

**6 LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE:  
A PASSION TO A PRINCIPLE**

Text by Adam Jasper

Kunsthalle Basel  
Steinenberg 7, CH-4051 Basel, Switzerland  
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kunsthallebasel.ch

Claude Lévi-Strauss had a thing about birds. He thought that we were innately likely to give wild birds proper names, like “Angela” or “Timothy,” rather than the demeaning pet names we give dogs, like “Fido” or “Spot,” or the intentionally unique names we give racehorses, like “Lord Cardigan” or “Belle-de-Nuit.” Lévi-Strauss’s explanation was that unlike dogs, which are part of human families but not afforded the full status of people, birds inhabit a more or less parallel civilization that doesn’t intersect with our own. You can catch a bird and put it in a cage, but you can never really own its loyalties.

Birds are given human Christian names in accordance with the species to which they belong more easily than are other zoological classes, because they can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason they are so different. They are feathered, winged, oviparous and they are also physically separated from human society by the element in which it is their privilege to move. As a result of this fact, they form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live. (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 204)

Whether or not Lévi-Strauss was actually empirically correct is debatable. He wasn’t really that into empirical research. But even if he’s factually wrong, he’s still right in principle—there’s something strange, or rather estranged, about birds. It’s something that Lynette Yiadom-Boakye also seems to have observed. Birds are the only animal that regularly appears in her paintings, and this seems to be because they can be co-present with people without implying relationships with them. In one painting in her current show at Kunsthalle Basel, *Pander To A Prodigy* (2016), a boy carries a peacock with its gorgeous tail politely tucked to one side. In another, *The Matters* (2016), a hunting owl sits on a youth’s leather glove, its head swiveled around to look to the right of the viewer.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye paints pictures that look like portraits, but are not. The people she paints are composite fictions rather than individual subjects. In this regard, and in another way that will be mentioned later, her painting is close to historical paintings composed to illustrate collectively known stories. They don’t look like them, though. They look much more like the painters that Yiadom-Boakye has exhaustively studied, like Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, and

Walter Sickert. A lot of the backgrounds feature a harlequin pattern, an allusion to *commedia dell’arte* that is reinforced by the costumes that some of the figures wear, including a sad Pierrot ruff, and more than a few ballerinas. *Commedia dell’arte* provided stock motifs for painting that have barely been seen since the Great Depression, and their use here underscores the conscious anachronism of the images. They look like post-Impressionist works from the first Harlem Renaissance, in which men and women gaze out from the canvas with a certain polite indifference to the people passing by. Men and women— or, better, men or women. There are no paintings that show women and men together on the same canvas. The closest to being an exception is the final diptych, *A Fever Of Lilies* (2016), in which the two figures began as a couple on a single canvas before being repainted on two canvases, decorously separated. Whenever she paints groups, they are always small, homosocial groups.

The canvas is usually left unprimed, its raw texture showing through the paint. Parts of the canvas are even left blank to provide highlights. The figures themselves seem to be constructed from a spiral coming out from the face, almost like a mosaic, with a dark background that is added after the figure is roughed out. The painting is done without *disegno*, without prior drawing, so that it looks both improvised and effortless, even virtuoso. Yiadom-Boakye works quickly, completing each canvas in a single day or discarding it. The speed of the work recalls fresco techniques, and has something of the same immediacy. There’s some modeling of shadow, but relatively little blending, contributing to the paintings’ characteristically post-Impressionist look. Painted in seemingly at the very end are the overly bright whites of the eyes, as in the rituals of icon painting, where the eyes are added last because they are the most dangerous part of the image, the part that enables the picture to see the viewer. It’s part of Yiadom-Boakye’s seriousness as a painter that she respects this.

The other way in which Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings resemble images of religious scenes is this: Claudio Vogt, who works at the Kunsthalle, observed that none of the people in the paintings are ever shown wearing shoes. This matters, because shoes are a part of costume that can always be dated. Shoes ground a work in a specific historical moment. In Renaissance painting, for instance, the patrons who commissioned the painting might be depicted in the foreground wearing slippers, but the most holy figures—like John the Baptist, or Jesus for that matter—are almost invariably shown barefoot. Leaving her characters without shoes leaves them outside any clear historical time. They can’t step into our world. Conversely, the large-format paintings are all hung so low that you can almost step into them. The almost life-size figures are roughly at eye height. It seems odd, when in the gallery, that we have been



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so accustomed to looking *up* at works of art. This should make us feel closer to the people in the paintings, but it does not. It makes their distance more curious, and more unbridgeable.

