance, dance, or we are lost<sup>6</sup>

Jade Montserrat also uses her own body as a starting point for her work, which exists at the intersection of art and activism. Her text in this publication reflects her reciprocal relationship with Josephine Baker (1906–1975), who Montserrat in conversation describes as ‘a tool, material and interlocutor’ through which she frames her practice and concerns.

Baker, arguably the first Black female superstar, was a dancer and singer who refused to perform to segregated audiences. She participated in the French resistance, was a civil rights activist and the first African-American to star in a major motion picture. In Montserrat’s text for *yellowfields* she writes: ‘Can I speak to Josephine, or through her...? ...I’m ambivalent towards her and emotionally invested. We share something.’

Montserrat goes on to describe two images of Baker, taped side by side in the artist’s own shrine to her. One photograph, of a young, nude Baker, is double-exposed, while the other was taken in 1963 as she spoke at the March on Washington. Three Bakers are present, each in a different moment of time. The double exposure produces a ghost Baker, suggesting past and present selves, and multiple or overlapping identities and roles. Montserrat’s text alludes to the hypocrisy of a racist patriarchy which simultaneously fetishises, shames and profits from Black women’s bodies: ‘Who’s game for titillation? Whose game? Double for our money.’

Although a figure of freedom, Baker was also exoticised and commodified, working at a time when Black performers’ artistic and public images were mediated and co-authored by white men. In the durational performance *Shadowing Josephine/Revue* (2013–ongoing) Montserrat dances, naked, to Cab Calloway’s popular Cotton Club song *Pickin’ Up The Cabbage*, repeating a three-minute choreography that references Baker’s *La Revue Nègre* (1925). Montserrat’s dance is – at least initially – exuberant and energetic, embodying the freedom and quest for equality that Baker symbolises. Performed live in arts institutions (to predominantly white audiences), *Shadowing Josephine* runs for up to four hours and *Revue* for up to 24 hours.

Montserrat’s looped movements gradually fragment through fatigue, her timing stutters and energy ebbs, but she goes on. Through its repetitions and duration the routine creates an array of references, including multiple notions and experiences of time, media spectacle and rolling news, Depression-era dance marathons, cultural and visual consumption, and the representation (and its labour) of Black bodies in public and institutional space.

At one point Montserrat pulls back her hair; in conversation she draws an analogy between this gesture and the pulling back of horses’ lips when they are sold, to check their health, age and therefore value. Most potently the gesture has parallels with slave auctions, where enslaved people were examined like livestock: ‘The buyers pulling their mouths open to see their teeth, pinching their limbs to find how muscular they were, walking them up and down to detect any signs of lameness, making them stoop and bend in different ways that they might be certain there was no concealed rupture or wound.’<sup>7</sup>

These images echo through Montserrat’s movements as she performs to the point of exhaustion. The audience is implicated in her labour, pain and exposure, as voyeurs and consumers, regardless of whether they continue to watch or choose to stop. Montserrat’s dance is one of physical, personal and political endurance, resistance and visibility. It is a refusal and demand. Why exhaust oneself deliberately? To regain power from those who enact oppressions in the past and present? To choose to exhaust oneself, and to make it public, is an act of extreme agency. Here, repetition is a strategy for maintenance: for care, preservation and survival.

### Most days I do nothing

A recurring theme in Freya Dooley’s work is that of internalised labour and the relationship between physical and mental states. Her text for this publication was written during a residency in Beppu, Japan, and draws parallels between the body and landscape, the internal and external spaces of each, and describes materials that maintain bodies: earth, water, blood and soap.

Shortly before travelling to Japan in February 2020, Dooley performed *The Understudy* (2019) at South London Gallery, in which she delivered a lengthy live monologue from memory. Standing at a microphone she explains that these words were



written for a performer who has fallen ill and she is now acting as the understudy: 'the person no one has come to see,' as she puts it.

Dooley's understudy character exists in a state of apparent contradiction: someone whose labour is invisible unless required to perform; who is trapped in a constant state of preparation and impasse; who craves visibility but then hates the attention (or perhaps their own desire for it) when finally called on to perform. They both enjoy and loathe the position they have chosen. The understudy represents a conflict of private and public selves, mirroring the solitary act of writing and the extroverted expectations of performance. In conversation Dooley describes performing from "behind" this character as offering some relief from the pressure of "being the work."

Performing is its own particular form of labour. *The Understudy* highlights the fundamental, repetitive nature of performing: of rehearsing, preparing, memorising and repeating the performance itself. This repetitive process allows words and work to be honed and refined. However, not all repetitive labour is so productive. Art is far from immune to the post-industrial condition of hyper-productivity, which insists on constant making and doing, and while in moments of not making and doing, being in a state of preparation to do so. In this cycle of compulsive production, time to rest is too often time to get ready to work again.

