**Review: Garbage! The History and Politics of Trash in New York City**

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Susan Strasser

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was the oldest country because it had been in the twentieth century the longest. Even if their relentless antihumanism is still disturbing, the modernist images in the exhibition are quite familiar. So much so that, while the solemnity of the Adeane Gallery and the sense of tradition exuded by the Fitzwilliam Museum seem to make this an inappropriate location for an exhibition about New York City, there is a curious compatibility between exhibits and location: these images are (modern) classics. Accordingly, no concessions are made to user-friendliness and gimmicks: all we have on the walls are the prints, in a roughly chronological order, and associated quotations. Considering that these prints are held in a private collection and the relative rarity of exhibitions dedicated solely to prints, it is a pity that the catalog does not reproduce more examples of this important historical source.

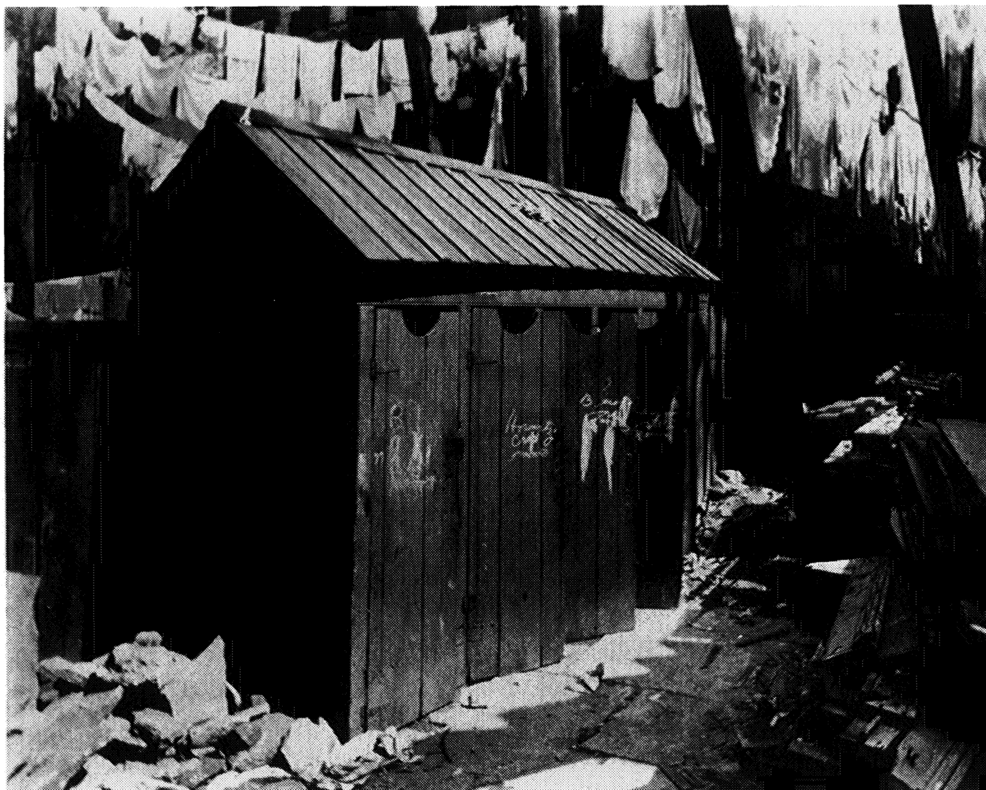
Ben Andrews
Douglas Tallack
*University of Nottingham*
*Nottingham, United Kingdom*

"Garbage! The History and Politics of Trash in New York City." D. Samuel and Jeane H. Gottesman Exhibition Hall, New York Public Library, 5th Ave. and 42nd St., New York, NY 10018.

Temporary exhibition, Nov. 12, 1994–Feb. 25, 1995. Elizabeth Fee, curator; Steven H. Corey, research curator.

*Garbage! The History and Politics of Trash in New York City.* (New York: New York Public Library, 1994. 96 pp. Paper, $12.95, ISBN 0-87104-437-4.)

