

Artist's work on NYC trash collection featured at Queens Museum

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Mierle Laderman Ukeles created a mirrored NYC Sanitation truck in 1983 and called it "The Social Mirror." A show of her work titled "Maintenance Art" opens Sunday at the Queens Museum. (MICHAEL ANTON/DSNY)

Picking up trash and keeping the city clean is an art form to Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

The artist who once spent months shaking the hands of 8,500 New York City sanitation workers has taken over the Queens Museum with a retrospective titled "Maintenance Art," which opened Sunday.

And for the first time, the museum is devoting all of its exhibition space to one artist.

Ukeles has been the unsalaried artist in residence at the city Sanitation Department since the late 1970s. Her groundbreaking, unusual work has boosted the morale of New York's Strongest, and she is one of the first to pair art with the seemingly ordinary toil of municipal workers.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the city Sanitation Department's official artist in residence, chats with a sanitation worker circa 1979-1980. (ROBIN HOLLAND/COURTESY OF RONALD FELDMAN FINE)

"Sometimes in our culture, we are so focused on success of a certain kind of people, like celebrities and those who become very wealthy," Ukeles told the Daily News.

"We tend to forget the people who are working all the time — the service workers who make it possible for institutions and cities to survive."

In 1983, she covered a Sanitation truck in mirrors to remind New Yorkers — especially those who looked down on "garbagemen" — that the trash it carried was their own. She also built a ceremonial arch out of thousands of work gloves. "I call it 'The Social Mirror,' said Ukeles, who lives in the Bronx. "I want people to know they are part of what goes into this truck."

Queens Museum President and Executive Director Laura Raicovich said Ukeles has taken on issues such as women in society, environmental sustainability and civic responsibility in her work.

"Her work is a guidestar and inspiration to new generations of artists working to engage social issues" Raicovich said. Sanitation Commissioner Kathryn Garcia said Ukeles' art also celebrates the importance of the work performed by the agency.

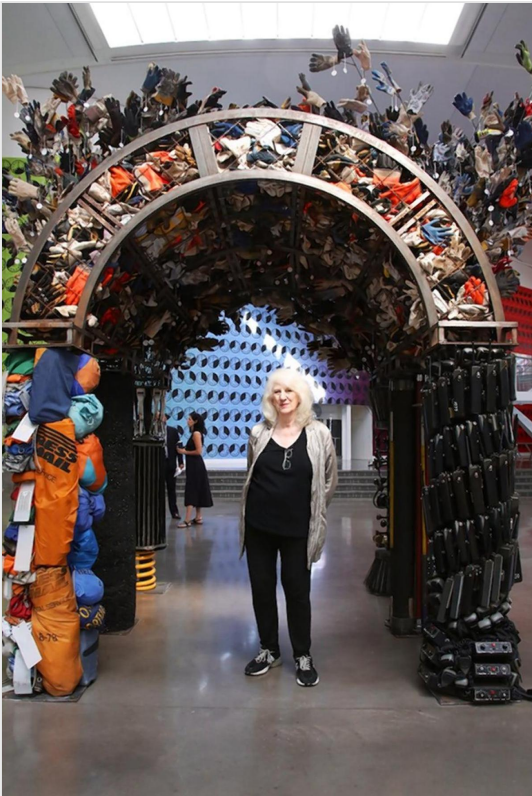
"Her art brought a new level of dignity to sanitation workers," Garcia said.

The exhibit includes a refurbished version of her almost 30-year-old piece titled "Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers in the New Service Economy." It includes thousands of used work gloves from city workers in several agencies including sanitation, police, fire, parks and transportation.

"They have this incredible loyalty to the work they are doing and it requires a reciprocation from the public who benefits from them," Ukeles said.



Sanitation worker Anthony Provenzano shakes hands with Mierle Ukeles. (MOLINARI, ED)



Mierle Laderman Ukeles' "Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers in the New Service Economy" includes thousands of used work gloves. (MICHAEL ANTON/DSNY)