

Diane Durant McGurren

I, Too, Must Understand:

An Interview with Artist Stephen Lapthisophon

Multi-media. Collage. Installation. The work of Stephen Lapthisophon can hardly be classified. As an artist, he almost prefers the designation of *poet*, considering his work a play with allusions, associations, and figurations much like the written form of poetry, operating in a place where questions are asked and important songs are sung. Challenged by close readings of Heidegger, Benjamin, and Marx, and



provoked by the transformation of cultural politics, Lapthisophon's work speaks to a certain sense of refusal—a refusal of such impositions as accessibility, eternity, process, and tradition. But as soon as there is a refusal, there is an embrace.

Raised in Houston, Texas, Lapthisophon's visual and sound pieces have been exhibited worldwide and are represented in the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. His visual novel, *Hotel Terminus*, was published in 2001 and is accompanied by the audio CD, "the bells," created the following year. Stephen has been an artist in residence at Southside on Lamar in Dallas and at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago where he produced the installation "My Tradition My Heritage My Voice." Upcoming exhibitions include a September 2008 show at Koch/Kunst/Galerie in Berlin as part of the Zagreus Projekt, an October 2008 installation at Mountain View College in Dallas, and a solo show at Conduit Gallery in Dallas in May of 2009.

Our conversation took place at Stephen's office at the University of Texas at Arlington where he currently teaches art survey and film theory courses.

Diane Durant McGurren: Let's start at the beginning. Every artist knows deep in his core that he has to be an artist, that he will go crazy

if he doesn't create. When did you know that you had to be an artist?

Stephen Lapthisophon: First off, I would say that I do agree with you, that there is an early moment when that does happen. I have taught little kids, and I think it's wrong to straight-jacket or pigeon hole them, to send them off to this one thing. But without question, I have seen the way some kids handle materials, the way they have certain sets of expectations of the world around them—they are either destined or doomed to be artists. So I definitely recognize that. In my own narrative, I would say that it's something that came in stages. I think in a broad, general way, one aspect is that I always felt that slight discomfort of being different that I think a lot of artists feel. I did take a lot of art lessons and classes in elementary school and always liked doing the things that were associated with making art when you're a kid. And growing up in Houston, I went to the museum of fine arts a lot as a child and figured out early on how to get there by myself—taking the bus and riding my bike. So I have distinct memories of seeing shows but then also of seeing what I think are probably really different things about them. There was a show of Frederick Remington's paintings that I saw when I was probably ten—they were all black and white oil paintings that he did that were versions of his regular western scenes—and I remember thinking that I had no idea what it meant or why he did it, but that it was a great idea. So I think that a lot of early memories for me would be of seeing exhibitions and works of art, not so much liking them or not liking them, but just having this revelatory moment that this thing is talking to me, this thing is giving me permission to think a different way—it was one of those kinds of connections that says “yes, I know what you're thinking.” It's those moments that seem retroactively formative.

DDM: What else was formative in those early years?

SL: I did see a lot of movies. And my parents weren't particularly sheltering in what I saw. I remember pretty early on seeing things that other eleven, twelve, thirteen, year olds weren't seeing, and understanding what made those things art, as well as seeing how they connected to the world—the way that it opened you up to a tradition of legacy such as film history—and thinking that I want to be a part of a history, of a legacy, of a lineage. I think people who don't

make art don't necessarily feel the burden of the past, either its obligation or its liberation.

DDM: I like that you used the phrase “burden of the past.” It gives a sense of a shared history and a shared community. But at eleven, twelve, thirteen years old, what do you do with that burden? What do you do with the realization that this art is speaking to you, giving you access, allowing you to be something other than what you thought you were going to have to be, what people told you that you had to be?

