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Sanitation Art Showings Brighten Workers' Image

By JAMES BROOKE

Edwin Sheridan held his tie with one hand and scrubbed vigorously with the other, erasing the taunting graffiti: "Trash Hound," "Garbage Man" and "Can Man."

"I've been called these — and worse," said Mr. Sheridan, a 25-year veteran of the Sanitation Department.

By scrubbing the window of a SoHo art gallery yesterday, Mr. Sheridan helped mark the opening of the "Touch Sanitation Show," two exhibits designed to celebrate the 8,500 men and women who clean New York City's streets and to do away with the image of the derogatory nickname "garbage man."

"Because they do dirty work, it does not mean they are dirty," Norman Steisel, Commissioner of the Sanitation Department, told a crowd of politicians, artists, union officials and sanitation workers at the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery on Mercer Street. Later, the group joined together to scrub taunts and slurs collected in a department survey that had been painted on the gallery's windows for the occasion.

'Tipping Floor' Exhibit

The first of the exhibits had opened earlier in the day at the Marine Transfer Station at 59th Street and the Hudson River, which is to be demolished after the show ends Sept. 30. On the station's "tipping floor," where for decades trucks dumped garbage into barges, there was a 350-foot-long light sculpture made from the roof flashers from old garbage trucks, a trough containing 22,000 gloves worn out by sanitation workers last year, and dozens of tools of the trade, including antique wooden shoes once used by men in incineration plants.

"I love the idea of art outside the gallery system," said Ray

Kelly, a sculptor from the Lower East Side, who aimed his video camera at an enormous clam-shell bucket.

Mr. Kelly spoke over the din of six loudspeakers that filled the cavernous transfer station with groaning pneumatic lifts, squealing steel, shouting men and shattering glass — "industrial music" according to the shows' organizer, a self-styled "maintenance artist," Mierle Laderman Ukeles. She holds the official, but unsalaried post of artist in residence at the Sanitation Department.

A 'Barge Ballet'

Later, the show moved outside, as six barges performed a "barge ballet" in the Hudson. The ballet, most of which was not visible from the transfer station, was the latest in several mobile productions by Mrs. Ukeles. Last year, six street sweepers glided through a five-movement, 32-block "Ballet Mécanique" on Madison Avenue during the New York City Art Parade.

The pièce de résistance of that parade, a garbage truck sheathed in mirrors, reappeared yesterday at the SoHo gallery. Called "The Social Mirror," the truck illustrates the link between garbage producers and garbage handlers, said Mrs. Ukeles.

Other exhibits at the gallery were a 1,500-square-foot transparent map showing the locations of Sanitation Department offices; three piles of televisions on which videotapes of sanitation workers were shown, and an old, department-section office furnished in "mongo," discarded furniture salvaged by sanitation men.

These exhibits, Mrs. Ukeles said, showed that, "the day of the garbage man, of linking the man with the waste that is not his, is over."