



## Garbage and Mirrors: A Self Reflection

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

*"Seventeen years ago, we were picking up Sin Brooklyn. It was very hot and humid, in the nineties. We were very tired. We had just loaded this lady's garbage and sat down on her porch steps to rest a bit. She opened the front door and said: 'Get away from here you smelly garbagemen. I don't want you stinking up my porch.'" Then he said, "For 17 years that stuck in my throat. Today, you wipe that out." And then he said to me, "Will you remember that?"*

I was told this story during *TOUCH SANITATION*, a three year performance (1977–1980) where I shook the hand of each of New York City's 8,500 sanitation workers, saying to each: "Thank you for keeping New York City alive."

I created the *SOCIAL MIRROR* in 1983, taking a regular, 28-foot-long, 12.5-ton NYC garbage collection truck and covering its body — including the curves of the rear hopper — with hand-fitted tempered glass mirrors. It was part of my work *SANITATION CELEBRATIONS*, the Grand Finale of the First New York Art Parade — 32 blocks long down Madison Avenue. "See Sanitation/See Yourself" was my early name for this public sculpture. Everyone, from two-year-olds and up, recognizes the shape of the everyday garbage truck. Yet the alienation in the 1970s and '80s separating those served from service workers was so extreme that people generally walked around

believing it wasn't their garbage, but rather the garbage of those smelly. . . . I wanted to capture people's images in the reflecting surface of the truck using the mirror as a primitive trap to frame their spirit of denial. An unexpected layer of magic rises as the truck moves majestically down the street. So big yet hardly present, it becomes a mobile, mirroring its context — street, buildings, weather, you, you, you. In movement, it splits open the street, peeling it back, and replays it right in front of our eyes; then it moves on and the screen is stripped away. It's the holistic urban portrait that I wanted to frame.

Used in parades for over 24 years, it became the centerpiece of my recent one-person show at the Feldman Gallery booth at the International Armory Art Fair in N.Y. I was worried that it would look passé. But it has taken on a new reality: displayed as a still sculpture — inside! Many people stopped and quietly faced themselves directly in its mirrors, pondering an altogether new level of worry about the fate of the planet: How did we get into this mess with the chemicals slipping out behind us polluting the rivers, the air, the whole earth filled with God's glory? People looked into the mirrors a long time, asking themselves, "Why didn't we see what we were doing? What are we doing?" The *SOCIAL MIRROR* has morphed.

*Mierle Laderman Ukeles, a multimedia artist, lives in New York and Jerusalem, works in the U.S. and internationally, and is represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York. Her work can be seen at [feldmangallery.com](http://feldmangallery.com). She is blessed with a wonderful family.*

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