Some New Yorkers anxious about the fate of the book in the late twentieth century might have winced at the huge banner emblazoned "Garbage!" that hung over the entrance to the largest municipal public library in the United States during the winter of 1994–1995. It advertised an exhibition, sponsored primarily by V. Ponte and Sons, the Pinewood Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, that was largely composed of books, photographs, and papers from library collections. Punctuated with an exclamation point like the name of a Broadway musical, the title on the banner may have attracted the public, but it misnamed the exhibition, which more broadly portrayed public sanitation and sanitary reform, reflecting the research interests of its chief curator, Elizabeth Fee. It devoted substantial space to such topics as tenement life and public baths, while downplaying significant details in the history of solid waste collection and disposal in New York City, such as the reduction system, which involved heating garbage under pressure to extract useful by-products, and city sponsorship of garbage picking. As a result of the discrepancy between title and contents, it was sometimes difficult to understand the exhibition's overall intent. Nevertheless, the exhibition provided New Yorkers with an effective historical context for contem-



A photograph of graffiti on a tenement outhouse taken c. 1905
by the New York City Tenement House Department.
*Courtesy The New York Public Library.*

porary discussions of public sanitation and municipal solid waste, thanks to its general conceptual sophistication and the richness of the New York Public Library's collections.

Declaring that "a city's history is written in its garbage" and claiming that New York "is perhaps the epitome of American urban life," the panel at the entrance to the exhibition raised issues of class, ethnicity, gender, and power, the "strands of social history" that constitute the strengths of the exhibition. The first of five sections, "Dirt and Disease: Conditions of Urban Life, 1840–1920," displayed such materials as Matthew Carey's list of people killed by yellow fever in 1794; maps charting cases of infectious diseases and the stables, privies, and nuisance industries that were thought to cause them; and Thomas Nast's 1881 *Harper's Weekly* illustration, "A Warning Light . . . ," depicting the Statue of Liberty as Death. A segment on tenements exhibited images from the Tenement House Department Collection in the library's Local History and Genealogy Division; one on home work featured photos taken by Lewis Hine, from the Division of Art,

One of the White Wings, the corps of street sweepers that George Waring, New York City's sanitation commissioner, created in the late nineteenth century.
*Courtesy The New York Public Library.*

Prints, and Photographs. There were some misleading statistical posters: a table presenting deaths from specific diseases between 1804 and 1865 in absolute numbers rather than per capita, a pie chart of New York's racial composition at the turn of the century that showed 97.62 percent of the inhabitants as "white" (as if that term were monolithic or uncontested), and a chart of deaths among tenement children from 1861 to 1865 juxtaposed with Hine photos taken between 1903 and 1910. Still, the primary issues got through to visitors; I overheard one group engaged in a heated discussion of whether tenants or landlords were responsible for the squalor depicted in the images.

The second section, "Public Health and Sanitary Reform, 1840–1920," offered more Tenement House Department material, including before-and-after shots from clean-up campaigns and photos of male and female inspectors. The women, we learn, were considered less effective because of their clothing, which restricted their mobility, and their occasional inclination "to let their sympathies run away with them." Most of the section concerned outhouses, toilets, public and private

bathing, drinking water, and sewers; it exhibited reports of city departments, more Hine photographs, and pamphlets about sanitary improvements.

The third and fourth sections focused on street sweeping and garbage per se. Col. George E. Waring, the city's colorful commissioner of street cleaning for three years in the 1890s, and the "White Wings," his white-uniformed sanitation workers, were central figures in the third section, "Who Should Clean the Streets and Collect the Garbage? 1860–1994." The White Wings were represented by a uniform, a pith helmet, and badges loaned by the Department of Sanitation, as well as by such ephemera as playbills from various productions of Philip Barry's 1926 play, *White Wings.* Material from the Women's Municipal League and other citizens' groups depicted residents' participation in urban cleanup. "Garbage Disposal: Sea, Land, and Air, 1860–1994," the fourth section, showed the options the city has used to rid itself of trash—ocean dumping, land filling, incineration, and recycling. Compelling photographs of ragpickers and scavengers by Alice Austen and Jacob Riis illustrated aspects of recycling.

