

## The 'Invisible Hand' of the Political

In a four-hour performance piece, feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles mopped the pavement in broad strokes and used cloth diapers to hand scrub the outside steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside* (1973). Anyone entering or leaving the institution that day would have seen her body bent over in the mundane posture and motion of repetitive labor. Ukeles effectively bookended the viewers' museum experience, making a lingering impression. In 1991, the conceptual artist Félix González-Torres created a 175-pound pile of candies, individually wrapped in brightly colored cellophane. Today, Torres' vibrant installation, which is meant to represent the weight of his partner before he became sick and died of AIDS, sits in one corner of the white cube of the Art Institute of Chicago. Viewers are encouraged to touch the work which is simply titled, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, and even take a piece of candy because the museum continually replenishes the supply. In an entirely different interactive exhibition at the Venice Biennale entitled, *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond* (2001), Santiago Sierra paid 133 illegal street vendors sixty dollars each to cram into a space and submit to bleaching their hair. Right afterwards in a second, unconventional "intervention," Sierra allowed the men to sell fake designer bags to the audience.<sup>1</sup> In these disparate but connected works, Ukeles, Torres and Sierra all engage the political. The artists take a seemingly ordinary action—making a pile of candy; washing a street; dyeing hair—and transform it into extraordinary, provocative, social commentary. They use irony and metaphor as artistic tools, giving form to well-hidden institutional and societal fault lines around gender inequality and maintenance labor (Ukeles); discrimination against gay men and fear of AIDS (Torres); and exploitation of immigrants and

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<sup>1</sup> Rubén Gallo, "Urbanism" in *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: the 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 114.

capitalist greed (Sierra). In that authorial process, all three works are able to interrogate, critique, blur or sometimes even erase boundaries altogether between the public and private spheres.

Each artist employs situational irony—“a striking reversal of what is expected or intended”—in order to draw attention to cracks in the art institution as well as society.<sup>2</sup> For example, even though the Wadsworth Atheneum invited Ukeles to perform her euphemistic “floor paintings” that recall Jackson Pollock’s technique, Ukeles’ actions, which engage with labor, critique the very institution that hosted her.<sup>3</sup> Her focus on maintenance disrupts and contests viewers’ perceptions of the perfect order of the white cube, a pristine, “bourgeois” space that often tries to hide from visitors’ eyes the unclean, hierarchized, inequitable parts of its functionality. The free movement of her body *outside* its walls ironically illuminates how women are often boxed in, confined to service-oriented jobs and domestic labor. “Her art opens the public space to the pressures of what it traditionally excludes or renders invisible.”<sup>4</sup> It is feminism camouflaged as service; institutional critique of “hidden yet motivated operations,” disguised as quiet, unassuming care.<sup>5</sup> As such, Ukuleles is able to question distinctions between public and private spheres right in front of the institution and her audience’s eyes.

Torres also experiments with the irony of simultaneously belonging to and opposing an institution and society that discriminate against artists openly referencing homosexuality or exposing the ravages of AIDS in their work, like Rosalind Solomon’s photographs of Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions and wasting, for example.<sup>6</sup> In *Untitled*, what is outside the museum’s walls—epidemic, prejudice, stereotype, fear—is ironically brought inside by viewers and the

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<sup>2</sup> “Merriam-Webster Dictionary,” Merriam-webster.com, February 24, 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/situational%20irony>.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (Spring, 2000): 78, 91.

<sup>4</sup> Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” 82.

