

WE couldn't find a place to throw out an empty potato-chip bag as we walked west on Fifty-ninth Street last week, but, starting this fall, it's going to be easy to spot a litter basket on the Coney Island boardwalk from the Hayden Planetarium, in Manhattan, or aim for one in the Bronx from the roof of the Swingline Staple Building, in Queens. The Sanitation Department's new baskets will be painted a color called ten-mile orange, and we had a chance to preview them on Pier 99, at the West Fifty-ninth Street Marine Transfer Station, a long, dark shed open at one end to allow garbage trucks to dump their contents into waiting barges. The baskets were there as part of an art installation—a world away from the Met and the Maoris—by a woman named Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who is the official but unsalaried artist-in-residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation. The exhibit is packed with the impressive tools and vehicles that keep the city from going to wrack and ruin, among them a Bombardier Snowplow, which, according to its manufacturer, "goes where all others fear to tread," more than a thousand gloves actually used by the Sanitation Department over the past year (Mierle received the collection from individual workers, and suspended it in a kind of wire trough), and a Rear Loader M-truck, plucked from its regular lower-East Side route for its display of thoroughgoing, flamboyant graffiti.

There were a lot of people on hand for the opening of the show, and some of them took the microphone to say a few words. Mayor Koch, who was a little late, said, "Only in New York could you have a sanitation facility where you could also have an art gallery. Notice there's no stench on anything—even our garbage."

John Coleman, who is an important man in foundations, said, "In the human language, there's no word more important than 'love,' except maybe 'dignity.'"

Norman Steisel, the Commissioner of Sanitation, was relatively silent, but Mierle, who is tall and Titian-haired, said that Mr. Steisel, who cleared the way for the show, reminded her most of the Medicis in

Renaissance Italy. "I'm not making a joke, though it sounds like that," she said. "After all, the Sanitation Department didn't say, 'O.K., we're doing art for a few months, forget about picking up the garbage.'" For the finale of the New York City Art Parade last year, Mierle choreographed a dance called "Ballet Mécanique for Six Mechanical Sweepers," and to open this exhibit, which is called "Touch Sanitation Show," she choreographed another—a ballet called "Marrying the Barges." "Barges travel in couples—lashed to both sides of a tug—as they make their way to Staten Island," Mierle went on. "When the couples are joined together, it's called marriage."

Looking downstream, we saw a tug that said "McALLISTER BROS." on its beam. It was one of two tugs and six barges that were about to go into their dance. The tug near us had been attached to orange cleats on a blue barge with lengths of heavy white line; earlier, we had talked to a man who showed us how to splice a rope, and now it gave us a little secret pleasure to know that inside each of the lines was a plastic strip that read, over and over, "City of New York." Soon the barges, which were empty of garbage, were doing glissades out in the Hudson, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves. They floated a way off from the Marine Transfer Station, from which they normally head for the dumping ground in Fresh Kills, and in the final moments of the ballet the tug maneuvered the blue barge safely into its slip. Before we left to go on to our next stop, we leaned over the railing and peered down into the cavern of the barge. There was an inch or so of water in its hull, and it looked vast and deep and patient.

LATER that afternoon, many of the same people reconvened on Mercer Street, in SoHo, outside the Ronald Feldman gallery, to watch a non-Maori ritual called "Cleansing the Bad Names." The bad names were names that people had called garbage men over the years; in fact, one of the bad names was Garbage man. "The day of mingling the person with the waste that's not even his own must be over," Mierle said. "It's your garbage, not their garbage. Anyone who makes garbage is a garbage person." Some other bad names were: Scavenger, Can Man, Slob, Trash Hound, and Goof. Mierle Ukeles got her list

straight from the sanitation workers—she shook the hand of every member of the department during an eleven-month performance-art project five years ago. One man told her about a hot, humid day seventeen years back when he and his colleagues stopped for their break and sat on the porch steps of a house in Brooklyn. "The lady opened the door and yelled at them, 'Get off my porch, you stinking garbage men!'" Mierle said. "The man told me that those words had stuck in his throat ever since." Mierle had painted all the bad names on the windows of the gallery, and she handed out sponges to city officials and just about anyone else who wanted to help scrub them off. "It is our right as free human beings to say the time of the smelly garbage man is over," Mierle said.

A nicer name than Garbage man is Sanman, and inside the gallery Mierle had built an exhibit called "Sanman's Place," which was a painstaking reproduction of a department locker room. The walls sagged with what artists call found objects, and what Sanmen call "mongo;" in fact, this locker room contained a number of artifacts from the departmentally famous "mongo wall" of Brooklyn's District 10, complete with beer signs, velvet paintings, and Elvis bumper stickers. "Sanman's Place" was a shrine dedicated to refuse, and we were moved. Next to it was a reproduction of a state-of-the-art locker room, boasting a Universal weight machine and a computer on a desk. Everything was very neat.

On the gallery walls Mierle had silk-screened eleven hundred and sixty-nine clock faces—one for each eight-hour shift in a year, and seventy-four more for symmetry. Her empathy with the sanitation workers is obviously immense, and it is catching. Outside, a woman in a stylish black dress stood listening to speeches by Mierle and others. She was smoking, and she casually dropped her cigarette butt to the ground. A few minutes later, though, right around the time Mierle was saying, "They've got to do their job every day—they never get to wake up and think, 'Perhaps no one put anything out this morning,'" the woman reached down and picked up her butt and tossed it into the wire-mesh trash basket provided for that purpose. Which, not to make a big deal out of it, is precisely where it belonged.