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*WENDY VOGEL*

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**ON WHOSE BACK?**

**SHE  
WORKS  
FLEXIBLE**

She Works Flexible 2016

# **ON WHOSE BACK?**

Thoughts on Lily Cox-Richard's "Stringer Lode" at  
She Works Flexible

**WENDY VOGEL**

**“The sourball of every revolution:  
after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?”**

The feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles posed this searing question in her 1969 “Maintenance Art Manifesto.” In five points, she articulated a binary of “two basic systems: development and maintenance.” Development, in her telling, linked up with the dominant ideology of modernism: “the new; change; progress; advance.” Maintenance, by contrast, “is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.)”. Laderman Ukeles enumerated a list of chores that maintenance workers perform. These duties run from the custodial (wash the dishes, clean the floor) to self-maintenance (I’m out of perfume, stay young) to the emotional (he doesn’t understand, call him again). The tasks, particularly the latter types of affective labor, even today retain an explicitly feminine connotation.

Ukeles, however, saw a more complex relationship between the two categories in avant-garde art of her time. “Conceptual & Process art claim pure development, yet employ almost purely maintenance processes,” she wrote. For her, this curious marriage of avant-garde art with what Benjamin Buchloh would later term “the aesthetics of administration” spurred a radical practice encompassing gestures of care. Where many artists of her era utilized bureaucratic methods such as serial photography and instructions in their work, Laderman Ukeles sought to engage with the physical aspects of labor that keep bodies and institutions “alive.” Unsurprisingly, her works—which included such services as performing janitorial and conservation services Wadsworth Atheneum or shaking hands with every sanitation worker in New York City—remained underknown for years. Factors such as the developing market for performance documentation, revisionist feminism, and the codifying of social practice art helped render Laderman Ukeles’s work visible.

I reflect upon Laderman Ukeles's gestures as one entry point to Lily Cox-Richard's exhibition "Stringer Lode" at She Works Flexible. Like Laderman Ukeles, Cox-Richard generates work from a process of making visible what is usually unseen or overlooked. Her projects, however, are rooted in the material world. She has taken scrap copper, sculptural pedestals for 19th-century statuary steeped in colonialist ideology, impressions of metal upon paper, lightning rods, and unmarked graves as some sources for investigation. For Cox-Richard, however, these physical objects operate beyond a metaphorical level. Rather, they are a metonym for networks of association and support between people and things. In her book *Vibrant Matter*, political philosopher Jane Bennett posited a useful notion of "vital materialism"—a way of analyzing events, such as a blackout, that levels the hierarchy between human and non-organic agents. Bennett's philosophy springs in part from an engagement with ecofeminism, which equates the anthropocentric, exploitative view of nature with sexist and colonialist oppression. Often associated with speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, Bennett's feminist viewpoint brings questions of care and maintenance into what could be seen as a removed philosophical discourse.

At She Works Flexible, Cox-Richard's spare exhibition consists of sculptures based on the containing forms of DIY mushroom cultivation buckets and baskets. These objects evoke communal activities of craft and horticulture, while also touching upon the idea of a latticed network of a stringer lode. As Cox-Richard has noted, unlike a mother lode, stringer lodes consist of irregularly veined deposits of metals—a type of structural organization that is related to the sprawling root system of mushrooms. At the center of the gallery at SWE, a stacked column of gray cast buckets from which mushroom forms sprout rises like a totem. This sculpture, *Cistern*, rests on small platforms and is crowned with a domed capital that rests against the ceiling. The platform, modeled from auto blocks, has a domestic proportion—almost like a stepping stool or the blades on a mixer. Ringing the space are a series of basket sculptures, most of which are embedded in walls. The forms

play with ideas of interiority and functionality, as well as wholeness. Cox-Richard has amplified the effect by subtly reconfiguring the gallery floor plan through the addition of two parallel walls that enclose an empty space.

