

Darn It

Charlotte Richardson-Deppe
2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents.....	1
List of Figures.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Darning	3
From ‘Dernen’: To Stop A Hole In A Dyke.....	5
Everything I Do Is Art Is Art.....	8
(Text)iles.....	10
Piecing Together: Works.....	11
Bodyknots.....	12
Pillowcase.....	13
My Grandfather’s Clothes.....	14
Clinging/Cleaning to Life.....	14
Just a Shirt.....	16
Two Pants.....	18
Surgery Is to Bodies What Mending Is to Clothes.....	19
Mending in Progress.....	20
Conclusion: Darn It.....	21
Works Cited.....	22

LIST OF FIGURES

All figures, unless otherwise attributed, consist of artwork made and photographed by Charlotte Richardson-Deppe in 2021.

Fig. 1. A pair of my socks, with natural wear, tear, and repair.

Fig. 2. Still from video [*Demonstration of Sock-Tearing Object*](#).

Figs. 3-12. Screenshots from Google.

Figs. 13, 14, 15. Installation shots of *Darn It*.

Fig. 16. Documentation of *Bodyknots* performance.

Figs. 17 and 18. *Pillowcase* documentation. Embroidered text printed below.

Fig. 19. *My Grandfather's Clothes*.

Fig. 20. *Just A Shirt*.

Figs. 21, 22, 23. *Two Pants*.

Fig. 24. Jeans mending in progress.

Fig. 25. Darned socks, the same pair as in Fig. 1. Current state of (dis)repair.

INTRODUCTION

“Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” — Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

If prayer is an instance of sustained attention then is cleaning not prayer? A steadfast devotion to keeping things up, taking care, giving love to? In the hyperspeed capitalist attention economy we live in, our attention as a commodity is of immense value (Odell 11). Is not cleaning, then, or mending, maintenance, or care work, a most precious and resistant redirection of our time? A commitment to nurture the old, not buy the new: to re-*new* that which already exists through sustained attention (*prayer*). “The cult of the new” will always be sold to us (Cwynar, *Soft Film*). How can we divest?

DARNING



Fig. 1. A pair of my socks, with natural wear, tear, and repair.

This research began with a sock. Socks get holes in them. I darn my socks, repairing the holes. This, theoretically, happens in perpetuity—it follows, then, that a sock should end up entirely made up of darned patches, the original fabric completely eroded; its body re-comprised of new, slowly-woven segments. From thread begets fabric; from wear, fabric yields to tear; from tear begins darning, a careful (*care-full*; *care-filled*) process of turning thread into fabric again.

Why have I never seen a sock that is more made up of darned patches than of its original fabric? When considering what this object might be like, I thought of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. In it, Nelson draws analogies between the changes of her pregnant body, her partner's body in the midst of gender transition, and the ancient Greek hero Jason's ship *The Argo*. Nelson writes: "the Argo's parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the Argo" (Nelson 5). If every part of something has been replaced, is it still what it once was?

Summarizing this project several months ago, I wrote:

I am accelerating a cycle of decay and repair by tearing holes in a sock and darning them until the sock is entirely made up of darned patches. I think of the absurd, inefficient travesties of capitalism—clothing and food destroyed rather than distributed because it went unsold. Despite these counterproductive measures, capitalism urges us to constantly police ourselves to maximize productivity. With these contradictions in mind, I take great delight in the internal logic of my piece: spending hours darning one sock when I could easily buy new ones for far less time-money-effort. For art of any media—both the product and the process—to be absurd, provide levity, poke holes in oppressive logics or create their own systems of internal logic: all these resist the imperatives of oppressive systems. (Richardson-Deppe 2)

Looking at it one way: this project is about darning, the power of repair; the mending of a sock against the mandates of capitalist disposability; mending a sock as analogy for slow-moving, insistent, resistant, repair. The fabric of the sock: the fabric of my life: the fabric of society.

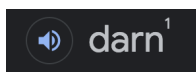


Fig. 2. Still from video [Demonstration of Sock-Tearing Object](#).

