

# Cleaning Up Images

By Paul D. Colford

**R**ONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS is probably the only SoHo gallery to collaborate with the city's Department of Sanitation. The department's 59th Street Marine Transfer Station is probably the only Hudson River pier to launch a ballet of barges and tugboats.

The reason for these cultural curiosities is Mierle Ukeles. She's the department's artist-in-residence, and this is her weekend to shine.

"Touch Sanitation Show," Ukeles' two-part art exhibition, opens on Sunday amid a flurry of happenings at both sites. Part I, called "Transfer Station Trans Formation," will bring a 350-foot sculpture of flashing light panels and an awesome array of Sanitation's mechanical might to the aging pier, beginning with a 1:30 p.m. "ballet" of six barges and two tugs. Part II, "Maintenance City/Sanman's Place," will turn the Feldman gallery, at 31 Mercer St., into a multimedia environment showing sanitation workers as abused civil servants with a lofty calling. At 3 p.m., city officials will gather to clean the gallery's windows of the graffiti of bad names that workers have been called.

Ukeles, a tall woman with thick blonde hair, is passionate about her work. Since 1979, three years before becoming Sanitation's unsalaried artist-in-residence, she has involved herself with these grittiest of public servants by doing their jobs and listening to their laments. In fact, she visited each of the department's 59 districts to shake hands with every worker and thank them for "keeping New York City alive."

"Touch Sanitation Show" weds her warm feelings for the sanitation workers and her concern for how we view all those who serve.

"Our culture tells the sanitation workers that they are part of the garbage and so they will sit on garbage," she said the other day at the Feldman gallery, pointing to a once-discarded child's chair that is used in a sanitation locker room. "To allow a man who loads tons of garbage a day to use this is the most insulting thing I can think of."

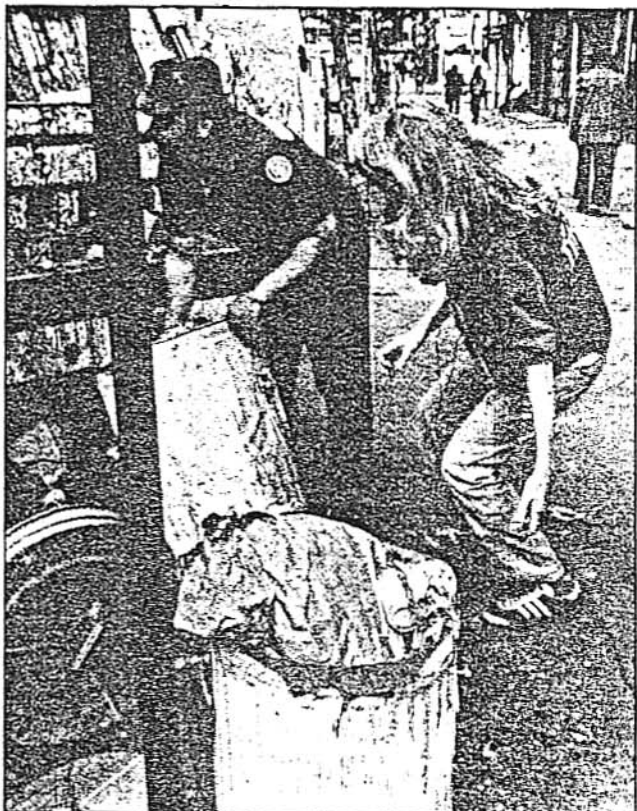
The chair sits in a decrepit installation of battered lockers and barely functional debris that was taken piece by piece from sanitation facilities around the city.

Exposing these foul conditions is part of what she calls a "felicitous collaboration" with the Department of Sanitation. The department is bent on reforming working conditions, the artist said, while she wants to address the issues of dwindling landfill space and the integrity of workers in a reflective atmosphere created by galleries and exhibitions.

For, as Ukeles sees it, how we view the filth and clutter in which sanitation workers must lunch, shower and change concerns not just those laborers.

"A test of any society," she said, "is how it treats those people who provide services. This show is about serving and servants." How about serfs? "Yes, and serfs, too."

"Touch Sanitation" also celebrates the workers by providing an amusing glimpse



Mierle Ukeles gains insights into sanmen's day on the job and in the locker room.

of their resilience and artistry. The grim locker room, which adjoins a new and more sparkling one, is decorated with plastic ferns, signs, pictures and other so-called "mungo" that workers retrieved on their routes.

"I feel close to the sanmen," Ukeles said, "because they handle materials in flux that have lost their traditional moorings. They are like artists that way."

It is apparent, too, that members of the Department of Sanitation feel close to Ukeles. Commissioner Norman Steisel, joined by numerous officials of his department and the sanitation workers' union, feted her at a reception in his office last spring.

"What Mierle does is important," Steisel said. "She reflects on the nature of our work in a positive way, and she shows the public how important the work is, even though it's dirty work, and how they should take pride in the people who do this work."

Like Steisel, sanitation worker Nick Pettito was initially skeptical of Ukeles. But as Steisel went on to give the department's blessing to her efforts, Pettito was even persuaded to be an assistant choreographer for Ukeles' "Ballet Mechanique" for six street sweepers, which was part of the New York City Art Parade held last fall.

"She's done hard days' work in the sun with the rest of us," Pettito said. "We've

gone along with her art work because we know she means well."

Of all the materials, machines and videotapes gathered for "Touch Sanitation Show," Ukeles is particularly pleased with the basket of used workers' gloves that she has suspended from the ceiling at the Marine Transfer Station. There are hundreds, all gnarled and torn, and they, too, are ready to fall into barges that haul away the city's garbage.

"These gloves are the best picture of garbage I ever saw," Ukeles said. While they reflect the brute labor of garbage collection, they also show "that we make garbage."

Ukeles added: "When we face the issue of service workers' not being servants, then we will have developed culturally. But it's not so simple." ■

"Touch Sanitation Show" runs for several weeks following Sunday's opening activities. The transfer station "Trans Formation," cosponsored by Creative Time Inc. (619-1965), will be open noon to 7 p.m., Wednesday to Sunday, through Sept. 30. Ukeles' "Maintenance City/Sanman's Place" will be on display at the Feldman gallery (226-3232) through Oct. 5. Hours there are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. In addition, a special bus will run from Columbus Circle to the Feldman gallery for the duration of the exhibition. The number for information is 571-2206.