As one of the final events at She Works Flexible, Cox-Richard's exhibition reflects on the gallery's mission statement as a feminist site for discourse and poetic exchange. Discourse around an exhibition is usually considered contingent to the production and exhibition of artwork. According to the capitalist narrative, the messy, branching veins of the research process and discussion (before) and the press reception (after) radiate from a central node of an object assigned a market value. This object, whether produced by an individual or a collective, is unified as a singular aesthetic statement. Like physical maintenance functions—packing, transport, documentation, repair, lending—discourse is a mode of "taking care" of the object. By foregrounding the ephemeral, discursive aspects of art making, She Works Flexible questions this hierarchy of art labor.

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The reconfiguration of discursive work as art work has wide-ranging political implications. I think of Lucy Lippard, the feminist critic and curator who began her career by championing dematerialized conceptual and minimal art. As Julia Bryan-Wilson wrote in her book *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era*, Lippard was keenly aware of class politics from early in her career. Lippard was employed as a freelance researcher while pursuing her graduate degree, identifying as part of the "proletariat" and distinguishing herself from her classmates who did not hold a day job. In an interview in 1974, Lippard reflected on that time. "I called myself an art-historical whore because I'd research anything anybody asked me to," she said. Bryan-Wilson explained that Lippard remained attuned to this notion of labor as she became involved with the leftist politics of her time as part of the Art Workers Coalition. She aligned herself with the anti-war, civil

rights and, eventually, the feminist movement. “As she embraced writing as a distinctly political form of labor,” Bryan-Wilson wrote, “she also turned increasingly to feminist art.”

It is telling that Lippard equated her early freelance work with sex work, a form of labor that is clandestine, precarious and deeply associated with women. Throughout her career, she politicized the functions of criticism and curating, which also serve a “support” role within the art world. Lippard’s generation introduced radical changes to the distinctions of cultural labor. In the mid-twentieth century, such figures were positioned as the “custodians of culture.” As vast political and cultural changes shifted the nature of art making, artists called these roles into question. Labor, too, became a pertinent topic in the feminist movement.

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The notion of maintenance or reproduction does not function simply as the dark underbelly, equal in weight and proportion to the privileged product. Rather the shape is pyramidal: the stringer load, the laced network, the wide base of support. One such organization took on the cause of labor and maintenance, in the same era that Mierle Laderman Ukeles was producing her museum-based maintenance art works. The International Wages for Housework Campaign, which grew out of the International Feminist Collective in Italy, determined in 1972 that two-thirds of all work was reproductive in nature, but only five per cent of it was compensated. The movement sought to pay women wages as suppliers of the capitalist work force through their labor of birth, childrearing and household maintenance. This movement, which had more of a cultural than widespread economic effect, shed light on the economic effects of patriarchal oppression.

Silvia Federici, an Italian autonomist writer and co-founder of the International Feminist Collective, considered this movement in her 2004 book *Caliban and the Witch*. This text redefines the notion of primary accumulation. In a Marxian sense, primary accumulation

is the expropriation of common land from which capitalism is built. Federici positions primary accumulation as stemming from the unpaid labor of both women and the poor. During the 16th and 17th centuries, when the roots of capitalism took hold and colonial empires were built, sexual difference was also enforced through the division between compensated wage labor and unpaid “reproductive” labor. Central to this enforcement of a sexual hierarchy was the witch hunt—the elimination of women who took charge of their own reproduction. Witchcraft is equally associated, of course, with the religious, medicinal, and cultural traditional of non-Western peoples.

These various radical feminist gestures echo today in an artworld that is fully integrated with late-stage capitalism. Sometimes their consequences seem to be deeply at odds with their origins. Lippard’s generation introduced the concept of an independent curator and critic, unbound by the constrictions of institutional politics. Today the “hybrid” cultural worker model is commonplace, particularly in expensive art capitals, yet it represents an economy of precarity and instability. The ballooning art market, like most capitalist systems, fails to account for its blind spots: the networks of support that produce cultural value and the values it continues to reproduce. Various forms of institutional critique and social practice have sought to intervene with the sociopolitical context of art making.