Looking at it another way: I am the one destroying the sock. I am the reason it must be repaired in the first place. I am not letting the natural course of things occur, repairing only after so-many footsteps or so-many snags have built into a tear. I am the scraping, tearing, monster with my sandpaper tool of destruction who again and again submits the sock to rupture. I imperil myself, as well: my body is in the sock that is being ripped asunder. My skin, the next in line to rupture, if I do not take care to only tear the thin layer of sock that is the sole barrier between my flesh and its imminent abrasion.

FROM 'DERNEN': TO STOP HOLES IN A DYKE

Embedded in this section: Figs. 3-12. Screenshots from Google.



verb

mend (a hole in knitted material) by interweaving yarn with a needle.

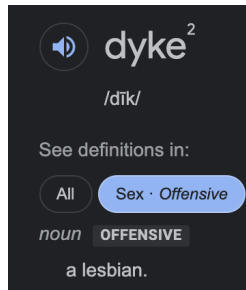
noun

a place in a garment that has been darned.

early 17th century: perhaps from dialect *dern* 'to hide', which is from Old English *diernan*, of West Germanic origin; compare with Middle Dutch *dernen* 'stop holes in (a dyke)'.

dernen 'stop holes in (a dyke)'.

I am the dyke and the hole is in me, rather, it is in the skin-shell I wear called clothing. The hole is from repetitive action, wear and ultimately tear, that causes me to need to stop up this hole. To protect the parts of me that are most vulnerable, most worn, most aching, bare, or at risk.



noun: **dyke**; plural noun: **dykes**;

1. a long wall or embankment built to prevent flooding from the sea.

This morning: reciprocating polite conversation (*but he's probably hitting on me, don't be too encouraging like you usually are*) with a man I see on the bus regularly. I live with my partner, I say. (*I have said this to him before*). Like a roommate? No, like my girlfriend. Oh, he says. Oh.

Long before it was a slur (*noun, offensive: a lesbian*), and then a reclaimed slur, the word dyke meant, and still means, this too: an embankment built to prevent flooding from the sea. A wall, susceptible to holes or leaks, that might need fixing (*dernen: to stop holes in a dyke*).

In the 1970s some dykes called for a lesbian separatist movement: women on women's land. Women living with women, women working for women, women loving women. The words dyke

and lesbian as a call to action, a wall to build around a community, keeping some in and many others out. Important but flawed: racism and transmisogyny, both then and now, have always troubled where and how queers try to draw exclusive community lines.

Perhaps dyke, used this way as a wall, is antithetical to what I hope are the principles of dykeness. Perhaps instead we can think about dyke as a wall around our hearts, a wall used to reinforce our minds against the daily tides of cisheteroness. Holes, as they emerge in this wall through wear or tear, might need patching: might need to be filled with dyke affirmation or dyke care or dyke media. Maybe this wall can be more permeable than an embankment: moreso a membrane than a stone buttress or stolid earthwork. Perhaps it is more like a sock, or a shirt, or a pair of jeans: a membranous vessel to contain whatever comprises our dykeselves, that swells and expands when we fall in dyke love or dyke lust or go to a dyke party or tattoo our dyke friends. To reinforce our dykeminds and dykebodies. To swaddle us in the dykelove dykehistory of the dykes who came before us.

perhaps from dialect *dern* 'to hide',

Traditional mending is a skill of subterfuge, visual de-emphasis: a skillful mend is unnoticeable, making the hole imperceivable from the whole.

What changes when mending is overt rather than hidden? When we wear our wounds on our sleeves? Is it beautifying? Uglifying? Neutral? What shifts with visible, pride-filled mending? What am I gesturing toward with overt repair, glorified restoration?

What about passing? Queerness: so often about setting ourselves in contradistinction to, standing out; also queerness: often about blending in, or aching to blend in (but not being able to). Either of these can be in pursuit of gender affirmation: going with the grain of the self's desire, becoming far more (or far less) of a woman or man than any cishet woman or man ever will be. Or instead a blending for safety's sake, camouflage—for some, this goes against the grain of the self's desire, but is necessary, sometimes or always.

Visibly, I pass as cishetero. I'm femme looking, with some tattoos and mostly loose, practical clothes, but still feminine enough. I get honked at when I wear a dress.