SL: Yeah, it's funny. My parents were both public school teachers. My mother taught all the various forms of history and social science, and I was very close to her father who was very active in politics and political life and often talked to me about his version of the world—which was fairly Left-leaning—but also just talked about things in bigger terms: this is here because this happened, and this happened because this happened. Things were connected. And so that connectedness really did feel empowering, that things were bigger than just having fun making a drawing. But then it really did, every once in a while, feel like I can't just know this one thing—I've got to figure out why it happened, and who this person liked or studied with so that I would understand what the whole thing was about. My mother and her father gave me this feeling that one needed to know about precedents.

DDM: I think what you're getting at is some of the difficulty in art, in interpreting art, and even at a young age, you seem to be wrestling with that difficulty. How does that carry over into your own art-making, this notion of difficulty and the responsibility that is placed on the viewer?

SL: It's something that I have struggled with a great deal, and I have gone in various directions with it. I think over the last five or six years, I have felt the most comfortable with the relationship between my work, its audience, and the difficulty factor. At this point, I am more at peace with it—I'm sort of reveling in all of those questions. But getting back to your earlier question, I would say that when one talks to non-artists, or talks to people in a general way, or to younger artists, about works that seem difficult to somebody, or are just plain

unfamiliar, there is a kind of defensiveness. And this brushes up against one of the important things for me, which is the play and roll of emotions in all creative work, but also in life in general. But that aside, I will say that I didn't have that feeling of defensiveness when I got to something that I found difficult. I didn't assume that something was a joke or a fake. I assumed that if I didn't get it, that it was my job to figure it out. And so I tried to read about things and find out what was informing the work, what were the connections. It made me want to get to a place where someone was pushing a boundary or a limit. So I embraced these ideas of something being advanced and being beyond what I might expect. I was interested in avant-garde jazz and experimental film and *barely there* conceptual art when I was in high school and early in college, and at every point it stuck with me that I embrace the idea that radicality in works of art—and as a governing principle—was something to aspire to. And then, coupled with that, I would say I did do a lot of work in political campaigns. So, early on, there was a level of my work that was meant to agitate. There is a certain provocation that is at the core of a lot of what I do. And I think that at various points, when I wasn't as comfortable with myself, or hadn't figured out the way certain things mesh with themselves, or the way that works of art enter the world, the kind of bland response or no response that I got from my work was difficult for me. But I thought that it was an unwillingness on the viewer's part to come to terms with the work, because clearly there was a lot of work that was more difficult than mine that was being well-received. And then I just realized that there were a number of things, works of cultural criticism, philosophy, that offered a way out for the emotional defeat of feeling like your work is poorly received. My motivation for making work is to connect, and I would like it to be "understood..."

DDM: Accessible?

SL: Accessible—in some fashion. But I've reached a point where I realize that it's going to be a limited audience. And I'm fine with that. I don't think it's fully an excuse, but I do think to a certain extent that the question of accessibility is a smoke screen for another kind of difference.

DDM: What do you mean by that?

SL: The works that I make rely on references to art history, to pop culture, to literary events, to events in my own life, and they're all blended together. And I blend them together in a hybrid way that maybe takes some unpacking, and maybe doesn't. But I try to package it in such a way that there's some fun or some pleasure that grabs the viewer initially. And when I talk to someone about the work, they usually have something that they *do* get—they get what's happening. They might not be able to cite the exact page where I've drawn a quotation from, but they get the gist of what's happening. So what I find most recently is that it's not that they don't understand or that it's too difficult, but rather the intention that I'm going for, the meaning that is driving the work, is actually refused. It's not that it's not gotten—it's that people don't want it. Because a lot of times I really am talking about a kind of discomfort. And in much of the recent work, I'm trying to encourage somebody to go to an emotional place, and it isn't really where somebody wants to be.

DDM: Talking about things being discoverable or not, accessible or not: there's a lot of obstruction in your work, so many layers of things, ideas that go unseen. What do you hope the viewer takes away from your work? What will they gain from engaging in your work?

