

Aaron T Stephan's *Closer*

Closer is a performance piece for an audience of nine, created by artist Aaron T Stephan. The piece was performed on three different occasions for three different audiences—on October 30, November 3, and November 5, 2009—at Coleman Burke Gallery in Brunswick, Maine. The following is one participant's account of the November 3rd performance.

*"Loveliest of what I leave behind is the sunlight,
and loveliest after that the shining stars, and the moon's face,
but also cucumbers that are ripe, and pears, and apples."*

Praxilla

The nine guests arrive at the gallery, a large industrial space with stacks of pre-cut lumber neatly arranged across the floor. Nine metal folding chairs, arranged in three rows of three, sit in the middle of the room, not far from a pair of dimly lit plywood tables stacked with dinner ware, kitchen equipment, cooking ingredients, and bottles of wine. At one of the tables two women roll out pasta dough, hand-crank it through a pasta machine, and hang the strands of freshly made linguine on a home-made wooden rack.

In front of the chairs sits a data projector and a beat-up portable screen. A vintage wall clock to one side and a makeshift lectern to the other evoke a run-down college classroom. A little after 6 p.m., the evening's host and organizer, artist Aaron Stephan, turns on the projector, steps up to the lectern, and without further ado begins a typical artist's talk about his own work.

As the lecture begins, five construction workers set to work as well, their movements as swift, discrete, and precise as the assistants in a Kabuki theater. As Stephan continues his lecture--seemingly oblivious to the deafening squeal of screw-guns echoing through the space—the workers begin assembling the pre-cut, pre-marked two-by-fours into the standard framework for building walls, while the kitchen workers also go about their work, likewise oblivious to the others.

For the audience, however, it's a different matter. From the moment the first slide hits the screen, Stephan's commentary is all but impossible to follow, his words drowned out by the cacophony of power tools. A remark here or a phrase there breaks through the racket just long enough to raise hopes that the lecture might still be audible, but those hopes soon give way as the construction noises and the artist's talk continue to collide, triggering nervous laughter from some, uproarious laughter from others, and a mix of wonderment and incredulity from the rest, who are doing their best to keep up with the dissonant events unfolding around them.



An early piece of Stephan's, in which he took a copy of Emmanuel Kant's "Critique of Judgment" and fashioned it into a wrench to fix his truck, appears on the screen. Thoughts about tools...language as a tool...philosophy as a tool...philosophical "tools" vs. ordinary tools...form a mental chain that resonates with the events unfolding in the room. What good is philosophy (or an art lecture), he seems to be asking, if it can't fix a truck (or build a wall)? Can a wrench made of paper really loosen the nut on a tie rod? Or is the absurdity of trying to fix a truck with a wrench made from a book (or trying to give an artist's lecture in competition with a construction crew) pointing toward something else--about philosophy? art? life?

And then there's the question of what the workers are building.

First clue: one of the walls, six feet high and covered with a thin grey sheet of Masonite, is erected along one side of the audience. A moment later a second wall goes up at a right angle to the first one. Other walls soon follow (including one with a pre-hung door built into it) until the audience is partially enclosed in a 12 x 20 foot dark grey stall with the top and one side still left open, oriented toward the screen and the lectern where Stephan continues his talk.

To build a roof on the structure, the five workers carry pre-fabricated ceiling panels on their shoulders, as solemnly as pall bearers, and lift them overhead, laying them to rest and fitting them together with surprising speed and accuracy across the tops of the walls, securing them as they go.

When the ceiling is complete, and even as the artist's lecture continues, one of the workers takes away the projector, effectively ending the slide show, while another replaces it with a low riser and a stool. A third worker attaches two clip lights to the open beam ceiling while yet another leaves a folded stepladder leaning against the wall. A moment later, the fourth and final wall of the structure goes into place, enclosing the audience entirely in a dimly lit, much smaller, and much quieter space. From outside, the speaker's voice, punctuated by the methodical drone of the power tools, can still be heard, but muffled and far away.

The sensation of being buried alive--reminiscent of that scene in *Kill Bill 2*, when Uma Thurman's character, Beatrix Kiddo, is sealed inside a wooden box one nail at a time—is hard to avoid. Having a room built around you as you sit in it is a unique experience, watching as a space the size of a gymnasium, with high ceilings and large windows, is transformed into an airless, six-foot high enclosure that could easily pass for a basement storeroom or the interior of a padlocked shed in Purgatory, Maine.

It's not unusual for an artwork to disrupt our sense of space, time, or identity, but not often while we're sitting right in the middle of it, watching the work evolve first-hand. In 1961, artist Robert Morris made a piece entitled *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*—an ordinary hand-made wooden box measuring 9" square. Inside of it was a tape recorder playing a four-hour recording of the hammering, sawing, and other construction noises that went into building it; a conceptual mobius strip in which process and product became one. Stephan's piece is a clever twist on this idea, but adds a witty reversal, placing the listener/viewer on the inside of the box and the sounds of the live (rather than recorded) construction process on the outside.