This normalised narrative, whether exercised in art or any other aspect of life, just results in exhaustion and the need for a dormant period. Dooley's residency in Beppu was a chance to work *and* recuperate, though in her text the narrator frets about wasting time. The idea of "wasted" time, the guilt of implied laziness, is a fantastic tool of capitalism, where the failure to produce is seen as weakness. A deliberate rejection of the concept – by cutting off communication, downing tools, going silent, disappearing, saying 'I can't' – is regarded as somewhere between unorthodox and insane.

In Dooley's text for this publication, the notion of rest becomes a condition for creation. Emphasising the uses of not-doing, of deliberately being "unproductive," it celebrates the radical nature of rest. Rather than being a luxury it is in fact essential to keep going: to continue to make art, share ideas, to be audible and occupy space.

Apart from rest, one way to counter the exhaustion caused by constant production is to follow the rhythms of one's own body, the landscape and domestic routines. In Dooley's *yellowfields* text, repetition is present in the routine of the day, in the tannoy jingle that acts as a marker of collective activity and in the daily ritual of communal bathing. These repetitions, which could be seen as limitations, are in fact liberating: by facilitating rest they are tools for maintenance.

### **A flashy type who is very attractive on the eye**

Harriet Bowman deliberately repeats herself, working within the creative constraint of an ongoing fictional narrative that she has been writing and rewriting for the last four years. From this constant labour of revision, fragments of the text provide the basis for her sculptural practice, in which works made of leather, metal, ceramic and sound are presented as theatrical dioramas. This publication marks the first time she has presented a section of this text as a work in its own right.

The protagonist in this continual narrative is Fled, whose name suggests running away, escaping or bolting; past tense but alive and present. What danger is he fleeing from? In the *yellowfields* text, as Fled becomes physically one with the seat of his car, an object of mass production and desire, it is unclear who or what is in control – and whether this process of unity is liberating or consuming.

The text zooms in on detail, to the point where we see Fled's skin as if through a microscope. Repeated words and phrases function as subtle shifts in emphasis, like a film camera cutting to a slightly different angle. Repetition also creates uncertainty, causing words to collapse rather than crystallise. Do we understand more about Fled as we zoom in? Bowman's descriptions, while sensory, sometimes horrifying, are cool and removed. The closer our view of his body the more he becomes a surface and an object.

When Bowman describes Fled's feeling of oneness with his car and their ability together 'to easily pass the horse' on his daily commute, man and machine are pitted in competition with an animal. Fled and his car represent an excess of power, of a kind that advertising promotes as desirable. In a previous work Bowman collected sentences found in car adverts and those selling horses:



Excellent versatile / last two owners female / Body work isn't the best / bombproof / Handsome heavy weight / A FLASHY TYPE WHO IS VERY ATTRACTIVE ON THE EYE / Beautiful head turner potential all rounder safe, sane, sensible and absolutely stunning.<sup>9</sup>

Similarities in the language of aesthetics, performance, value and ownership are unsettling in their ambiguous reference to either a living animal or material object. This language plays to stereotypes, for example, of normative masculinity, itself a social construction which is perpetuated through advertising. Assumed collective values are exploited to sell us more, bigger and better. There is always a faster, safer, shinier model in production, an upgrade, another emotional lure. Every version is new, but its effects are the same. The car, as a symbol of excess and individualism, is toxic and unsustainable. Everywhere it goes it leaves a vapour trail of capitalist ideology.

Bowman's text in this publication sits apparently in opposition to the other three. The symbolic images she creates are of individual security and power but their presentation also evokes their counter-values. As we contemplate the antithesis – collective responsibility, care for the planet and sustainable ways of living – we can't help but imagine what this alternative might look like.

### What's left behind

Jo Lathwood's work represents an antidote to capitalist excess, foregrounding her own labour, sensitive use of materials and care for the environment. Her text in this publication proposes a practical manifesto for a more sustainable practice, which is predominantly sculptural, large-scale, site-responsive and temporary, with a focus on how the audience encounters and engages with it.

For the installation *Getting There* at Fabrica, Brighton in 2018, Lathwood constructed a sculptural, rising pathway made of recycled timber. For the first three weeks visitors could watch the laborious process of the build; for the next two they could make a journey along the path – at the top it was possible to touch the building's atrial ceiling. In the final week the installation was dismantled and the wood distributed for reuse.

Lathwood's text in this publication takes her rejection of waste a step further. For the exhibition *Well Trodden Wrong*

*Ways* at Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Honiton in 2019, she presented *Tetrapods*: seven small sculptures (approximately 30cm wide, deep and high), made from mudstone, sandstone, gypsum, salt, chalk and sea water collected from local beaches and cliffs. In her *yellowfields* text she describes the *Tetrapods*' labour-intensive production: an arduous, repetitive process of gathering, transporting and preparing the materials for casting. Their geometric forms are inspired by sea defences, which, in large-scale concrete, act to disrupt waves which cause sea cliff erosion. These objects are intended to protect and maintain, to enable survival. They are objects of care.