My partner is non-binary, masculine leaning. Shaved and dyed hair, gauges in their ears. More easily clocked. They've occasionally gotten sir'ed in public, then sometimes receive a double take and an apology. They were followed and surveilled in a women's bathroom once: a woman aggressively questioned if they should be in there, watched them through the stall, and pulled her kids away. (*Straightcisdanger inciting dyketears dykeanger: dykelove needed to shore up the aforementioned dykespirit dykemembranewall*).

Clothing becomes “distressed” when it is purposely manufactured to be ripped, worn, faded, rather than letting time create these changes. People become distressed when they are harassed on the street.

What is different about a shirt that is snagged on something sharp, ripped asunder; versus the hole that emerges on a sock from a thousand uncounted steps? One thing careworn; another harshly torn. What is the same: they will both need to be darned.

Is it queerer to mend with the goal of visibility or invisibility? This question is a trap: there is no right answer and can never be. We all lose if we engage in the “queerer than thou” debate. For me, for right now: mending visibly is easier for people to spot, to comment on, engage with.

Appearance can be paramount. If you can see it, is it more real? Not necessarily, but it certainly looks that way.

EVERYTHING I DO IS ART IS ART

“Maintenance is a drag, it takes all the fucking time...the mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs=minimum wages, housewives=no pay....Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art.” —Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969.”

To offer a condensed biography of artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, I'll quote from a previous paper of mine:

Ukeles ventured into the field of maintenance art after she became a mother in the 1960s and found herself consumed with the constant maintenance work of caring for a child—cleaning, washing, cooking, etc. (Harris). As an artist she coined the term “maintenance art,” in high contrast to art that strives to make something new and present it neutrally.

In her manifesto, Ukeles states: “I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order)” (3). This statement grants insight into Ukeles’ personal positioning toward feminist politics. In the art world, she is supposed to just be an artist, not a woman, and especially not a mother. Ukeles was unable to be her full self according to the values of the art world, so instead she identified, changed, and expanded the methods of art making to highlight the labors she undertook constantly in her quartet of identities. Thus her art exposes to viewers their own thoughts and biases about what they value in art and why. Ukeles states in her exhibition proposal: “The exhibition area might look “empty” of art, but it will be maintained in full public view” (Ukeles 3). Maintaining, then, is just as much of doing something, as much of participating in culture and moving ideas along, as painting or sculpting or picketing or writing. (Richardson-Deppe 1-2)

Making this current body of research felt like a long awaited collision of allowing what I do at home—my domestic instincts and personal patterns—to finally, at long last, merge with my academic artistic research. I was darning socks in December 2020; then, I cordoned them off, did not dare to include them under the purview of my research because I was too scared to blur this line, to challenge what is or is not deemed art.

In my most recent installation, I created a room that variously invoked, for myself and others, clothesline, laundromat, closet, clothing store, living room. Part of this is an assertion, following in the lineage of Ukeles and many more feminists and fiber artists, that the domestic is art is labor is meaningful. It is important to me that my installation is activated by my regular presence sewing and mending.

The articles of clothing pictured below are my clothes, either mended or in need of mending. On the closet rack, I formalized this designation with signs reading “MENDEd” and “MENDING IN PROGRESS.” The chair, lamp, and table are simply a place for me to sit and sew.



Figs. 13, 14, 15. Installation shots of *Darn It*.

(TEXT)ILES

“Text and textiles are woven always” —Ann Hamilton, “On Being: Making, and the Spaces We Share.”

More than ever before, I have begun to let writing emerge and be foregrounded alongside my art objects and performances. Much of my time over the last few months has been spent trying to distinguish between the (false) categories of academic writing versus creative nonfiction /

autotheory versus artist statements. This paper is a living document: an attempt to nestle all three in various combinations—a trying-out of how this might be possible.

I have come to think of portions of my writing that are creative nonfiction essays as “vignettes.” I think of the shorter, paragraph-length portions of my writing, which are shared alongside the images in the “Works” section below, as “wall texts” given their placement in relation to the work when installed in a physical space. “Wall texts” isn’t quite the right name for them, for these short segments are equal partners to the artworks they are paired with, rather than consisting of practical information or art historical context, but “wall texts” will do for now.

There are three vignettes included in this paper. You have already encountered “From ‘Dernen’: To Stop A Hole In A Dyke.” The other two are embedded in the “Works” section below: “Clinging/Cleaning to Life” and “Surgery Is to Bodies What Mending Is to Clothes.”