SL: Well, for example, in November of last year, I did an installation in St Louis. It was a large art space that was in an old car repair shop—a contemporary feel, cleaned up enough to look like an art space, high ceilings. And much of my recent work has to do with leaving the process open, showing the residue of making. This piece was called *Marinetti's Heart*. And it was specifically about the ways the embedded, progressive ideals of modernist art and cultural practices either went nowhere, went the wrong direction, or were filled with questionable motives. And then you've got futurist ideals that touched cuisine, touched dress, architecture, poetry, painting, sculpture, all sorts of cultural practices, but at the same time were made with militaristic, repressive kinds of misogynist foundations. So, who knows what's in Marinetti's heart? In the installation, I did a lot of things that referenced late Romantic thought, progressive politics, Italian relics, Italian things that refer specifically to the futurists, and arranged them throughout the space with a bit of sound. And then a lot of things had to do with the ways that, like all great Italians, Marinetti felt that he had something to say about

cuisine, so there were some things in reference to cooking as well. To me, the piece had a lot of fun and delight in it. But it had its own disorderly and chaotic structure to it, and as people walked in initially, they didn't know *how* to enter. But then as they let their bodies settle and walk through, they said, "Well, I don't know what to make of this pile of coffee grounds." And so that was the sort of thing where what I *want* them to do is to say to themselves, "I don't know what to make of this little pile of coffee grounds." And then, if the body, or the psyche, is able to slow down and allow itself to feel vulnerable and say, "I don't know," instead of saying, "Well then, this must be garbage," they will start saying "Well, that makes me think of that, which makes me think of that, which is over *there*." So it's a process of relaxing, and I want to test people's limits of how much they are willing to work, how much they are willing to relax and trust themselves...

DDM: ...allow themselves to engage, as opposed to saying, "I don't get it, and so I'm going to walk away."

SL: Right. And again, getting back to food and Italy, it's like the Slow Food movement. I'm not creating work that does well as drive-thru, on your way to the gym, while you're in the car on the phone, listening to the radio. You have to be in that moment, aware of your own body, your own place in the world. You have to be open to asking for help, saying you don't know, being comfortable with not knowing, and working through those things. You have to be comfortable with process all together, comfortable with slowing down, taking the time to enjoy those kinds of moments. So I do try to give some hooks, some pleasure, so that someone isn't immediately pushed away entirely, but I don't mind being a little stubborn.

DDM: It sounds to me like this is why installation is so important—the show, the installation itself, becomes a body of work. Tell me about your installation process.

SL: Installation is very important to me for a lot of different reasons. For me, I think art objects are in a time of peril—market forces make things so expendable and disposable. So I embrace notions that go along with site specific installations because of the way they force people to confront an entire environment, slow their bodies down,

slow their viewing process down, engage with a total experience. I do a lot of work where I have to talk someone into letting me have the space for a certain period of time, and often that involves spaces with quick turn-arounds for their exhibitions. And so I might go to a place I've never seen and have two days or less to create a show, and I like that kind of challenge because I like drawing on what's around the space to bring it into the work. I like using the gallery space as studio, and I like the idea of creating something for a place in the way that it marks and commemorates the moment. I don't think of things as eternal—and so I like works of art that are ephemeral and have a vaporous, barely there, just holding on, momentary quality to them.

DDM: Well, given the limited amount of time you often have in a space, what ideas and considerations take precedence?

SL: When I go to a place, I often spend a chunk of time just being there, seeing how the light changes in the course of a day; if it's a public space, seeing how people move through it; seeing how the space is used; sometimes just listening to the space, walking around it; seeing what kind of difficult things are in it like a light switch that can't be ignored or a fire extinguisher that has to be taken into account. I like to incorporate all of those things. Designing a piece, I come into with a driving principal, but things always change. It's slightly improvisatory, I suppose you could say, but I don't want to exclude. So I like there to be an aspect of an idea that I am preoccupied with at the moment—a chunk of things that I carry around with me as objects or things that I like—in addition to the needs of the space. And whatever seems to be happening at the moment around it—whatever's floating about that seems to inform the space. And they all seem to come together.

DDM: Do you ever make changes to the installation throughout the run of the show?

