

What Would Bateson Say?

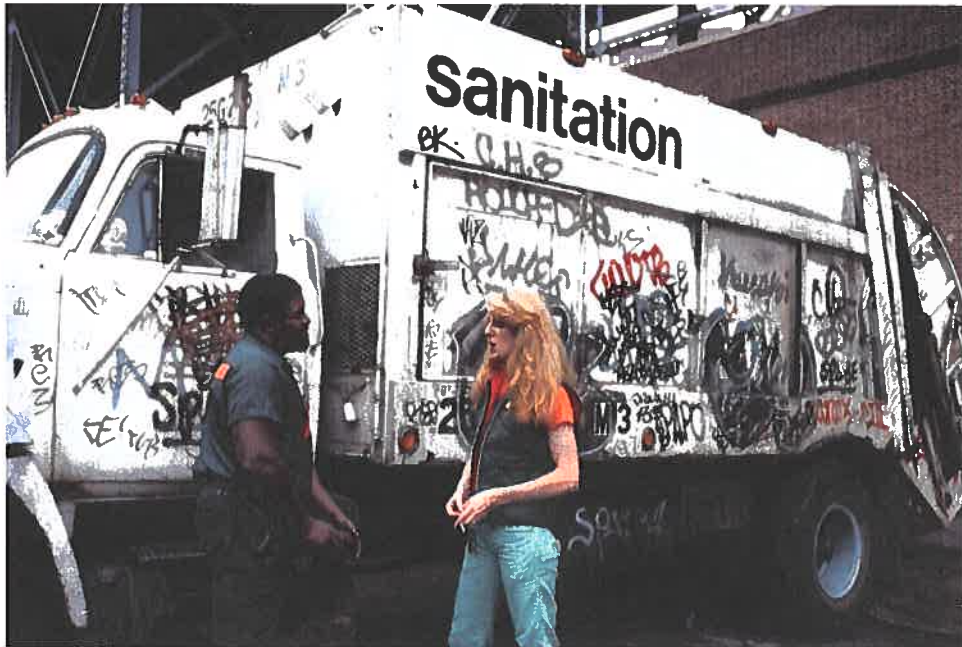
Ecology of Mind in Feminist Art: Mierle Laderman Ukeles

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Abstract

Gregory Bateson's mid-20th century ecology of mind has found its winding way to contemporary art criticism. Bateson's idea of "the pattern that connects" all things has much to contribute to thinking about today's interest in technology and open systems. This paper imagines the relationship of the work of two true originals a generation apart. Both Gregory Bateson and Mierle Laderman Ukeles were passionate advocates for wholeness; Bateson a revolutionary thinker who broke out of the box of traditional British and Newtonian thinking; Ukeles' "Maintenance Art" subverting the order of privilege and patriarchy. Both were devoted to the natural world and finding an organic way of being in it. They were compatriots who never met, but whose engagement with art and technology is mutually enlightening.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles (1984)

When I had a baby, people suddenly got uninterested in me. It was like I got put in this box of mothers with children, as if they automatically knew everything about me. This made me furious. And I became a maintenance worker. Because if I didn't do certain tasks, the baby would die. I take care of the baby, the baby can thrive, if she's lucky and healthy. I loved that baby, but nothing in my educated brain, nothing in my culture, prepared me for this. I got really pissed off. I thought, if I'm an artist, then I get to say anything is art. So I call 'maintenance' 'art.' If art wasn't like that before, then it has to change. Why? Because I say so. Period." (1969)

And it did, over five committed decades of working hard and prolifically about the hard work of maintenance in its many manifestations.

I gave birth to my own first child in 1968 and experienced the identical sort of instant invisibility that took so many new mothers by surprise in the Age of Aquarius, when life was supposed to be revolutionary but the status of motherhood had changed not at all, except the drudgery was now romanticized along with most other popular culture of the time. To spend 1968 – arguably the most explosive year of the 20th Century – changing diapers and keeping a tiny being alive was deeply disconcerting. Ukeles is the only artist I know of who has fashioned a brilliant lifetime of revelation and public art from the sheer grinding work of maintenance of a baby, of a home, of a street, of a city, of the ecology that connects all. She has extrapolated from the exhausting duties of childcare to maintenance and service in all its many forms, where the one thing in common is the lowly status of the hardest working members of the community – those who quietly keep it alive and running, whether they are nursing babies or driving snowplows.

