

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Found Objects and the Art of Stephen Lapthisophon

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Ever since Marcel Duchamp nailed a common coat rack to the floor (*Trap*, 1917), destabilizing our viewing orientation and undermining the aura of authenticity, artists who traffic in the world of everyday fare have sought out unusual framing devices for the display of their readymade goods. Stephen Lapthisophon is one of these artists who negotiates real things in real space. His work has always involved a kind of interrogation of everyday existence and found objects as well as found text often serve as the most suitable palette.

Found object art is uncanny in that it is both familiar (a recognizable thing from the everyday world) and unfamiliar (the thing retooled as art and presented in a gallery). The beauty of this fluctuation between the familiar and unfamiliar, the real and the imaginary, is compounded by the manner in which the ordinary is displayed. At Gallery 400, Lapthisophon choreographs our encounter with cardboard boxes, ramps, walkers, coiled electrical cords, and appropriated art. We trip across things, strain to see images, and maneuver around obstacles and situations throughout the space. It is all rather unsettling, if not ludicrous. Most of the work functions as a metonym, referring to a system of objects drawn from a registry of disability aids. And this is the catch, for Lapthisophon is legally blind and the work is about addressing sensory deprivation and its phenomenological impact. But what is interesting is how Lapthisophon transgresses the border between private and public by skipping between personal disclosure and social commentary. He wishes to speak to the problems of handicapped apparatus, which is often inconvenient or difficult to use, but ultimately he addresses larger questions about human access—sensory, spatial, and intellectual.

The project began with Lapthisophon's memories of exhibitions at Gallery 400 and the recurring image of the clunky wheelchair lift stationed outside in the lobby. For Lapthisophon, the contraption became an emblem of the disabled: dusty, cobwebbed, and out of place. But it also recalled a minimalist box, Tony Smith's *Die*, for instance. From here, the twin engines that drive Lapthisophon's process, the act of quotation and art historical association, revved into gear. He took actual disability aids and made them pointless. They became sculpture. He tackled social issues about handicapped experience, but extrapolated through a nod to post-minimal sculpture, engaging issues of space, site, and subject-object relations.

So at Gallery 400, a series of handicapped ramps end up going nowhere. Big cardboard boxes, decked out with wires and audio equipment, a reference to reading aids for the blind, emit garbled text. An aluminum walker dangles ineffectually from the ceiling above, and enlarged prints of Andy Warhol's dance patterns, guides for the "dancing impaired," steer the viewer straight into columns or dead-ends. In all of this, Lapthisophon free associates between industrial production and sculpture. The ramps look like Robert Morris pieces and the cardboard boxes like Warhol's three-dimensional work. The walker mimics the Art Institute of Chicago's famous Duchamp hat rack hovering in gallery 242 and the dance patterns are appropriated art about appropriation, transformed into minimalist queries on the nature of moving this way and that.

Throughout, Lapthisophon uses the language of art history to “fiddle with an idea,” as he puts it. Lapthisophon refers to Minimalism to underscore the precarious nature of the body in space, he uses Pop Art’s reliance on an increasingly artificial culture to address the nature of the prosthesis, and he culls from Duchamp’s conceptual game-playing in order to reinforce how meaning always relies on temporal and spatial contexts. Indeed, the hanging walker as a double of Duchamp’s hat rack suggests how the notion of a handicapped audience extends beyond the physically disabled to include the conceptually impaired—in this case, our inability to understand modern art. (Duchamp’s work is certainly one the most perplexing objects for Art Institute viewers.) Lapthisophon suggests that negotiating our way around things is matched only by the difficulty of negotiating knowledge of a thing. Slippage is on all fronts. There are some who can’t see, there are some who can’t walk, and there are many more who can’t know. Against the constraints of our various cultural systems—the mechanisms of power implicit in language, design, and art—we bump and stumble, trying to navigate and narrate a proper course.