The door opens and one of the workers comes in and hangs a black velvet drape on the wall in front of the audience. Another man, dressed like a construction worker but carrying two guitar cases, follows. He takes the stage, pulls out a six-string guitar, tunes it, and begins to play a haunting delta blues song that brings to mind both the music and the story of Robert Johnson. The singer's voice—powerful but subtly modulated, like his guitar-playing—resonates through the room, even as the muted construction noises echo outside.

With the low lighting and the black velvet backdrop, another transformation has taken place, transporting the audience from a nondescript college classroom to a Greenwich Village folk house or a Mississippi juke joint—all without moving us a single inch. Aaron Stephan...Beatrix Kiddo...Robert Morris...the Delta Blues...where is all this headed?

The presence of the performer (singer/songwriter Moses Atwood) raises another question: Is he one of "them" or one of "us?" He's clearly part of the performance but he's also here in the box, not on the outside with the ones who put us here. Between songs, he glances at his watch and alludes to the time remaining. Is Moses meant to play the part of his namesake, leading us out of captivity, or is his job to row us across the River Styx to another destination, in the company of Robert Johnson?

From the second guitar case Atwood pulls out a Dobro and performs on that as well, the sound of the slide guitar conjuring visions of live oak, Spanish moss, cotton fields, and wooden shacks (not unlike the one we're in). As the songs continue, the construction noises gradually subside until all that's heard from outside the box is a vague shuffling of feet and...the clink of glassware?

Moses Atwood introduces his last song. When it ends—to the warm and enthusiastic applause of the audience--he gets up and puts away the guitars. He opens the stepladder, places it under a hatch in the ceiling that hadn't been especially apparent until that moment, and then climbs up, inviting the rest of us to follow.

As the guests emerge atop the newly built structure, the final transformation becomes apparent—a railing has been added along the upper edge of the box, with a wooden staircase on one end leading back down to the gallery floor. In the center of

this impromptu roof garden is a table large enough for eighteen people (the audience, the artist, and his assistants), set with dinnerware, wine glasses, and candles, with still more candles placed on each of the windowsills in the space below, transforming the warehouse-like gallery space into its third incarnation--one of the most spacious, understated, and elegant dining rooms imaginable.

Wine is served, and then a salad of greens, sliced pears, and prosciutto. As the meal gets underway, the guests get better acquainted, raise a glass to the artist, the chefs, and the construction workers (newly reincarnated as waiters and busboys), and talk about the ongoing performance. The linguine, last seen hanging on the rack, reappears as the main course, an ambrosia of freshly made and perfectly prepared pasta tossed with cheese, herbs, and wild mushrooms.

Food and art--like food and religion, food and politics, and food and just about any other aspect of human experience—have enjoyed a long, rich, and complex relationship. From paintings of Eve and the apple, to the murals of Pompeii, to depictions of the Last Supper, to Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*, and through generations of still lifes, food has served as a metaphor for knowledge, desire, sensuality, celebration, wealth, poverty, loss, and a reminder of the fleeting nature of life, to name just a few.

In addition to food as a motif, artists' dinner parties and after-parties have been a staple of the art world from at least the time of Caravaggio to the latest art opening. Artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark (who founded the legendary Soho restaurant, "Food") and Rirkrit Tiravanija (whose early gallery shows included a kitchen that offered gallery visitors free servings of freshly made, vegetarian Thai food) have used food as a medium of social exchange and as a way of questioning assumptions about its role (as well as the artist's role) in society.

Closer extends this dialog, but with a metaphorical spin in which serving dinner is just the final stage—the apotheosis--in a complex fusion of performance art, architectural and interior design, musical performance, and audience participation; a multi-faceted performance piece that's designed to operate on as many levels as one cares to bring to it (and take from it).

Late in Aaron's Stephan's lecture--not long before the fourth and final wall of the enclosure went up--an image from his most recent site specific installation, *Vessels Absent*, appeared on the screen. Imagine a typical shipping crate, eight feet tall and made of plywood and wood strapping, but custom-made in the shape of a standing human figure, frozen in a contemplative pose and staring at an unseen object. Multiply this piece several times over, with each figure in a slightly different pose and "looking" at a different (empty) spot on a museum wall, and you have *Vessels Absent*, in which the containers normally used to crate and ship works of art have been re-imagined and re-engineered as if they were designed to hold the art viewers themselves.



Vessels Absent (2008), Installation at the University of Maine Museum of Art, Orono

A cross between a crate and a sarcophagus, these figurative totems foreshadow the key element in *Closer*, namely the artist sealing his audience in a box. While the containers in *Vessels Absent* only suggested the *idea* of boxing someone, the box in *Closer* did this in fact, and for a party of nine no less.

Like artist's lectures, the construction methods used for most installation art, music played at openings, and the meals shared at after-parties, shipping crates are both emblematic of the art world—a familiar part of its physical, social, and economic landscape—but at the same time rarely, if ever, thought of as worthy media or meaningful subject matter in and of themselves. At a time when many artists in search of fresh horizons are training their sights farther afield--toward history, the sciences, social sciences, cultural theory, new technologies, and so forth--Aaron Stephan's ambition, at least in the case of *Closer*, has been to use these overlooked accoutrements and marginalia of the art world itself as both fair game and fertile territory in which to play out timeless and cross-cultural themes of passage, transformation, and transcendence.

Mark Wethli