Art is freedom expressed. I became an artist to be free: to use the gifts I was given to me by my artist-heroes. Uncle Jackson Pollock gave me the gift of the body active with the art-making process. Grandfather Oscar Durham, the gift of making meaning anew. Uncle Mark Rothko, the gift of moving from one dimension into another. I worked for years to become a free artist. Then in 1968, we fell in love with each other. I became a maintenance worker, not only to do the work necessary to keep our lives alive. I learned that Jackson, Marcel and Marc didn’t change diapers; I fell out of their picture. Also, my Art. I moved to a new dimension of art: the symbolic freedom, I fell into a crisis. I didn’t want to be two separate people—the maintenance worker and the fine artist. I was one person: the City; the Planet. With limited resources from our finite planet, how do we do it? How do we survive? I got new eyes. I looked at this new world and saw that most people were working to get along, to survive. They had, at all time, there was always a very little hero for service work and service workers: those at home and the ones in the streets. I was immersed in this vision and revolution with everyone in the picture. After making art my mother’s way of life, I began to see the maintenance workers. I just called from the Sanitation Department: “How would you like to make art with 10,000 other people? I’ll give you 4,000 of their work trucks maintenance heaven at the time of the maintenance hell of the NYC fiscal crisis.” They got the idea. I wrote a manifesto and published it in the New York Times. We were lucky to have officials and workers and the art world opening all the doors, to take a fake and say “Yes. Yes.” I welcome you all to this show.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Maintenance Art

Ukeles was insistent that all art has to do with the whole of life, the environment, and the future. Ukeles’ first performance with DSNY was her One Year’s Worktime II, 1969. In this extraordinary work, she did both, creating an installation that opened on the same day at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in Soho and at a decommissioned Marine Transfer Station, where garbage went from truck to Hudson River barge. Three elevators were reimagined for the Queens Museum: a Ceremonial Arch for Fresh Kills—one of the world’s largest landfills—and sites in other cities and countries.

Since 1984, Ukeles has stage several (6) World Events, 1983-2012, in five cities around the world, working with the drivers of heavy-duty municipal vehicles and their families, using a standard Harley-Davidson motorcycle and barge engines and barons are the dungies. (19 Social Mirror, 1981, is a garbage truck drive-in movie. The three-year film and fine work take a film and in 2005, they visit the Museum’s east entrance on Saturdays and Sundays during the run of their film. For full details, please visit queensmuseum.org for full details.

[14] Ceremonial Arch IV, 1988/1993/1994/2016, was first created in 1988 for an exhibition at the World Financial Center titled Ceremonial Arch. For Workers’ Rights. Restored for this exhibition, Ceremonial Arch is a celebration of the hands and enduring spirits that keep the city running. A “harvest” of 2,000 of used, signed work gloves from workers at New York’s Police, Fire, Sanitation, Environmental Protection, Public Arts, and Transportation Departments; the Metropolitan Transit Authority, and ConEdison spool in a neatly canopy over six stories, covering cutouts of the facade of the trade at some of the same municipal agencies and the United States Postal Service.

Since the start of her tenure at DSNY, Ukeles has envisioned landfills as many public parks. In 1969, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority displayed the ceremony of the first time on five walls surrounding Queens Museum’s Panorama of the City, 1964–1984. This work was displayed throughout the world’s largest landfill—not sites in other cities and countries. Landfill, estimated to be constructed in 2018, is a transformative site that allows viewers to envision what it will be like to experience the completed work.