

Goncharov, Kathleen. "Out of the Studio: Art With Community." Bronx, NY: P.S. 39 Longwood Arts Project, January, 1987. (Exhibition catalogue for Above it all - Sculptors of the Bronx and Upper Manhattan).

## Part I: Art With Community

Because of the diversity of the projects in *Out of the Studio*, a variety of writers have been invited to discuss the specific artists. These writers include the artists themselves, members of the community where the projects took place, and curators from sponsoring organizations.

### Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Maintenance Art

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is a "community" artist in the best sense of the term, that of dedicated social activist. As artist-in-residence (unpaid) for the New York City Department of Sanitation, she gave a group of workers, usually reviled, a new sense of pride and "community." As Director of Exhibitions for Creative Time, in 1984 I worked with Ukeles on the *Touch Sanitation Show* and watched her briefly unite two very insular "communities", that of sanitation workers and the art world, for a common goal. We who worked with her, the staffs of *Creative Time*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts; the NYC Department of Sanitation and its workers and various other individuals also became part of a "community," coming together to realize this incredibly ambitious project. But Ukeles' most important accomplishment was to drive home the fact that we are all part of a global "community" and in our symbiotic relationships, all roles, no matter how mundane, are essential for the survival of that community.

Ukeles' art comes partially out of the conceptual, performance and feminist movements of the 1960's with their social utopian aims. After giving birth to a child, she began to question the relationship of culture to everyday life when confronted with the negative reactions to service work and her role as a mother. Her response was to leave the studio and make the demanding routine of "maintaining" the family, the city and the earth into a collaborative performance, while breaking down the traditional definitions of art. With antecedents of early 20th century European movements such as Suprematism, Constructivism, Dada and Futurism, which extolled the virtues of the unification of art and life, the breakdown of barriers between art and viewer, a critique of modern technology, labor, urban life, and the expression of real time and space, Ukeles embraced as art, the everyday tasks that make culture and every other social institution possible. Like those artists, she began this new body of work in 1969 with a manifesto. Entitled "Manifesto for Maintenance Art: Proposal for an Exhibition", it posited maintenance as a literal artwork existing in real time.

In 1976 Ukeles collaborated with a community of 300 maintenance workers at the Uris Building (which housed the Downtown Branch of the Whitney) to do the performance piece, "I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day." Concurrently she began interviewing sanitation workers and in 1979 began *Touch Sanitation*, a performance work in real time with video documentation in which she shook hands with and personally thanked each of New York City's approximately 8,500 sanitation workers "for keeping New York alive." In order to accomplish this piece, Ukeles spent twelve hour days travelling to the 59 NYC Sanitation Districts to experience the everyday reality of the workers in a related performance called *Following in Your Footsteps*. For the 1984 Art Parade she choreographed a



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation*, 1979-81. Performance work, courtesy Ronald Feldman.

*Ballet Mechanique for Six Mechanical Sweepers*. She also created *The Social Mirror*, a mirrored sanitation truck which graphically points to the fact that all of us in the community must take responsibility for the garbage we create and when we call those who pick it up "garbage-men" we unfairly assimilate them into our own product.

Ukeles' move in the 1980's to a more public arena culminated in the two-part *Touch Sanitation Show* in 1984, billed as a total environmental artwork. Part I, presented by Creative Time consisted of the conversion of the enormous NYC Department of Sanitation transfer station at 59th

Street into an installation piece. It included an Athey Wagon resembling a monster created by Steven Spielberg and a bicycle equipped with brooms, a gift from the people of Peking to New York City. There was a 350 ft. flashing light sculpture made from the parts of condemned sanitation trucks, a trough filled with thousands and thousands of worn-out gloves used by sanitation workers, a multi-track sound work with the voices of workers and the sounds of their trucks, a huge salt mound, and many other works made from sanitation equipment and vehicles. *Marrying of the Barges* was a ballet performed by two tug boats and like the earlier *Ballet Mechanique...*, a celebration of the machine in the Russian Constructivist and avant garde theater traditions, aesthetically engaging as well as socially significant.

Part II took place at Ronald Feldman Gallery and consisted of two video environments: "Waste Flow Video" included four towers, representing the seasons, showing tapes of workers' interviews on twenty-eight monitors; "Sandman's Place" consisted of a re-creation of an old fashioned sanitation workers' facility created from other people's throw-aways and a newer facility made up of new furniture bought specifically for the sanitation workers (a newly instituted policy in New York City). The finale was a performance called *Cleansing the Bad Names* in which leaders in the art world and public life cleaned the names sanitation workers are called, from the windows of the gallery. With the *Touch Sanitation Show*, Ukeles accomplished a difficult agenda indeed. She inspired interaction within and among a number of communities within an experimental art context.

Kathleen Goncharov



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *The Social Mirror*, 1983. From *Touch Sanitation Show*, courtesy Ronald Feldman.