The final section, "Contemporary Issues: Pollution, Technology, and Social Commentary, 1960s–90s," was a catchall, juxtaposing material on twentieth-century trash, cartoons about garbage, art made from found objects, and books and magazines representing the environmental movement. Its most outstanding artwork—and the centerpiece of the entire exhibition—was *Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers in the New Service Economy,* by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the unsalaried artist-in-residence of the city's Department of Sanitation. Thirteen feet high, the arch is constructed from materials donated by public service agencies, including gauges from the Fresh Kills landfill, mailbags, police walkie-talkies, street-cleaning brushes, and hundreds of used gloves. When the exhibition first opened, another Ukeles piece was on display on Fifth Avenue in front of the library, a sanitation truck she had resurfaced with mirrors.

Gottesman Hall, framed by arches, marble columns, and a carved wooden ceiling, provided an ornate and potentially distracting space for "Garbage!" The library's extensive collections gave the curators and designers much exiting two-dimensional material to work with, but few objects. They built partitions that effectively restructured the space, and they borrowed and created a variety of three-dimensional objects, some more successful than others. Clotheslines hung overhead in the tenement section; drawings of pigs and flies decorated blank wall space. Mounted on walls were a chair, some doors, a radiator, and a sewing machine, objects that might have been similar to ones found in tenement housing but had nothing to do with sanitation, much less garbage. A huge model of a wooden outhouse with a half-moon on the door and framed photographs mounted askew on the outside walls did not look like the urban privies in the photographs. On a giant rack hung two towels decorated with multiple euphemisms for "toilet." An enormous orange sanitation can full of normal-size ones contributed color and texture but nothing of intellectual value. In contrast, some of the constructions and some borrowed three-dimensional objects—notably the equipment loaned by the city's Department of Sanitation—genuinely added to the exhibition.

"Garbage!" offered stimulation for senses besides sight: recordings of the sounds of seagulls and of children playing and "smell funnels" that contained scents for those who dared to try them. The latter answered questions about the smells of city life, sometimes too positively—for example, "What could you smell on the streets of New York in 1890?" (violet-scented perfume, neither the first thing that comes to mind nor the point of the exhibition), and "How does a sanitary landfill smell?" (like flowers, not what I had smelled the day before on Staten Island).

"Garbage!" was represented in the library's gift shop by pig T-shirts and toys, tote bags made from burlap coffee sacks, caps and gloves fashioned from polartec (recycled plastic beverage bottles), bottle cap key chains, yo-yos displaying the recycle symbol, and books ranging from how-to manuals on making jewelry from waste materials to A. R. Ammons's book-length poem *Garbage* (1993). The exhibition spawned its own merchandise, too: a magnet, a student guide, an activity guide for younger children, and a catalog useful to scholars. The catalog contains an essay by Elizabeth Fee and Steven H. Corey, excellent reproductions of some of the exhibition's most effective images, a complete checklist of the items on display (including New York Public Library call numbers), and a bibliography.

Susan Strasser
*Takoma Park, Maryland*

"The Most Democratic Sport: Basketball and Culture in the Central Piedmont, 1893–1994." Museum of the New South, 2 First Union Center, 301 S. Tryon St., Box 200, Charlotte, NC 28282.

Temporary exhibition, March 4–July 4, 1994. 3,000 sq. ft. and 2,400 sq. ft. of basketball court. Pamela Grundy, curator; Peter Felker, project researcher; Amy Swisher, curator of education; Jeff Kennedy Associates, exhibition design.

*The Most Democratic Sport: Basketball and Culture in the Central Piedmont, 1893–1994.* By Pamela Grundy. (Charlotte: Museum of the New South, 1994. 50 pp. Paper, $11.95, ISBN 0-9640482-3-X.)

"Hoops & Goals: A Century of Women's Basketball." Museum of the New South, 324 N. College St., Charlotte, NC 28202.

Temporary exhibition, March 1–Aug. 11, 1996. 500 sq. ft. Pamela Grundy, curator; Angie Dodson, curator of education; Jean Johnson, curator of exhibitions.

North Carolina is in love with basketball and has been since the late 1800s, when Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) directors used it as a hook to lure young men off the streets and into religion. Basketball pervades the city of Charlotte. You see evidence of it everywhere. Images of the city's pro team grace city buses and buildings, and the caps and T-shirts of residents testify allegiance to Duke University or University of North Carolina (UNC) basketball. The men's teams at these colleges are perennial powers, and the UNC women's team emerged on the national scene in