<sup>5</sup> Miwon Kwon, “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997), 88.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art” in *Art AIDS America* (University of Washington Press, 2015), 29.

work itself; what is inside—pieces of candy, curiosity, questions, an artistic way of humanizing disease and the Other—is taken away and absorbed by its new authors, the viewers. Torres embeds this unexpected tension in the pile itself. Its weight diminishes with each taking action, and yet its never-ending supply ironically suggests the relentless nature of disease and imminent death. In this way, Torres, like Ukeles, quietly engages with and subtly implicates all the actors—viewers, museum workers and society. Umberto Eco underscores this idea of connection when he writes that an open work “sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society.”<sup>7</sup> With *Untitled*, Torres indeed engages his audience in a “new cycle” of seeing and perhaps even feeling. He measures the amount of time that his partner has left to live as well as the emotional weight of his own personal pain in pieces of sugar. His candy pile hides the political in plain sight, challenging the boundaries between public and private, sickness and health, us and them.

Unlike Ukeles who blurs the public/private line and Torres who erases it, Sierra draws attention to it, using irony to create tension and “antagonism” among his human subjects, his audience, and himself.<sup>8</sup> Viewers to his site at the Biennelle were probably wondering, ‘why are we here, and what is our purpose? Are we voyeurs or consumers? Are the vendors unwitting victims, accomplices, or a gimmicky part of the art? What dystopian universe did we stumble upon?’ In his circular, exploitative work, Sierra “pays others to do work for which he gets paid, and in turn, he is exploited by galleries, dealers and collectors.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike Ukeles who quietly labors alone and Torres who is figuratively hidden, replaced by his ready-made candies, Sierra intervenes. Like a scientist in a chaotic laboratory of human guinea pigs, he actively bleaches

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<sup>7</sup> Umberto Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work” [1962] in *The Open Work* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 66.

<sup>9</sup> Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 71.

hundreds of dark-haired individuals in what feels like an unethical, eugenics-inspired experiment.<sup>10</sup> A Spanish artist exhibiting in Venice, Sierra is also a “global nomad,” so an outsider and visitor at his own site. In that way, he ironically shares common ground with his subjects.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the site is “more than place.”<sup>12</sup> It becomes a dark metaphor for a controlling, inequitable society. Sierra’s activism through art is more nuanced than the others’. His action of paying people to demonstrate how underpaid and undervalued they are “in the name of art” is both ironic and troubling.<sup>13</sup>

Relatedly, all three works use metaphor as a companion to irony, allowing the artists to challenge systemic fault lines around issues of sexuality, gender equality, poverty and economic insecurity. Ukuleles, for instance, employs the metaphor of labor to show that a work of art is also the art of work. Her hypnotic motion seems to metaphorically wash away any boundaries between public and private. In addition, her own body becomes a symbol for inequality, just as Torres’ pile stands in for the dwindling life of a man. Ukuleles’ site expands “spatial terms” into a “cultural framework,” becoming a moving metaphor for maintenance workers who want to do more than wash someone else’s floors.<sup>14</sup> Sierra also applies the metaphor of labor, figuratively and literally highlighting poor workers by bleaching their heads. Torres explores the metaphor of infection. “I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution,” he once said in a recorded conversation.<sup>15</sup> The pile is the body; the candy pieces are cells; when visitors eat them, bodies are contained within other bodies—viral *and* human. The line between us/them seems to dissolve like a piece of candy on the tongue. The Barthesian theory that “the author enters into his own

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<sup>10</sup> Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 73.

<sup>11</sup> Chin-Tao Wu, “Worlds Apart: Problems of Interpreting Globalised Art,” *Third Text* 21 (2007), 725.

<sup>12</sup> Kwon, “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” 96.

<sup>13</sup> Rubén Gallo, “Urbanism” in *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: the 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 114.

<sup>14</sup> Kwon, “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” 87.

<sup>15</sup> Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” 24.

death” ceases being a metaphor when the death is real.<sup>16</sup> In Sierra’s work as well, the demoralizing sight/site becomes a metaphor for a broken system that economically harms and exploits immigrant laborers.

The ‘invisible hand’ of all three artists writes these metaphors and situational ironies into their works as important tools of engagement in an effort to raise the viewer’s awareness about marginalizing and discriminating against the Other based on gender, sexuality, or ethnicity.

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<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” [1967] in *Image, Music, Text* (Fontana, 1977), 142.