SL: Definitely. Writing on the walls, marking on the floor, adjusting the lights to create this kind of place that is marked off, saying, this isn't everyday life. But if you pay attention to the things that are around you in everyday life, there are some interesting things there. So I definitely like to be in that sort of place where limits are tested. And then the piece is done. But I often build in aspects that can

change, be malleable, be adjusted.

DDM: In contrast to that sense of malleability, the blurriness of things: the general public, often non-artists, like to put artists into a neat and tidy box, to classify them by medium. If you had to put yourself in that box, what kind of artist would you say that you are?

SL: (laughing) Um...

DDM: And then you can break that box open if you'd like.

SL: Well, I think that installation art is a kind of poetry. It operates with a set of associations, playing with image and allusion and figuration similar to the way poetry does. I guess, at core, I'm a poet. I'm not skilled in the craft of poetry, and I don't think I am a particularly good technical poet, but that's what I think happens with a lot of the visual work, and especially the sound pieces. And I think that—as high-minded as that sounds—is the core of what happens. It's also informed by an on-going reading of Heidegger's work, and the place where he puts poets and poetry is where I would *like* to see my work.

DDM: What place is that?

SL: (laughing) It's a *high* place. It's a place where questions are asked. For Heidegger, poetry and thinking are inextricably linked. And it's the kind of thinking that is open, that clears away, that asks big questions, that sings songs that are important—a place of revelation, where language asks its own questions about language. That's always in the back of my mind. To me, cinema is the highest art, but the things that I like the most in movies are those magical, nonsensical, crazy, odd, disjunctive, poetic moments, rather than the great stories.

DDM: Much of your visual work contains text, plays on language—the viewer becomes a reader. Tell me about your piece *Hotel Terminus*, which is presented as a traditionally bound book. Could it be successful in any other form?

SL: *Hotel Terminus* is the piece that is central to a lot of what I do. It's foundational, like the book form is foundational. It could take other

forms, and there are two other pieces that I have wanted to do with it: a Robert Barry-type slide projection piece and an installation that takes the images and feelings from it and makes them manifest.

DDM: But those would be two totally opposite experiences for the viewer, a controlled succession of images versus a more random experience that you, as the artist, couldn't completely control.

SL: There is the other version that has been made, the sound piece called *the bells*, which is almost a soundtrack to the book. But you're absolutely right. Any of these things would be totally different experiences. But I think that different forms of retelling, or re-seeing, an event or a place can be rewarding. I think of the book as a mini archive, a kind of collection or dossier or folder of images that are sequenced in the book but have their own page identities. It's both "book" and "book as place." And as a place, it's a temporary place, like a hotel room—a temporary resting place where we bring our temporary baggage and move on.

DDM: And it's intimate and private—an experience—just like any other installation piece you talk about. It still demands interaction on the part of the reader/viewer. They can cozy up with it or not, but they're not going to get it if they don't get in there and...unpack their bags, just to continue the extended metaphor.

SL: Right. Absolutely. I've been traveling a lot, and I'm constantly thinking, is this a stay where it's worth actually unpacking and using the furniture or should I just live out of the suitcase for a couple of days. And these are all things I want the reader/viewer to think about—and to feel. And when I encounter people in lectures or gallery talks, I see them getting hung up, wondering what I want them to think or feel, and maybe that's the ultimate failure of the work—I don't want someone to come away knowing something or having to think a certain way as much as I want them to *feel* something. And to feel specific states or to fuse references to cultural events or to places in the past to see what's lost. And in those losses, to accumulate a discomfort—discomfort that promotes action. My work really is more about states of feeling than about being able to reconstruct historical references and quotations.

DDM: I'm glad you said that, because you do use a great deal of historical and cultural references in your work—sometimes directly from the original source. I almost hesitate to ask, since “appropriation” has become such a dirty word, with copyright laws and other legal issues, but what is your philosophy on appropriation, on borrowing?

SL: I definitely operate in the land of quotation, borrowing, thievery, stealing, referring—all of those things have different meanings for me. But in my defense, I know that there are outright copyright infringements all over my work—

DDM: (laughing) And you're okay with that?

