



## Trashmagination Podcast #84 – Artist Residencies at Landfills

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Today we're going to talk about artist residencies at landfills. An artist residency is a program where an artist works at a location for weeks or months. Often they are paid a stipend and given studio space. Usually at the end of the residency, the artist displays the work that they created. Some residencies involve education programs or tours where the artist welcomes the public to visit while they work. Most artist residencies are in quiet, beautiful places in nature, like national parks [<https://www.artistcommunities.org/arts-ecology-residency-programs>]. But today I'm going to talk about residences that could not be farther away from national park – these are located at landfills and waste transfer sites.

### Sorting Trash Around the World

Of course there are people all over the world whose job is to sort trash at landfills and it's a very hard life. In previous podcast episodes, I have talked about examples of art projects at landfills:

1. The 2010 film *Waste Land* is about the world's largest landfill, Jardim Gramacho outside Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. In that film, an artist named Vik Muniz worked with people who sort through the landfill and they made huge art pieces. These workers are called catadores. They made portraits with trash and the photos were sold to help the catadores and their community [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glnKde8FmH4>].
2. The 2015 film *Landfill Harmonic* is about an orchestra in Paraguay where all the instruments were built from items found in the landfill [<http://www.landfillharmonicmovie.com/>]. I talked about this film in my podcast episode about making musical instruments from recycled materials [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnHLhQarzAQ>].
3. In my podcast episode about my favorite TED Talks about creative reuse, I talked about the Zabaleen in Egypt who sort trash and how some women started an artist cooperative making art from items they sort.

So of the many people around the world who work in landfills, very few have the opportunity to make art. But that is the topic we'll dive into now.

### Mierle Laderman Ukeles in New York City

This concept starts with an artist named Mierle Laderman Ukeles. When she became a mother, she found it was very difficult to produce art, and that the activities she did as a mother were not valued in the same way that art was valued. She wanted those activities to be valued more and she created a term called "Maintenance Art" to describe undervalued work of this kind.

In 1978, she became the artist-in-residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation. This was an unpaid position, and she has been doing that ever since – for more than 40 years. She is now in her seventies. She is best known for a performance art piece called Touch Sanitation Performance where she shook the hand of every person who worked for the Department of Sanitation, which was 8,500 people, and she said "Thank you for keeping New York City alive!" to each person. She was communicating that the work that sanitation staff did was an important contribution to the city and its own form of art.

<https://hyperallergic.com/355255/how-mierle-laderman-ukeles-turned-maintenance-work-into-art/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aR8voZ1Rk1w>

In 2015, the city of New York created a program called PAIR or Public Artists in Residence which was inspired by her work. This program embeds artists in city government to find creative solutions [<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dcla/publicart/pair.page>]. Sometimes this involves challenges with the waste stream. These residencies last a year. Artists receive a fee and resources like desk space.

## Jo Hansen and Recology in San Francisco

Around the same time that Mierle Laderman Ukeles was starting to work with the Department of Sanitation in New York City, an artist named Jo Hansen in San Francisco became a community activist. She encouraged people to clean up litter and make public art. She got the idea for making an artist residency after visiting the transfer station. This became the longest-running artist residency at a waste facility that I could find - called Recology [<https://www.recology.com/recology-san-francisco/artist-in-residence-program/>]. It started in 1990. There is a book about the first 25 years of that program called *Art at the Dump* [<https://www.blurb.com/b/6240341-art-at-the-dump>]. Jo Hansen died in 2007. There is a sculpture garden in her memory at the Recology facility which houses many pieces made by artists during their residency, as well as a grove of apple trees.

The Recology program selects 6 artists per year as well as three student artists selected from local colleges and universities. The residencies last four months and artists must live locally. The artists work at an environmental learning center which includes classroom space. In the book *Art at the Dump*, it says about 4,000 people tour the center each year. At the end of their residency, the artists' work is exhibited for three days.

There are now many ongoing related programs. There is a Gardener in Residence program to manage a garden onsite which grows food for the artists and community. There is a kiln where artists take broken bus shelter glass and make bowls and platters to be donated to fundraisers for schools and non-profits. Sometimes the artists work with community members to make parade floats or other projects.

Given this is the longest-running program of its kind, it has great information about how working in a landfill can impact an artist. Many artists report an initial euphoria of accessing all that material, followed by a feeling of overwhelm. I would love to learn more about the emotional side of these residencies and how artists process these feelings.

Recology is now expanded to Portland, Oregon. In August, I was visiting Portland where I saw an exhibition by artists who had just completed their residency. The program is called GLEAN [<https://www.gleanportland.com/>] and hosted five local artists for five months. They were paid a \$2,000 stipend. They had a month-long show in a nice spot in downtown Portland where they received 80% commission from the sale of their art at the exhibition. They were not given studio space. They were required to make at least 8 pieces of work and one piece would be owned by the residency program at the end.

In Philadelphia there is a similar program called the Recycled Artist in Residency program or RAIR [<https://www.rairphilly.org/>]. Applications are due at the end of October. They offer two types of residencies – one that lasts 4-6 weeks, and then a different model where you come to the site for 2-4 weekends. The longer residency includes studio space. It includes an honorarium of \$600, along with financial assistance for travel and housing. Even if you don't think you would apply for a residency, you take a tour on the second Saturday of the month from March to October.

Some artist residency programs at landfills focus on students still in school. In Haliburton, Ontario at Fleming College, there is a program called the Reclaim Artist Residency which takes place in the summer [<https://akimbo.ca/listings/reclaim-artist-residency-summer-2019/>]. In Monterey, there is an artist residency program that started in 2016. The artists are all students from California State University Monterey Bay [<http://www.mrwmd.org/artist-in-residence/>].

## Other Models of Artist Residencies at Landfills or Recycling Centers

Next I'll talk about other programs that encourage creative reuse art-making at waste or recycling facilities, but do not fit the typical model of a residency.

So first, perhaps you have seen programs where artists are encouraged to paint utility boxes around town for a stipend. In Vermont, the Chittenden Solid Waste District hosted an interesting artist residency where they commissioned local artists to paint murals on their 22-foot-long recycling containers [<https://cswd.net/art/>]. This program was called The Art of Recycling. These containers then rotated to the county's recycling drop-off centers.

Some artist residencies are hosted not by a municipal landfill, but by another organization which collects trash or recyclables. In New York City, there is a place called the Ecology Center which is not a landfill or waste transfer station, but they do collect e-waste at their E-Waste Warehouse and they have an artist residency there [<https://www.lesecologycenter.org/announcing-2018-gowanus-e-waste-warehouse-artists-in-residence/>].

Goodwill in Kentucky hosts an artist residency program called The Art of Goodwill [<https://www.theartofgoodwill.org/>]. In 2019, The Art of Goodwill exhibit takes place November 16 at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky.

Really any organization that is dealing with a large amount of material could host an artist residency – even those who deconstruct buildings for example.

### Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Please let me know about any other artist residencies at landfills or transfer stations by contacting me at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). Until next time – may you see landfills and transfer stations as a source of art in your life!

### Other Artist Residencies at Landfills / Transfer Stations:

- Edmonton, Alberta [[https://www.edmontonarts.ca/artists\\_in\\_residence/](https://www.edmontonarts.ca/artists_in_residence/)]
- Seattle [<https://www.seattle.gov/utilities/about-us/spu-and-the-community/public-arts-program/artist-residencies>]