

DEAR SANMAN,

Nobody understands enough about what you do, how tough it is to work day after day on a job like this, about how hard it can be in lousy weather.

I've been talking to sanmen for over a year: about "blood money"--involuntary overtime; "material"--what everybody calls garbage; "conditions"--when the people out there don't pack it right and you're stuck with it; and "air-mailing"--when they just toss it out the window. Blizzards; garbage cans frozen to sidewalks; "sausage bags" splitting on you; broken trucks; terrible, exciting streets; how all people make waste, and how some are wasted themselves. It's all there, and more. Being disappointed, fiscal crisis, back pains, families, neighbors, fathers, injuries, surprises, hidden needles, things exploding, rats jumping on your chest, sleet down your neck and back. It's about holding up your end of your truck team; about people swearing at you, not looking you in the eye; about doing a good job anyway. Commitments and how they lock you into things for years beyond what you ever imagined; about this City.

I'm creating a huge artwork called TOUCH SANITATION about and with you, the men of the Department. All of you. Not just a few sanmen or officers, or one district, or one incinerator, or one landfill. That's not the story here. New York City Sanitation is the major leagues, and I want to try to "picture" the entire mind-bending operation. To try to face each one of you, to shake your hand. In every corner of our City, the act of facing sanmen as public "performance" art.

I am an independent "maintenance" artist. I don't work for the city, the unions, the newspapers or networks.

This is how I'm planning the TOUCH SANITATION "performance". I'll travel to where you work. It will take 10 "sweeps" around and around to "hand over" the whole city. "Sweep 1" will include the first Sanitation district in each borough of the city; "sweep 2" will be the second district in each city-borough, and so on, as plotted on the map. I'll try. Even at 6 a.m. roll call sometimes. I won't disturb your work. The first part will start mid-summer, then a break, with the final part in the fall. I hope to invite the public to join me sometimes, to wave and shake hands with you also.

The Department will track me on the telex everyday I'm out with you, so you'll always know where and when I'm going to show up.

I'm also going to take photographs and make a videotape of the "performance" so that others can view it. To give you a chance, if you'd like, to tell the public individually about you, your needs, where you're at. You can participate in directing the shooting. Whatever I shoot, I'll show you a playback immediately, so you'll know what's on tape. There are no secret things I'll be doing; I respect your work rules and your privacy.

At the end, after many months, there will be a public exhibition for you, your family, your friends, and all New York. I'll let you know where. The exhibition will show the video and photos of the whole "performance".

Another thing, TOUCH SANITATION is for my kids and all the children in the City. I want to take kids along with me. I figure if they can understand the kind of unending work it takes to keep our City going, and if they can focus on what your everyday presence in their own world means, then they will have learned something basic and stabilizing; and this can be a more civilized, even friendlier place for them to grow up in.

What kind of artist am I, you might wonder? I handle regular art "material" and also all kinds of far-out "material", as you do. As necessary. If I am asked to classify myself, I say I am a "multi-media performance artist". The term "performance art" for me means creating voluntary actions with real people on-the-spot in public: a living artwork.

This term, "performance", is important here because of the similarity with what you do. You are out there "on stage" in the

public eye everyday, rain or shine, performing your work as "the sanman", no matter how you are feeling inside. Very demanding.

The Talmud, in speaking about how precious human life is, says: "Each human being is a whole world."

You do the most necessary work in the City. You keep coming back. You are probably the biggest experts on what's going on around here. I'm amazed when I talk to sanmen. They can tell me what a street will look like even before we come there. Magicians. Of all the people who symbolize the City as "public workers", you know the City. You feel it in your hands, in your backs, in your bones.

More than the policeman and more than the fireman. They're there to handle things gone wrong and out of commission. You're there to handle the "normal", what's going-going-gone, what keeps coming continually.

Without you, the City is a joke. Impossible. Pffffft! You know that, of course. Making waste--keeping the santruck hopper grinding away--is the surest sign that we're alive. Dead people don't make anything anymore. But what's forgotten is that it's not your waste or your fault. Many people want you to be their "grown-up" for them. They don't want to think about the other half of their lives, about their mess, their waste, their decay. They don't want to "face" it because they think they're supposed to be "stars" nowadays: always fresh, always "up". You handle the "down", the "throw out", the "throw away and forget it". Only, here in New York City especially, there's really no "out" and no "away". Not anymore.

Mister Sanman! Actually, you are a model of the man of the 21st century. You already work in the NEW way we all will have to act on planet Earth since cities' natural and fiscal resources are becoming increasingly limited, where there's no more "out" space. We're all "in" it together, and we must all take part in caring for our living places and, ultimately, for the whole earth. Or we will destroy it.

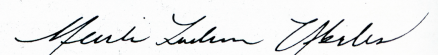
YOU ARE THE BALANCING AGENTS. You do hard, heavy, physical work, traditional "men's" work. (No woman has passed the sanman's or officer's entrance exam. Yet.) At the same time, you nurture, you "husband" the City. So we don't drown in yesterday, today. You keep the delicate balance between what's fresh and what's decayed. You carry Everyday out in your hands and bring it, refreshed, back here again. You feel pain and loneliness because of a gulf that has regrettably opened up that separates you from the public, for the reason that none of us understands these things well enough. Or how to celebrate the necessity of it. It's time for us all to learn to honor this balancing kind of work you do.

I've talked a lot about "hands", to "handle" waste, "handling" the pressures and difficulties of the job, and finally -- about "shaking, shaking, shaking hands". This is an artwork about hand-energy. What you are expert at, what you do everyday. The touch, the hand of the artist and the hand of the sanman. I want to make a chain of hands: the public--the makers and users / and the sanmen--the make-roomers and carriers-away. Hand to hand. A hand-chain to hold up the whole City. Or a web, spun hand to hand. Circling the City, bound round and round until it's all woven together. To put together the whole thing. That's a real picture of New York City.

I invite you to join me in making TOUCH SANITATION. I invite the public to participate by waving at you whenever they see you. Everyday. To make a citywide everyday wave. If I, a "maintenance" artist, can do it, everybody can.

Thank you sanman. Thank you for keeping New York City alive!

SEE YOU,



Mierle Laderman Ukeles

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