

Placentite M, Vykoukal M (2009). Critical Reflections on 'At Your Service' (interview). *Drawing The Line*. Toronto: CASAZine

In an effort to ignite streamlined, hyper-functional lives with meaningful and surprise encounters, "artist-in-service" Markus Wernli Saitô offered At Your Service -- a series of site-specific interventions for each day of the week. For 56 consecutive days, rain or shine, between September and November 2006, everyone was invited to join unusual, daily one-hour experiences in public places in Kyoto, Japan. Actions included, among other things, a mobile tea ceremony and the occasion to express gratitude toward those whose services in cities are often overlooked and undervalued. Milena Placentite and Monika Vykoukal, Editors, CASAZine 4.

Critical Reflections on *At Your Service* (and beyond) by sMarkus Wernli Saitô

I like to distinguish socially engaged art from activism based on motivation. I find that activism tends to follow an ideological and almost missionary urge. Often, in the quest for a better world, acting occurs at the expense of listening, which I believe is instrumental for true involvement and shared authorship. Purely ideological action often entails a certain cynical separatism and I think we already have enough splinter groups in this world.

Socially engaged art is a critical practice that invites learning through enquiry, and as described by artist/curator/writer, Miwon Kwon (2005), it is activist in the sense that it is a model of public address. It is a process of dialog that enables people to realize the importance of their stake in the community. I believe that through dialog, which includes learning about each other's differences, we can learn to design our own environments, and discover that ideology is only one point of departure.

We live in a world where many people feel disconnected, and Japan is no exception. The traditional social spaces where individuals make contributions to the common good outside of commerce (i.e. neighborhood organizations, public bathhouses, and freely accessible squares) are diminishing rapidly in Japan. This social disconnect is reflected in outdoor spaces where everything beyond the fine-tuned shopping experience appears suspect. It is in this context that *At Your Service* reconsidered the service paradigm. The experience of collaboration – of accomplishing something bigger, together – has lost meaning in the market economy, and in an age where the public sphere is contested (from hyper-commerce to security paranoia), I feel there is something to gain from exploring the many possibilities in public spaces that remain untried.

In an interview with Eleanor Heartney (1997), the former director of the Public Art Research Institute in Tokyo, Sokichi Sugimura, stated that the "Japanese hate controversy, and they avoid it in art." He further stated, "public space in Japan is not contested as in the United States since the homogeneity in the Japanese population makes issues of community representation less pressing." That was a decade ago.

Today, an increasing number of alternative art initiatives are challenging this view. I believe that active participation in public can be part of a democratic process where individuals transcend self-interest to become equals in a debate.

I find that discussions about what constitutes art, or the practice of artists, are somewhat tiresome because I believe we are all better served by individuals interested in sharing. Through my work, I seek to provide what I call an *aesthetics of closeness*, which involves creating opportunities for people to experience and cultivate the empathy that already exists in this world. I find such experiences are especially beneficial when a bit of play and surprise is involved. Therefore, I see myself as an instigator of empathy; empathy motivates my work in public spaces, and it encourages me to create experiences for everyone interested. It is through my desire to produce accessible opportunities that I set up an eight-week schedule of activities for *At Your Service*, and it is why I sought to use a language that I hoped could be accessible for a broad Japanese audience (like the cute pictograms on related print materials, and the security vests that offered better visibility for participants and the artist).

A critically engaged art practice entails challenging traditional definitions of an artist. Conventional art endeavors have a tendency to split artists from audiences so that one [the artist] sends a message to the other. Art that is relevant to real life means a dialog to which all parties can contribute. As an artist, I can facilitate this process proactively: sometimes as a kind of playful trickster, sometimes as a self-motivated individual who has the courage to stand up for my beliefs – in fact something anyone can do!

Creativity researcher, Lewis Hyde (1983, p. 143) compares the role of the artist to “the boundary-crosser and joint-worker who shifts the joints or workings of society.” On that note, socially engaged art has political implications when practitioners chose to act in the dualities of being simultaneously inside and outside of the social context, and of exploring views concerning both what is good and bad. As an artist, I try to live in ways that heighten and address these dualities in order to create tensions and momentum for change. Since traditional definitions of an artist are problematic in this socio-political context, (especially in the case of 'signature artists' who appropriate reality for personal gain) I sometimes seek to avoid the labels "art" or "artist". By disregarding the status of art, I often achieve more trustworthiness while working with individuals not as frequently involved with art.