SL: Yeah, but I have never disrespected any one else's work. There isn't any way anybody would ever see something they've done and see it repackaged or represented by me and be able to accuse me of claiming that what I'm doing doesn't involve their work. I almost always give attribution to where it is that I have taken something. And I don't ever use the things to profit from them. I suppose, in some highly circuitous way, my borrowing of something has given me a livelihood, and so I profit, but I feel like I'm honoring, paying homage to these things. I'm operating in the land of collage. Actually, to answer your earlier question, what I really am is a collage artist. So, hypothetically, when one takes a scrap of newspaper and uses the word “star,” and takes it out of context, that scrap of paper is like a quotation. But for the newspaper to hunt you down for the act of borrowing from that newspaper...does the newspaper own the word “star”? So I like to question notions of ownership, question the institutional structure that wants to own everything—to question it and reject it. And to call upon the sadness and pathos of an institution that needs to drain every bit of ownership out of a thing and make it only into an economic transaction—that they can't just say, “Oh yeah, you can have that, and make it better.” It's no excuse, but works of art thrive on quotation: Bartók quoting Hungarian folk dances, all the early modernist poetry of the twentieth century that was reworking other people's poems, Wordsworth incorporating Milton. For example, I don't know what the purpose is of some small town in Hungary pursuing Bartók to extract the equivalent of the fee for sampling. I find that abhorrent, and I try to push it. I take works and

extend their lives by putting them in a different context. I want those uncanny juxtapositions of the past with the present. It's an act of cultural criticism more than it's an attempt to profit by somebody else's work.

DDM: The text in one of your pieces reads, “Brecht was right.” What was he right about? Because I don't know, as a viewer, and I can no longer engage in that piece, except to laugh at my own ignorance, to perhaps walk away and read all of his plays and hope for insight into what *I* think he could have been right about—which, after what you've said, I assume you're okay with. But what do *you* think he was right about? What's the origin of that piece?

SL: Already, what you've said about your first wrestling with the piece is fine, appropriate, and what I would hope to get from an initial encounter. That was another touchstone piece for me. For the past five or so years, I have been doing these large signs, ink and paint on cardboard, that are supposed to look like picket signs that have seen better days. I remember hearing about organized protests in an American city where the protesters were going to use simultaneous group text messages as their way to reach a large amount of people. So, in thinking about the way we exchange information in public and private settings, and recalling my experience as a kid attending political rallies, I realized that young people really had no idea what a picket sign was or how to make a sign themselves. There was an activity that was lost. The communal nature of that activity, the making, and then the activity of carrying something around, was lost. Since a lot of what my work is about is a sense of loss, I wanted to make these signs—something that would question the role of an object as sign, as holder of language, as painting, drawing. They are definitely artful in the way they are made. So, in the way that I like to operate, I was walking down the street one day and a bakery must have gotten in a shipment of appliances. These huge sheets of cardboard were flying around on a windy day, and I was thinking about picket signs—and I've always loved cardboard—so I thought, okay, I've got to use these.

DDM: So, *Brecht*?

SL: The first message needed to be ambiguous, with an historical

reference. I'm often struck by literate, cultured, well-educated people and where the gaps are. I've got more gaps than anyone, but I'm intrigued by how we piece together our shared cultural literacy. And I felt like, at a certain point in my education, there was a time when I couldn't open a magazine without seeing a reference to Bertold Brecht, and I had studied a great deal of western Marxism, the revival of certain aspects of Walter Benjamin, and the place of the Left in our moment. And so I wanted something that was about the kind of ambiguous place in the world that the Left occupied and the failure of that in our time—the way in which a certain kind of solidarity in terms of resistance had been lost. I needed to find a figure to whom I could refer where art, cultural practices, and political goals meshed. Bertold Brecht, to me, was the perfect place. I did four pieces the same day: one about Gramsci being locked in prison; one about the source, which just had the first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*, "The specter is haunting Europe"; one about Rosa Luxemburg; and one about the Situationists. These were markers where art, culture, and politics intersected. The Brecht piece was the first because of that.