PIECING TOGETHER: WORKS

At first in this body of work I had darning, an assertion of mending, maintenance, care. Then I had darning and hole-making, a logic puzzle of newness and creation through destruction. As the semester wore on, my seemingly disparate studio experiments and writing fragments began to slowly cohere into many sides of some w(hole)—many ways of considering care; pain; loss; love; desire; memorial; personal a/effects; and more, all through fiber, textile, clothing, cloth. These works are presented in the following section.

BODYKNOTS



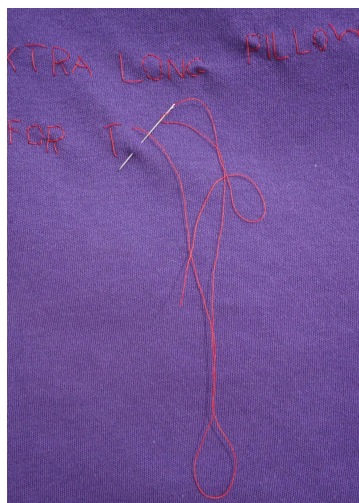
Fig. 16. Documentation of *Bodyknots* performance.

Turn inside out, cut strips through front and back. Sew them together, seams out. Stuff the tubes. Sew the tubes together, end to end, to form one long loop. Longer than you'd think.

I put on the tube. I interlace it with my body. I complicate its continuity with loops, ties, interlacings, threadings. I pull it over my head like a sweater. I step into it like pants. I wind it around my body like scarf, like aerial apparatus, like lover, like tights.

I take off the tube. It is different now. It is all wound up. It will stay like that until I put it on again.

PILLOWCASE



Figs. 17 and 18. *Pillowcase* documentation. Embroidered text printed below.

This pillowcase is for my lover's pillow she will rest her cheek on these words she will sleep here and dream here I made this out of my love for her. This pillowcase will be cherished like my grandmother's quilt which also lies on this bed, like the shirt I now wear that my aunt sewed for her brother, my father. Only the handmade receives this level of care, of protection, of desire. It is tailored solely for its intended purpose: it is singular and specific and made for Gabby for their extra long pillow that I stole from them each night when we first started dating, for this pillow that now lives on our bed that we share, on Gabby's side of the bed, where we rest our heads, sleep, dream, whisper, cry, collapse, and sing.

MY GRANDFATHER'S CLOTHES



Fig. 19. *My Grandfather's Clothes.*

These clothes were my grandfather's. I inherited them after he died in August 2021. They have been sitting in this stack in my closet ever since. I can't bring myself to wear them or wash them. They smell like his house, his laundry detergent. Every once in a while I try to wear them, but soon I take them off again, fold them, smell them, and put them back in this pile.

CLINGING/CLEANING TO LIFE

I first got the news over text. Cried; laid in bed; cried. Then announced to my partner, who was tenderly asking what they could do for me, that what I wanted, needed to do, was clean the house. Cleaning, showering. Rites of purification that my grandfather's body had undergone mere hours before. Washing the body, changing the linens. Someone dies; someone else still needs to do the dishes, to shower. Those last few hours before a short night of sleep and an early plane ride: scrubbing kitchen counters, neatly folding clothes, recycling junk mail, making

the bed. Writing out a list of what food I would bring to the airport in the morning: Bagel with cream cheese. Cucumber. Zucchini bread. Banana. Apple.

Later, in Oregon. My grandmother announcing that we'll not hold Grandpa's living room memorial service with dirty dishes stacked in the sink a few feet away, prompting extended family to tag team in and out of doing dishes. Working to keep Grandma out of the kitchen so she can mourn without needing to scrape a plate, squeeze the sponge, run the disposal.

The first thing that happens when my sister and I join the video call with my parents (after the text message news; before we've bought flights): they tell us they want us on that next available plane. Clarity cutting through: nothing supersedes a death in the family. This death in my family.