In a best-case scenario, my work offers participants access to experiences and resources that can inspire a process of small transformations. In the future, I plan to re-delegate access to resources to participants more often, which can in turn lead to increasingly democratic projects. In other words, I'd like to share authorship in order to shift my privileges of exhibition, performance, or funding in a formal way to others. In this model, socially engaged artists become a sort of placeholder for a more pluralistic expression of the participants. Meaningful participation goes both ways: the engagement of the art practitioner is just

the beginning of a trajectory where participants not only influence and co-create the work, but are also integral to it. Furthermore, audiences are directly invited to internalize a work and carry it beyond the primary experience.

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At Your Service inhabited the fine line between enticement and provocation by penetrating routine behavior and tapping into our desire and curiosity for doing things differently. The combination of open play and/or meticulous dedication to action invited people to find their own meaning by looking differently at familiar or even mundane things. Being a foreigner in Japan allowed me to push the boundaries of something as traditional as the tea ceremony, which I transplanted from the teahouse onto the street.

Both activism and entertainment tend to create a certain distance (and impasse of dialog) between artists and participants. In my work, the actions mean neither to dispense a certain truth about reality, nor to be a form of comedy aimed to make people feel superior for understanding subtle cultural references. Rather, the actions seek to contribute to everyday life and public spaces that otherwise can often feel faceless and stale.

While presenting *At Your Service*, I was concerned about being perceived as a comedian, so part of the project's concept was to provide room for guided conversations with participants before, during, and well beyond the actions (like the weekly story hours). As self-declared "artist-in-service", I regarded service not as an end in itself, but as a means to collectively reach a deeper understanding of life. Ideally, true service plays on the dualities of the server and the served as artist and community forge a single dynamic and interdependent relationship. Therefore, asking what each collaborator gets out of a shared action is essential to the work.

The (usually accidental) participants in the public actions of *At Your Service* often became living examples of the need to break down barriers to interpersonal communication while, at the same time, demonstrating the need to protect parts of our social, cultural, and spiritual life from the marketplace. Using public space to create time for strengthening kinship, for creative idleness, and for the slow maturation of ideas, allowed for the (re)creation of culture beyond competition and profiteering. Accordingly, had I presented my work in a pristine gallery, the actions would have been absorbed by many of the elements associated with the status of art. By utilizing the urban outdoors, *At Your Service* ruptured expectations about where certain types of activities and behaviors are possible.

While the goal of *At Your Service* was to produce work that was co-authored and beneficial to all persons involved, art that depends on participation in order to be realized still makes the artist accountable for any

experiential outcomes. However, by giving away some of their time, instead of spending money on admission or a commodity, participants become involved in acts of mutually reciprocal generosity. Lewis Hyde (p. 95) confirms that when conceived as a gift and not a commodity – that is when it is given away, shared, or spent – "art retains or increases its liveliness (like a human life) and becomes a means of transformation, a meaningful wasting of surplus."

It is important to note that documentation of participatory art turns action into objects, which can also be marketed and traded. While documentation helps to include secondary audiences, it also makes it possible for artists to appropriate ownership over social processes. Therefore, it is beneficial to record exchanges in collaboration with participants using collective reports in documentary fashion. Consensual videotaping of actions during *At Your Service* meant also that the camcorder circulated among participants.

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In our time of seemingly constant emergency and crisis, many artists have moved away from contemplative forms of representation to direct, participatory action. Socially engaged art can be viewed as a form of constructive anthropological research because it aims to create new connections; and if such action-based art can sustain new relationships, it might generate small-scale models for alternative social arrangements and value exchanges. Other social intervention groups such as WochenKlausur (Austria), N55 (Denmark), or HaHa (USA) appear to share this view and work with it in mind. Thus, socially engaged art can be said to start with a commitment to the possibility for social transformation through different social constellations and behaviors and thrive on a consciousness greater than the drive for individual profit.

At Your Service consisted primarily of gestures that hinted subtly at social and political issues. It offered a springboard into exploring ways of approaching strangers in public space, yet there were times when the actions felt a little undetermined to both various participants and to me. As a result, in future projects, I would like to focus on more concrete, issue-related interventions, which I hope will allow for deeper dialog while, at the same time, expanding frameworks for being and for enhancing courage in life.

Works Cited

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