

Performing Agency in the Everyday: Maintenance and Care with Ukeles and Beckett¹

Between October 2012 and April 2013 Jonathan Baxter and Sarah Gittins (hereon referred to as 'the artists') undertook a part-time residency at Scottish Sculpture Workshop, Lumsden. Their project, *When the Future Was Now*, investigated food sustainability within SSW as an organisation and Lumsden as a village. The intended outcomes for their project - to support a more sustainable food system within SSW and Lumsden - have yet to be realised.²

During their residency the artists had plenty of time to observe and interact with SSW staff and fellow residents.³ They noted that a number of practical actions could be undertaken to enhance sustainable practices and minimise SSW's carbon footprint. To this end the artists designed some **Maintenance and Care** signage to be displayed at SSW and downloaded via the Creative Carbon Scotland website.

When developing their signage the artists had in mind Mierle Ukeles' *Manifesto! Maintenance Art* (1969). Ukeles' manifesto challenged the boundaries between the maintenance of everyday life and the role of artists in society. In Ukeles' manifesto, and subsequent career, Ukeles draws attention to the 'maintenance ideas, maintenance activities and maintenance materials' that underpin *all* art activities including those of the avant-garde. As Ukeles observed, 'I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order.) I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I "do" Art. Now I will simply do these everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.'⁴

To help 'flush ... up to consciousness' issues relating to sustainability – and to avoid the pitfalls of endless maintenance 'rules'; who, after all, doesn't want to break or ignore a rule!? – the artists utilised the characters of Ukeles and Samuel Beckett to make their **Maintenance and Care** signage more engaging. Ukeles was used to perform the values of environmental awareness and Beckett was used to perform the anti-values of avant-garde failure. To paraphrase (and caricature) Beckett's position: All art is failure; the rest is housekeeping.⁵

Now, whatever you think of Beckett as an ecological or anti-ecological thinker,⁶ it's certainly the case that Ukeles' manifesto can be *rhetorically* used to stage a useful, because oppositional, conversation between Ukeles and Beckett. Here, Beckett's well known pessimism – his belief in the inherent failure of art to say anything that's finally worth saying – is challenged: "You must

¹ 'Performing agency in the everyday' is taken from SSW's 'Communities and Cultures' programme: 'Communities/Cultures investigates who are our communities and what cultures they produce, and how visual arts can perform agency within the everyday.' For further information about SSW see, www.ssw.org.uk - last accessed 25th September 2014.

² See, www.whenthefuturewasnow.wordpress.com for background information. Last accessed – 25th September 2014.

³ 'Observe and interact' is the first principle of permaculture design. The artists consider this to be the first step in any socially engaged art practice.

⁴ See http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf – last accessed 25th September 2014.

⁵ The full quote reads, '... to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and to shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.' Samuel Beckett, *Proust [and] Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (1965/1987), p.125.

⁶ See http://www.academia.edu/350917/Endgame_Becketts_Ecological_Thought – last accessed 25th September 2014 – for an informed discussion on this topic.

choose,” says Molloy in a novel by that name, “between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so.”⁷

Paradoxically, however, it may be Beckett who has the final word. For who better articulates the psychological and spiritual impasse of our age,⁸ our refusal to acknowledge the ecological crisis that is upon us.

HAMM: Nature has forgotten us.

CLOV: There's no more nature.

HAMM: No more nature! You exaggerate.

CLOV: In the vicinity.

HAMM: But we breathe! We change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom, our ideals!

CLOV: Then she hasn't forgotten us.

[...]

HAMM: Absent, always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened. [Pause.] Do you know what's happened? [Pause.] Clov!⁹

What exactly *has* happened we can't say. Nor do we know where this dialogue takes place. Is it set in a post-apocalyptic scenario or was there never such a thing as 'nature' anyway? And do any of us really care? Are we here or are we absent? Have we been forgotten? Did we forget?

So the artists have used the characters of Ukeles and Beckett to highlight some very simple everyday practices that might – just might – make a difference to our lives in the *future now*.¹⁰ They're signs. They're worth attending to. Although perhaps they come to late.

⁷ Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition, Vol. II, Novels* (2006), p.36.

⁸ For an unusual reading of Beckett, but one that the artists find persuasive, see Paul Foster, *Beckett and Zen: A Study of Dilemma in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (1989).

⁹ Samuel Beckett, 'Endgame,' *The Complete Dramatic Works* (1990), pp.89-134. Please note, this is a compressed edit.

¹⁰ 'When will they stop making me say more than I said?' asked Beckett of Raymond Federman. See, <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/imagery.html> – last accessed 25th September 2014. Clearly, the artists are guilty of this object use.