

VOICES FROM THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH MUSEUM

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Changing the World, One Mirror at a Time

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It's not often that one visits a contemporary art installation, opens up the comment book, and reads the following: "First of all, I am a broken vessel, a victim of abuse, and I am in the process of healing." Or: "Today, June 8, makes 7 years since I lost my wife." Other entries include promises to help the environment, or work with local schools to improve the quality of education.



If anyone has doubts that contemporary art has relevance to people outside certain cultural circles, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' piece "Birthing Tikkun Olam," part of the Museum's exhibition *In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis*, puts them to

rest.

Ukeles' installation is a unique combination of Biblical interpretation, public participation and social action. Her gallery space contains two walls of small, hand-held mirrors, surrounded by biblical texts and the artist's kabbalistically-inspired poetry. Visitors are invited to take seriously the idea that people are made "in the image" of God, and collaborate with Ukeles to make the world a better place. More specifically, Ukeles asks visitors to fill in this too much to ask? Apparently not. Since the Museum opened in early June, thousands of people have carefully considered the request, and written out (and in some cases drawn) their commitments.



On July 31, Phase II of the installation began. On this "Day of Transfer and Exchange" (the first of three), a few dozen visitors sat in a Museum classroom downstairs and wrote out a comprehensive "covenant" with Ukeles,

in which they agreed to undertake an act of tikkun olam – Hebrew for holy social work. Then they took the covenants upstairs, replacing the mirrors with their piece of paper, fulfilling the artist's goal of making her art a full collaboration. After two more events like this, all the mirrors will have been given away to visitors, replaced with personalized agreements.

Visitors were clearly moved by the experience. "I've never been so fulfilled in front of a piece of art," explained Zachary Teutsch, who works with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union, and was in town from Washington D.C. for a conference. Echoing the artist's mystical language, he continued: "We have power, and can create justice in the world, when we can all work together like this. When workers come together we can send sparks up to heaven, as well as send them to each other here on earth."



Jennifer Leigh, a Palo Alto psychologist and life coach for teens, was equally moved. "I made a covenant with God when I was 12. No one has asked me to make a covenant since then," said Leigh, the author of the forthcoming book *Girls, You Just Don't Get it! What Guys Want You to Know about Love and Respect*. "I am so grateful for this invitation to dig so deeply into my heart." Leslie Stone, from Sausalito, said that the event "gave me an opportunity to do something about the world other than complain. Having the artist include us like this is a gift."

We at the Museum are curious to know how visitors feel about the installation as the mirrors are replaced with personal covenants. Tell us what you think

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