The sculptures, in their small-scale, effectively exist as models; divorced from their function they are futile in any practical sense. Like the full-scale sea defences, they contain their own failure. While sea defences protect a particular area of coast (often where houses are perched on an edge of swiftly retreating land, or other points where land has economic value) they also push the problem of erosion further along. They cause a diversion but not a real solution.

During the course of the exhibition at Thelma Hulbert Gallery, *Tetrapods* developed cracks and began to crumble, just like the fragile cliffs they had come from. When the exhibition ended Lathwood returned them to the sea, to be dissolved by the waves. Rock, a material often assumed to be permanent, became temporary. As conventional art objects in a gallery they were in a suspended state, incomplete until they were returned to where they originated.

*Tetrapods* emphasises an alternate system of value. The artwork's significance is no longer to be found in the object itself but in the action of its creation and in the borrowing and moving of natural materials. The result is a shift away from ownership: of artwork, material and the land itself. The artist's labour, which is repetitive and time-consuming, becomes a key element of the work. As Lathwood states in her manifesto: 'Value is labour and design. N.B. always keep plans to remake if necessary.'

Lathwood's work articulates the dilemma of whether artists who are concerned with sustainability should be making anything, because all art and design creates more stuff that the world doesn't need. *Tetrapods* can be seen within the field of speculative design – where art and design is a means to imagine how things could be, to consider other possibilities. In speculative design the conflict of whether to make at all is outweighed by the power of ideas to inspire change; critiquing



the present to imagine the future.

### Diminishing dominance

The artists in this publication challenge unsustainable systems of labour and oppressive power structures, and through their work propose alternative values. Since Ukeles wrote her *Maintenance Art Manifesto* in 1969, the compulsive cycle of constant production has only accelerated. “Development” in the narrow capitalist sense of wealth accumulation and profit creation crashes onwards, exacerbating global inequality, climate crisis, and exploitations of people and planet. It makes a mess and it is always women, people of colour, immigrants and the poorest who are at the forefront of the clean-up operation.

In a system that favours development at all costs, maintenance presents itself as a radical strategy of resistance and sustainability. Ukeles’ manifesto emerged from a moment in which she was stuck. Sometimes you need to have ground to a halt, become temporarily immobile, be trapped in a loop of repetition before you can move on. It is possible to choose these states as well as have them imposed. In activism repetition is necessary to enact change. Acts of demand and defiance must be repeated, again and again and again, until those with power are forced to listen. Repetition is necessary but can be exhausting for those doing the repeating. In art repetition is a way to remember, to refine, to pause an unstoppable forward momentum in order to reflect and find clarity.

The *yellowfields* artists interrogate collective histories and dominant narratives to critique racist, patriarchal, institutional and linear power structures. They search for new ways of sustaining bodies – sites of power and vulnerability – in relation to themselves, others and the planet. They speculate on the quietly transformative power of resting and revisiting: of maintaining, in order to go on with renewed energy.

### Endnotes

This essay emerged from a meeting in Bristol on 3 February 2020, when I met with all artists involved in this publication to discuss their writing and practices, and explore ideas around labour, value, the body, maintenance and sustainability.

<sup>1</sup> Tim Etchells’ description of durational performance offers parallels with this experience: ‘The point of the duration is that it exerts a kind of pressure on you as a performer. You get tired, your brain gets slow, your ability to stage manage yourself, to be on your best behaviour, falls away. Within an hour or two you’re ragged. That’s interesting because you’re falling apart... an audience gets to see people in a different way – they’re vulnerable in a way that they’re not normally. As you’re losing those bits of control you also gain something in a kind of intuition, a raw, more present presence... It gets you to a place you wouldn’t have been in before.’ Tim Etchells on Durational Performance, Forced Entertainment, YouTube. October 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mLlozWPbVs>

<sup>2</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969! Proposal for an exhibition “CARE”*. The title of this section of this essay – ‘After the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?’ – is taken from Ukeles’ manifesto.

<sup>3</sup> Sherry Buckberrough and Andrea Müller-Keller, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles*, Matrix 137, 1998. Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum.

<sup>4</sup> James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race*, 1971. New York: Bantam Double Day Dell. Quoted in: Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 2018. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>5</sup> Since 1976 Ukeles has been artist-in-residence at the New York City Sanitation Department. For her work *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80) she shook hands with 8500 on-shift sanitation workers (almost all men), thanking each of them ‘for keeping New York City alive.’ Her words equate maintenance with survival and sustainability and acknowledge the invisible-in-plain-sight work that deals with the collective waste of a city and society. *The Social Mirror* (1983), a working sanitation truck with a mirror covering one side, which reflected citizens as it went about its work, made this collective responsibility even clearer.

<sup>6</sup> The words of dancer Pina Bausch, quoted by Montserrat during our meeting.

<sup>7</sup> ‘American Civilization Illustrated: A Great Slave Auction,’ New York Daily Tribune, 9 March, 1859. Library of Congress, Washington DC, US. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1859-03-09/ed-1/seq-5/>

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Bowman, *all rounder sad sale*, 2018, magazine print and blotting paper.