## 7 MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES: MAINTENANCE ART

Text by Elena Tavecchia

Queens Museum  
New York City Building, Flushing Meadows  
Corona Park, Queens, NY 11368, United States  
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queensmuseum.org

*Maintenance Art* is the first institutional retrospective focusing on the practice of the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who has committed fifty years of her career to bringing to light what lies behind the scenes. Following her early engagement with thematic of the urban and ecological environment in the early 1960s, which gave shape to the series of the inflatable sculptures "Air Art" Ukeles's practice took a radical shift following her 1969 "Manifesto for Maintenance Art." This bold feminist statement, issued after she had her first child, addressed the apparently irreconcilable dualism she perceived in society between being an artist and being a mother. With her revolutionary manifesto, Ukeles reversed that point of view and broke this forced separation. She delineated a distinction between development and maintenance, in which the former stands for the creation of the new, progress, and excitement, while the latter is about preservation, care, and sustenance. This empowering way of reconsidering social dynamics upends the discriminatory gender bias that ascribes higher value to a working practice identified as masculine while the "feminine" practice of care and maintenance is demoted to a lower status and wage. As Andrea Liss points out in her 2009 book *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Ukeles's pronouncement consisted of treating her maternal work as material for art and cultural commentary. Her manifesto was a groundbreaking statement that continues to resound in the twenty-first century.

Following a series of maintenance performances in the early 1970s included in the traveling exhibition *c. 7500*, curated by Lucy Lippard—an overview of feminist Conceptual art—Ukeles took an important leap in 1976. For her work *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, she invited three hundred maintenance workers at the Whitney Museum of American Art to conceive of their work as "maintenance art" for one hour every day during their eight-hour work shift. At that time, New York was in a deep financial crisis and about to declare bankruptcy. Following a cheeky review of the show in which a journalist suggested that the Department of Sanitation might apply for art funds, given the economic situation, Ukeles

decided to take this suggestion literally and initiated a long-term commitment as the official unsalaried artist in residence of the Department of Sanitation. Challenging social expectations once again, Ukeles identified her work as a mother with concerns for the labor of the others, and forged a deep connection with male and female maintenance workers.

Her first related performance, *Touch Sanitation* (1979–80), lasted eleven months, during which she met with each of the 8,500 sanitation employees of New York's fifty-nine districts. Pictures taken during this extensive performance show Ukeles shaking hands with the employees, listening to their stories, and thanking them for their efforts in keeping the city alive. She would also imitate their movements, which was the most explicit way to acknowledge their effort. Telefax messages were sent out every morning from Sanitation headquarters to all the city districts, so that the workers could keep track of her daily reach in the surrounding areas. Much documentation and numerous works related to the project ended up in *Touch Sanitation Show*, a massive exhibition displayed at two locations in 1984, which is now re-presented for the first time at the Queens Museum retrospective. Included in both shows is *One Year's Worktime II* (1984/2016), a full year of work shifts in the form of clock faces silkscreened over a gradient of colors representing the seasons. The work fully occupies the main wall of the Queens Museum and functions as a celebration of the daily effort of the sanitation workers.

From the mid-1980s through 2013 Ukeles staged several *Work Ballets* in different cities across the United States, Europe, and the Echigo-Tsumari Triennale in Japan. She worked with the skilled drivers of trucks for trash collection and snowplowing and choreographed graceful and intricate performances specifically developed for each setting. Staging the aesthetic potential of heavy-duty tools generally associated with dirt and removal was once again a way for Ukeles to shed an artistic light on what usually stays behind the scenes.

At the heart of Ukeles's commitment to art, the environment, and her engagement with the lives of workers is her deep Jewish faith. *Repair Room*, made across many decades, is organized around the theme of *tikkun olam*, or the healing actions of individuals and communities. Past projects involving participatory installations and unrealized proposals are presented in an intimate setting, attempting to address peace and healing torn societies.

The center of the exhibition is occupied by the final and most visionary effort of the artist to date: the *Landing* project on the site of the Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island. Since the beginning of her experience as an artist in residence at the Department of Sanitation in 1977, Ukeles was interested in landfills