From this most human of experiences, Ukeles wrote her brief *Manifesto for Maintenance in Art* in 1969, which has remained the foundation of her vast body of work. Ukeles begins by distinguishing the death instinct from the life instinct:

The Death Instinct: separation; individuality; Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one's own path to death—do your own thing; dynamic change.

The Life Instinct: unification; the eternal return; the perpetuation and

MAINTENANCE of the species; survival systems and operations; equilibrium. (1969)

Note Ukeles' embrace of the language of organicism in these very first statements: unification, systems, operations, equilibrium.

Beyond life and death instincts, there are

Two basic systems: Development and Maintenance. The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?

Development: pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing.

Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight. . .

Development systems are partial feedback systems with major room for change.

Maintenance systems are direct feedback systems with little room for alteration. (1969)

Here Ukeles uses the terminology of feedback systems, not at all common at the time of her

Bateson

Gregory Bateson was one of the most profound thinkers of the twentieth century. His story could fill volumes, and has. Bateson's love of nature, his passion for art, and embrace of cybernetics make him a unique point of reference for understanding Ukeles' work. As she was beginning to hit her stride in the 1970s, Bateson – on the other coast – was publishing his collected essays in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), and was widely acknowledged and celebrated during the years until his death in eight years later.

Bateson came from an erudite English family whose peers were the Darwins and Huxleys. He was “born in the formal, stable world of Cambridge intellectuals,” dominated by the prominence of his father William (W.B.) and to nineteenth century traditions of the biological sciences. (Brockman, p. 27) The Batesons were atheists, but W.B. insisted they discuss scripture at the dinner table so they would not be “empty-headed atheists.” William Bateson was a major art connoisseur and a fan of William Blake, whom Gregory quoted frequently throughout his life. (“A tear is an intellectual thing.” “Wise men see outlines and therefore they draw them.”) “He [W.B.] deeply appreciated art. It was sacred to him. He ‘worshipped it, and regarded it as inaccessible to all but geniuses’ (Brockman, 35.)” Stephen Nachmanovich wrote:

Blake, the prophetic, passionate and spiritual artist who so precisely saw and drew his visions, may have served as a kind of placeholder for all those feelings that were beyond or outside for the elder Bateson. Those things for which Blake stood – a sense of wholeness, a recognition of the vastness of unconscious activity, and love, were the elements which Gregory Bateson later tried to integrate into the epistemology of science. (2007)

Gregory's early fieldwork as an anthropologist was written up in *Naven: The Culture of the Iatmul People of New Guinea as revealed through a study of the “Naven” Ceremonial*. (1935, 1958) Coincidental with our present concern with feminist art, Bateson begins his first major work with a methodological statement about the differences between artistic and scientific methodologies. He asserted for one thing that “the artist is content to describe culture in such a manner that many of its premises and the inter-relations of its parts are implicit in his composition. . . This impressionistic technique is utterly foreign to the methods of science. . .”(1958: 1) So at this very early stage of his thinking, Bateson acknowledged that the methods of art can reveal what science cannot. One of Bateson's deepest beliefs was that “ultimate unity is aesthetic.” (*Mind and Nature*, 1988)

In “Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art,” (1967) Bateson argues that “the artist's dilemma is of a peculiar sort. He must practice in order to perform the craft components of his job. But practice has always a double effect. It makes him, on the one hand, more able to do whatever it is he is attempting; and, on the other hand, the phenomenon of habit formation, makes him less aware of how he does it.” (p. 138) Almost without exception, “the products called art or their products (also called art) have two characteristics: they require or exhibit skill and they contain redundancy or pattern.” (147)

With the heart of an artist and the mind of a scientist, Bateson often seemed to struggle to reconcile his holistic epistemology with the Newtonian world view that dominated scientific thinking. His introduction to *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* is a clarion call of his belief that:

Such matters as the bilateral symmetry of an animal, the patterned arrangement of leaves in a plant, the escalation of an armaments race, the processes of courtship, the nature of play, the grammar of a sentence, the mystery of biological evolution, and the contemporary crisis in

of Play and Fantasy.” It was nearly fifty years before the idea of “framing” – especially in political discourse – became part of common language.

In some ways, Bateson bore responsibility for his marginalization. He never held a long term academic appointment and his work is very difficult to read, skipping around science, anthropology, cybernetics, poetry, and whatever else caught his fancy. When I asked him about this, he told me that people were saying “Bateson, I don’t understand. Bateson, why don’t you write more clearly? What we are talking about here is paradigmatic change. I don’t know how to say it any other way.” (Wilder, 2013).