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Recently in New York, I visited two exhibitions focused on the carceral system as an organization that reproduces structural racism. From January to March 2016 at Artists Space, Cameron Rowland’s exhibition “91020000” considered the extraction of labor from prisoners. This powerful but spare exhibition situated objects made by inmates, various objects related to slave trade and prison data, and a contract-based work. The title, “91020000,” refers to the number Artists Space was assigned by the New York State prison industry organization Corcraft in order to purchase products

made by prisoners. These included manhole covers, jackets worn by firefighters, courtroom benches and government office desks. Along with the objects made by prisoners, Rowland presented container lashing bars for ship cargo and insurance certificates from Lloyd's of London, who monopolized the maritime insurance industry during the slave trade. Fastened to the wall in an X shape or laid out on the floor, the heavy metal bars conjure the image of malicious human bondage. As an administrative work, Rowland initiated a Reparations Purpose Trust with the insurance company Aetna, with Artists Space as the grantor. Aetna was one company who issued slave insurance policies as a hybrid of life and property insurance. Per the contract, if slave reparations are granted, Artists Space will grant its 90 Aetna shares to the federal agency in charge of reparations disbursement.

At the Whitney Museum of American Art for two weeks in March 2016, Andrea Fraser presented *Down the River*, a sound loop recorded in the A Block of Sing Sing prison in Ossining, New York. The work was commissioned for the Open Plan series on the museum's fifth floor. The ambient, echoing sounds of the A Block, emanating from speakers on the ceiling, resonated throughout a completely empty 18,200-square-foot gallery—the largest columnless space in New York, as the museum is eager to declare. In a wall text, Fraser related the prison and the museum as inverse institutions in terms of cultural value and demographic makeup. The museum audience is primarily white, viewing carefully preserved cultural treasures that promote notions of intellectual freedom. The prison population, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly composed of racial minorities who actions deem them “unfit for society.” Where museums increase property value and serve as urban landmarks, prisons aim for discretion and are often sited in rural areas.

And yet, the two institutions have similarities. Both the Whitney and Sing Sing, located 32 miles north of the museum, look out onto the Hudson River. According to the Whitney's new slogan, “You Can See America from Here,” the westward view onto New Jersey

represents the entirety of the United States. The slogan is both an ironic reversal of the title of the Whitney's show that inaugurated the new building—“America Is Hard to See”—and a strange reference to the notion of Manifest Destiny that urged westward expansion across the U.S. The name of Sing Sing, derived from a Native American tribe, also bears reference to the U.S.'s bloody history of colonial displacement. Additionally, both museums and penitentiaries proliferated since the 1970s, aided by an influx of private capital. Today, privatized American prisons have their avatars in American museums funded largely on the beneficence of corporate largesse, as opposed to public funding. And finally, both reveal financial and social inequity as they promote white cultural values.

Rather than representing the prison population, both Rowland and Fraser point to the bodily effects of incarceration. Rowland focuses on displaying objects that allude to the slave trade and prison labor, and asks the institution to make a transactional promise to commit funds to future reparations. Fraser's installation evokes elements of life behind bars—constant noise and surveillance. (Just as Michel Foucault theorized the self-disciplining effects of the panopticon, which caused prisoners to monitor their own behavior, visitors are both surveilled and self-surveille through technological devices in the museum.) By placing the visitors within this space, Fraser constructs a performative scenario where visitors may also imagine how museums extract value from their audience, whether through increasing admissions prices, souvenirs, “experiential” installations or the affective work of social media. (It is no coincidence that the labor of social media has become the subject of a feminist, artist-run initiative called Wages for Facebook.)

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Being read alongside these efforts of explicit institutional critique, “Stringer Lode” at She Works Flexible can be viewed as an inquiry into systems of production, exploitation and renewal. So, too, can mushroom harvesting and craft be designated types of “maintenance” activities. As Cox-Richard has explained, mycologists who seek to promote mushroom cultivation view the plants as a method for survival in a world that is ecologically doomed. Craft occupies an aesthetic role that intersects with but is not wholly subsumed by the ecology of the contemporary art world, with associations of the decorative and even therapeutic. By utilizing these forms as a way to draw attention to the space of She Works Flexible, Cox-Richard implicitly asks the question of whose labor supports cultural and capitalistic reproduction.



This pamphlet is a publication of She Works Flexible Press. It is distributed as an accompanying text to the exhibition, *Stringer Lode*, featuring the work of artist Lily Cox-Richard. The exhibition is open from February 19th through April 9th, 2016 at She Works Flexible, 1709 Westheimer Road, Houston, TX, 77098.

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