Obligations, schedules, plans don't hold up when someone (*my grandfather, Dr. Robert Hugo Richardson: kind, gentle, funny; loved bacon, peanut butter, chocolate covered nuts; felt deeply; had a preponderance towards melancholy and depression; read widely, especially on wrenching topics (war; genocide); a recovered alcoholic (every time he visited my mom bought sparkling water and non-alcoholic beer); beloved by his wife of 38 years, Anne (each had been married twice before and each found their soulmate in the other's arms); loved opera, dapper dressing (fancy men's hats, suspenders, nicknamed "the Bowtie Doctor" for the crisply tied bowties he wore to teach at Oregon Health Sciences University), and Japan (where he had been drafted to serve as a doctor during the Vietnam War—he considered dodging the draft but wanted his kids to know their grandparents in the states so he moved his young family to Tachikawa for three years); specializing, at different points through his career, in pulmonology, ethics, and palliative care*); has just died in the living room.

I struggle to listen to what my parents are saying in the moment, my mind wanting to immediately turn to logistics, planning: plane tickets (Costs! Times! Emails to send!). They gently redirect me from Google Flights as I unwillingly (am I afraid?) maximize their video feed on screen. They tell us how he died in the living room of his house on a hospital bed. For two days prior, his three children and wife kept vigil by him, feeding him water and coffee in a syringe, holding his hand, telling him they loved him (until the last day, he always said it back). They describe how they anointed his body with oil from a shaman my grandparents took meditation classes from. How for him, a lifelong lover of trains, a train whistle sounded in the river valley, its sound pulsing through the open windows, just as the life left his body.

Poetic and fitting that one who championed palliative care and fought to enact the Oregon Physician Assisted Suicide Act into law should get a good death: at home and surrounded by loved ones. A good death: the best that we, human, can hope for from this life. A good life while we live and a good death when we die.

Death is not clean, ever, I think—even when it is swift, it is usually bloody, or dirtied in some way—is it not? Is cleaning then a compulsion to deny the ever-moving rhythm of our unruly bodies that are constantly in a state of slow decay: wearing out, breaking down, dirtying themselves again and again. And the house of the body, the clothes, are dirtied along with the body, forevermore and always; and the linens dirtied, and the bed, and the room, and the house itself: the cleaning is never done and can never be done. You shower and then you continue to exist and another cleaning will again become necessary.

Does cleaning distinguish us as human, sentient? Human, and consumed with cleaning against the ultimate degradation of our bodies, our clothes, our houses, and everything in them? Is cleaning a fight to remain alive? An assertion of our stubborn continued life: alive, and damn it, cleaning. A testament to life itself: in death, there is no need to clean, no need to be cleaned (after that last cleaning performed upon you before cremation or burial). Is there a more unenjoyed constant than cleaning? A more universally resented necessity?

JUST A SHIRT

A hotel near the airport in the suburbs of Chicago. The final night of choir tour, the spring of my senior year of college. I'm leaving someone's hotel room party with several friends to go back to our rooms, flushed and happy, wearing this shirt:



Fig. 20. *Just A Shirt.*

A man, middle-aged, enters the elevator. He makes conversation; I tell him that we're a college choir on tour. My friends and I exit the elevator, go into our hotel room. I think nothing of it.

The phone in my hotel room rings. My friend picks up the receiver, confused. A man (the man) is on the other line: he asks if a girl in a black and white striped shirt is staying in this room. The three of us make panicked eye contact with each other; gesture violent shakes of our heads, mouthing silent no's. My friend on the phone lies, says no she isn't in this room you must have the wrong room, hangs up. We are scared.

We double-lock the door to our room (the man must have seen me enter this room from the elevator). We call a male friend. He is tall and strong. He goes to the front desk, asks them to change our room. We move rooms at 1:30am. We double-lock the door to the new room. It is hard to fall asleep that night.

TWO PANTS

When installed in a gallery space, viewers are welcome to touch, sit on, and interact with this object.



Figs. 21, 22, 23. *Two Pants*.

SURGERY IS TO BODIES WHAT MENDING IS TO CLOTHES

Surgery is to bodies what mending is to clothes.

Is it any big surprise that, on this day, in this age, we so easily cast off our clothes, discard them to be thrown away? Capitalism cares neither for clothes nor bodies that do not work for it, that do not produce excess labor in its glory, that do not lie belly up singing the praises of hustle culture.

