

Mierle Ukeles at Feldman

Begun in 1976 by artist Mierle Ukeles and along the way involving garbage sweeper "ballets" on the streets of Manhattan, choreographed scows on the Hudson, a constant stream of newspaper, radio and TV interviews and countless other feats of logistics and promotion, "Touch Sanitation" had its grand finale in September in two elaborate installations—one in a turn-of-the-century pier at 59th Street and the Hudson River, and the other at the Feldman Gallery. Billed as "A Total Environmental Art Work," "Touch Sanitation" was in fact a perfectly benign civics lesson, enlivened by the incongruities of a screwball comedy.

Uptown on the river, Ukeles transformed a condemned Sanitation Department collection point into a temporary museum of garbage machinery and tools, including ranks of brooms, brushes, rakes and wire baskets and every conceivable style of tracker and truck. These ranged from a gargantuan dumpster on tank-treads that looks like a Star-Wars prop, to a simple and eminently practical bicycle pedal sweeper from Peeking, to Ukeles's own invention—a mirrored garbage truck that reveals the "garbage-people" (us) to ourselves.

At Feldman, the natural staginess of the steel-frame pier was repeated in a dingy mock-up of what is reputed to be the worst "Section Room" in the Sanitation system; next to it was a recreation of a modern "Section Room" with Nautilus equipment and clean bathroom. The main gallery housed the most theatrical element of the series—a mylar map of the collection zones of New York was suspended from the ceiling; the walls were covered with both stenciled and real clocks on different time-tables. The room also contained several columns of video-screens representing the seasons, and a teletype machine bracketed by flags. It looked like nothing so much as the War Room at the Pentagon, which I take to be Ukeles's point—garbage collection is platoon labor requiring year-round readiness.

But, real or facsimile and for all their detail, these environments were rather dull. What life there was in them was provided by the steady chatter of loudspeakers and TV monitors that served as aural captions to the assembled objects and simulated situations.

Several years ago, inspired to "appreciate" those who perform the endless and thankless task of maintaining the world, Ukeles set out to shake the hand of every Sanitation worker in New York City—hence, "Touch Sanitation." The tapes and videos record her encounters. She came armed with a smile, an earnest speech and a microphone, into which flowed the workers' frustration over pay, status, bureaucracy and most of all their anger at the public perception that it is they who are "dirty," we who are "clean." The result is a little like listening to a novice Studs Terkel, but despite the humanity of the testimony, the net effect is inadvertently self-satirical rather than radicalizing. The workers were evidently at least as bemused by Ukeles's naiveté as they were "touched" by her concern for them—and some were plainly embarrassed, suspicious and bored.

For her part, Ukeles, a self-styled independent, an "Artist," brought absolutely no sociological understanding or political conviction to her project. Thus the information she gathered merely illustrates the obvious, in what is otherwise a mildly ingratiating exercise in common courtesy. Indeed, more than anything, Ukeles's part in all of this recalls the society woman in the Depression farce "Our Man Godfrey" who goes to the shanties on the East River to find a "lost man" to show off at a party, and who in the process learns a little about class and hard times. It is in this sense, on the level of ordinary good will and good manners, and not with regard to any conceptual breakthrough, that one can say of "Touch Sanitation," that "it's the thought that counts." As for the rest, it's just overdressed.

—Robert Storr

Storr, Robert. "Mierle Ukeles at Feldman." *Art in America* (February 1985).



Street view of Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *The Social Mirror*, 1983, tempered hand-fitted glass mirrors and plexiglass on 20-cubic-yard garbage collection truck.