

# SERVICE MEDIA: COMMUNITY AS COLLABORATOR

STUART KEELER

How can artists engage others beyond the accepted aesthetic norms of public art? Chicago offers one answer, in the form of an innovative genre that goes beyond typical North American ideas of community art. This engaging and collaborative form of public art, which I call "service media," is very different from typical group object-building art workshops, not to mention the simple plopping of a statue on the square. And it is gaining ground.

In service media, a service is offered by the artist to the community as a whole, and community members then choose how to participate in the completion of the service/art process. Community members change from art-viewers into public participants through their own active engagement and collaboration with both the artist and the art process.

Service media is a reanimation, but also an extension, of its predecessor, new genre public art. While the two have much in common—a commitment to working outside of the gallery

system, an emphasis on political issues, and an engagement with the general public—service media emphasizes *active* and *equal* participation between artists and the public. The most successful works have created eclectic teams consisting not only of other artists, but also of community members, merchants, neighborhood associations, and other non-traditional arts supporters. Service media projects model new process of social intervention based upon large social and civic needs.

In 2005, I appointed myself artist-in-residence of the Forty-Fouth and Forty-Sixth Wards in Chicago's Lakeview East neighborhood, where I have lived since 2004. I challenged myself to initiate collaborative art projects in this neighborhood, with the idea that I might be able to offer the community new views of their (and my) familiar urban landscape. Moreover, I hoped that the community might create a new vision, or several, for *itself*. I called this project Art 44.46, and my role as "curator" was to encourage, develop, and support collaborative ventures among merchants, citizens, and artists. The two guiding principles for the project were that artists must produce work informed by site responses, and also enthusiastically and earnestly collaborate with merchants and other members of the community. The project attracted many notable Chicago artists: Kevin Kaempf, D. Denenge Akpem, Stephanie Brooks, Juan Angel Chavez, Inger Lena Gassmyr, Tiffany Holmes, Judd Morrissey, and Mark Jefferies. Artist stipends were provided by the Lakeview East Chamber of Commerce as part of a unique partnership in which artists produced ephemeral works that were exhibited throughout the month of October, to coincide with Chicago Artists Month.

Andy Hall describes his Art 44.46 project, *Zip Car Cartage* (2007), as "a collaborative effort to engage awareness through good humor and dedication to the environment." In a landmark collaboration between Chicago's Department of the Environment and the Goose Island recycling facility, Hall was appointed artist in residence at the recycling plant for the duration of his Art 44.46 project. Partnering also with Zip Car (a shared car company), Hall encouraged residents of the two wards to use his free service to recycle their e-waste, household chemicals, and surplus paint. After either contacting Hall via e-mail, or dropping off their waste at the Lakeview East Chamber of Commerce, residents were able to easily participate in a recycling program—a change they met with great enthusiasm.

While it may not have been obvious to the community that they were participating in an art project, this kind of knowledge was not Hall's concern. Works in service media present ideas and concepts within an art context, but this context does not necessarily need to be made overt. Rather, the performance

Collaboration is working within the zone of confrontation.

— Trisha Brown, choreographer



Andy Hall, *Zip Car Cartage*, 2007. Making a stop in a Chicago neighborhood, the artist loads items for hauling and recycling.

and endurance action of the artist assists in creating a space for art in daily life. Service is the “medium” and community dialogue follows as part of a kind of chain reaction. The support structures necessitated by the complexity of *Zip Car Cartage* resulted in a citywide conversation in which the issue of collaboration in relation to the greening of the environment was the focal point. In his role as outsider and artist, Hall was able to transcend the political and social status quo of the neighborhood to make meaningful art on location.

Another Art 44.46 artist, David Parker, combined performance and sculpture to create a hybrid work meant to raise consciousness about water conservation. Acting as a “contemporary town crier,” Parker dressed in yellow rain gear and walked the streets pulling a rolling sculpture made of a rain collection barrel and a “floating cloud” of empty water bottles. Appearing three days a week throughout the month, Parker conversed with whoever approached, dispensing bookmarks printed with ideas to conserve water and the web address of Chicago’s Department of Environment, where people could learn more about conservation. This work gave community members an unusual opportunity to engage with the city, first by piquing their curiosity, and then by providing them a space in which to learn more about their neighborhood. The success of Parker’s piece was directly related to the level of community participation, and without it, the work would have failed.

Of course, there are varying levels of participation in service media art, since each piece is site specific. Artist Inger Lena Gassmyr created a work that required especially active participation: *Graknitti* (2006) was a collaborative piece in which the artist offered knitting workshops on the streets of Lakeview East. Advertised via a website, the workshops produced colorful “sweaters” for the trunks of trees, a process which Gassmyr envisioned as a way to offer “participation and learning.” Both knitting enthusiasts and first-time learners were encouraged to participate, and more than thirty people took part. The workshops provided a social space of commonality and exchange where neighbors could meet one another as they collaborated on a shared, ephemeral art action. In the process, the artist sought a connection with environmental issues like global warming, while also providing the knitters with an intimate medium with which to reclaim their urban realm.

As artists continue to extend their explorations of public space, this new role as service ombudsman is ripe for expansion. The dialogue, collaborative exchange, and experimentation that are integral to service media can stimulate awareness and change, with the goal to aid in the creation of a socially sustainable environment.

**STUART KEELER** is an artist of public spaces, active with all art genres, from temporal to fixed. He teaches at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago.



ABOVE: David Parker, in yellow rain gear, conversing and dispensing bookmarks promoting water conservation, 2007.

BELOW: Inger Lena Gassmyr, *Graknitti*, 2006. One of several “tree sweaters” created during community knitting workshops.