Do you have clothes in the back of your closet you do not wear because there is a hole in them? How long have they been there? What will you do with them?

Mending is empowering, mending is revolutionary. Mending is repetitive, mending is a drag. Mending takes forever, mending resists capitalism in its tiny protest against disposability, against commodifying time, against utilitarianism. If you love something, mend it. Mending is putting all your time and care and attention into a spot that is broken and worn through. Mending is restorative. Mending will not make it the same as it was before. Mending will make it usable again. The place where something has been mended is stronger: it is different from the rest of its former self. It might be raised up, or wrinkled, or a different fabric or color.

My dad needs his hip replaced soon. It is worn from his years of marathons, of dog walks, of running and biking and hiking. Of carrying me on his back through state parks (As a kid, I would say: "I'll carry the backpack if you carry me." I did not realize that meant he carried us both).

My dad has already had cataract surgery in both eyes. He is becoming a kind of robot. He will soon have surgery to get a cyborg hip and he will not hurt so much while he teaches second grade in the public elementary school. I wish he did not have to work so much. I wish he could stay home and read about science and write his songs and publish his music on YouTube and draw comics and take care of house projects and clean up his workshop in the garage where he used to build violins. He can play any instrument by ear. He plays the guitar that he built himself. He had to switch from lutherie to teaching because it paid more. Repairing string instruments at the local music shop didn't pay enough for launching two daughters and trying to pay off the mortgage and sending us to fancy colleges. He can't afford to retire yet.

Repairing instruments—setting up a student's first cello, replacing a broken string, fretting over frets. Gluing, sanding, shaping and cutting. Beginning work and finishing work. Ending in playability: a song, a chord, a note.

Teaching—attempting to ameliorate the effects of a broken system that leave his students angry, behind, isolated, bored, exhausted, hungry. Trying to patch a hole in a bucket where water has never stopped flowing out. Where new holes are continually created. Where nothing but radical systemic change could make things otherwise. The slow, patient, quotidian work of teaching young children: funny, repetitive, heartbreaking, repetitive, frustrating, dynamic, repetitive.

Teaching and lutherie: not so different after all. My dad writes songs with his students. Music and care and repair. Sustained attention to the places where objects have been broken; sustained attention to the people who the system has left unprepared to read, to do math, to write, to conduct friendships. Attempts to patch up holes; attend to lapses in attention; compensate for breakage, harm, loss. How much does he give of himself in this good and noble, utterly worthwhile yet utterly draining pursuit? (Too much.)

MENDING IN PROGRESS



Fig. 24. Jeans mending in progress.

The first repair didn't hold. This one won't hold either. This garment could not hold me within it: it burst at the seams, then it burst at the seams again. These have been sitting in my to-mend pile for years. Since then my body has changed. Maybe this time the mend will hold longer, will stick around. Perhaps the strength of my stitches will bear the weight of my hips and the wear of my walk. How soon until I will mend again?

CONCLUSION: DARN IT



Fig. 25. Darned socks, the same pair as in Fig. 1. Current state of (dis)repair.

When (if) I ever finish darning my sock, what will be left of what there was before? By the time I am through, I will be making holes in my darned patches. It is never ending, just like the task of cleaning. Maintenance is a way of being, a necessity, an attempt to get in right(er) relationship with myself, my clothes, my home, my relationships, my positions in society. Maintenance is not a means to an end, but a means to a means.

Works Cited

- Cwynar, Sara. *Soft Film*. 2016.
- Hamilton, Ann, interviewed by Krista Tippet. "[On Being: Making, and the Spaces We Share](#)." 2014.
- Harris, Beth, and Hickson, Patricia. [Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside \(July 23, 1973\)](#) Smarthistory, 2018.
- Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press, 2015.
- Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Melville House, 2019.
- Richardson-Deppe, Charlotte. [Demonstration of Sock-Tearing Object](#). 2021.
- Richardson-Deppe, Charlotte. "Divine Inspiration: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Johanna Hedva." 2021.
- Richardson-Deppe, Charlotte. "Reading Ruminations 1." 2021.
- Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. [Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!](#) Feldman Gallery, 1969.
- Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. "Artist Talk presented in conjunction with the Sanitation Celebration exhibit." Pace University Art Gallery, 2021.
- Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. Routledge, 1952.