Ukeles/Bateson

Two people could hardly be more different on the surface than Bateson and Ukeles. Gregory Bateson, the cultivated English atheist named after Gregor Mendel, and Ukeles the observant daughter of a rabbi from Denver. Bateson who never broke from the elegance of his upbringing in the pursuit of scholarship, and Ukeles who, literally, dove right to the bottom of the garbage truck in a commitment to sanitation art. Bateson the nomad whose multiple marriages and locales vs Ukeles long-time residence in New York City (she is now based in Tel Aviv) and a stable nuclear family. It can be said that neither ever held what could be called a steady job in their lives, but that they each had a real calling that made a singular contribution to our relationship with the world.

For one thing, once they caught on to systems thinking, neither of them ever let go. For Bateson it was the cybernetics conference; for Ukeles it was her identification as a new mother with the maintenance workers who invisibly make things live and work. It made Ukeles into a feminist, a word that Bateson may have never uttered. Better to look in this regard to the work of his elder daughter Mary Catherine Bateson's, especially her highly regarded book about five women artists *Composing a Life* (1984). When whole systems are in play, gender becomes just something else in the mix, the center of attention at one revolution and behind the scenes at others.

Power

Both Bateson and Ukeles were keenly aware of the role of their work in contesting and reframing power. Ukeles wrote in the introduction to *Seven Work Ballets*:

I’m always asking: What is the relationship between dependency and power and dependency and value? So it’s not just dependency on the one hand and power on the other that I have aimed to reveal in these works. It is beyond all that. With this book and with these works I have been drawing an invitation to move to a social state of interdependence. (2015:17)

Compare these sentiments to Bateson’s 1979 (published in 1982) concluding remarks, some of the last he wrote, after noting money as an “epistemological blunder.”

And then we have another set of metaphors which do not fit the world of pattern. These are the metaphors we take from Newtonian physics. The metaphor of ‘energy.’ The metaphor or ‘power.’ We use ‘power’ in political science to mean god knows what. Possibly capacity to bribe, capacity to harm, a complicated component in a relationship – a characteristic of one end of a relationship. We say that ‘A’ has power. What we mean is that there is something in the *relationship* between ‘A’ and ‘B,’ something in the *interactive pattern*. . . We have this massive addition to physical metaphors which, as far as I know, are completely inapplicable to the life and epistemology of real organisms in the real world. (1982:354)

cybernetics, and any other ideas he could inhale into his towering intellect were not safe from his thinking. He believed that every identifiable pattern could be best understood in terms of his ecology of ideas.

Both Bateson and Ukeles were original and passionate (and *compassionate*) advocates for their beliefs; Bateson revolutionary outside of traditional British thinking; Ukeles outside of the patriarchy. Both were devoted to the natural world and finding the most organic way of being in it.

I don't know if Ukeles would have much patience for Bateson the deep writer, but my educated guess is that he would love the creativity and reframing and even mischievousness at the core of her work. He would love the photographs of her in 1973 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford washing the museum's front steps on her hands and knees. "In them, feminism, institutional critique, sly humor and self-possessed humility unite. . .heroic in a sneakers and jeans way" (2016) Holland Cotter calls Ukeles "a conceptualist who has always grounded far-looking ideas in the here-and-now situations and things, and a social revolutionary who understands the power of service."

William Zimmer wrote, in 1998, a paragraph about Ukeles that could fit both her and Gregory Bateson to a tee:

Through her odd endurance tests, Ms Ukeles is realizing something sublime: that nothing is inconsequential, that human beings are interdependent. . .Her upbringing may have imbued her with the insistence on ritual and cleanliness that informs her art, an art whose major effect is a simple demonstration of fullness of heart.

Beginning in 2015, the NYC Sanitation Department released its own pin-up calendar, as fire and police departments have done for years. Could this have been imagined without the celebration of maintenance work by Ukeles? And one can only guess if Lady Gaga knew the history of her sanitation symbolism in a protest outside Trump Towers in 2016. When Ukeles argued that maintenance work is political, sanitation trucks filled with sand to protect the residence of a U.S. president-elect were not likely what she had in mind, but sometimes reality is stranger than art, as truth is stranger than fiction.

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