DDM: But what was he *right* about?

SL: It comes from an anecdote related in Walter Benjamin's chronicles, or his diaries, where he's talking about his experience being around Brecht. Supposedly, in the way of the base superstructure argument that takes place in Marxism—do you change the conditions of the working class, and the changes will produce better art, or do you make works of art that will change consciousness, and a new order will emerge—Brecht had a wooden toy donkey sitting on his desk with a sign around its neck that read, "I, too, must understand." The idea being, I guess, that the plays, the works of art and agitation that Brecht wanted to create, needed to be understandable even to a donkey, and by implication, any uneducated worker, for the worker to be able to be motivated to change his or her circumstances. And that works of art had to be accessible and understandable. I don't know if a worker would have gone to see the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and then gone out and created a strike situation that would have changed the working conditions of his fellows, but these arguments always come with high ideals, and who knows if they're successful or not. Even the implication of *his* sign, "I, too, must understand," has its own ambiguities. Brecht has

a great deal associated with him in terms of what he purported, his ideas about art, how the working conditions should be changed, and what the best way to go about that would be. Within that, he said things that were very structured and organized, and sometimes he probably had very confusing and contradictory messages. And so to a certain extent, I was trying to say that he was right about all of those.

DDM: (laughing) Yeah, I think I would have gotten that eventually.

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A week after this interview, Stephen attended a Bob Dylan concert and rethought his answer to the question of difficulty in his work. He wrote the following piece as an addendum to his previous answer, which is a resounding coda to the entire interview.

There is an assumption that artists have a responsibility to be accessible to all; this is particularly true for visual artists manifested as it is by the antipathy that many museum visitors feel toward "modern" or "contemporary" art. Museum-goers feel entitled to quick, easy statements and things that are readily "understood." For the most part, the reactions are emotional and rooted in a lack of historical perspective. Often, the works of art seemingly most easily appreciated by a wide audience hold a hidden, more radical, message than is suspected by its viewers. Audiences are divided and self-selecting—movies being a good example of this. (Although the casting of Adam Sandler in *Punch Drunk Love* revealed the way that audience expectation works in the production of meaning in a work of art.) Artistic practices have been folded into so much of the daily bombardment of sound, image, and text in our lives that it has become difficult for artists to engage in a truly radical strategy. Marginalization is not an option. Success does not bring more understanding. Novelty is the domain of the market. Repetition can be numbing.

An example of the difficulty of remaining alive in the face of the life-drain of market expectation can be seen in the world of pop music. Stars are created and their songs are recorded. Audiences seek out performances hoping to hear replications of their memories of the experience of hearing those recordings. Artists/performers are turned into automata constantly issuing forth assurances of spontaneity and

declarations of presence before audiences seeking truth in the form of connection with the creative act. How impossible is this after miles and miles of travel to stages across the world for a performer like Bob Dylan? In addition to the fixed memories of songs played and replayed, he is burdened by the mantles of cultural icon and “spokesman for a generation.” The potential for an alive, active, and radicalizing work of art in the face of an audience expecting merely to be *pleased* is daunting. Dylan works through this difficulty by re-interpreting both his own legacy and the cultural heritage informing his music. His history lessons are dark, aggressive, menacing, and real. The foreboding permeating his current live performances speaks to a future that is not interested in its own past and a life lived seeking only replications of a memory of an idealized mistake. Artists must jolt their audiences out of their expectations, not soothe them into a dull complacency. Mystery, surprise, stubbornness, and difficulty arouse the kind of discomfort that brings forth a quickening of spirit. Artistic practices must engage the type of activity Walter Benjamin referred to as “brushing history against the grain.” Or, as Ludovico Menschen remarked in a letter to Detlef Holz, “The greatest painting standing right now has its face turned against the wall.” The act of art can also be an act of refusal.