



 College of DuPage

*Amanuensis (I Hear a Symphony)*

## Stephen Laphisophon and the Gesture

The name is Thai — not the Stephen, of course, and the career of this utterly American artist began when he was an undergraduate student in the School of Art at the University of Texas in the late 1970s. There he quickly impressed a group of teachers that included the great photographer, Garry Winogrand, painters Otis Jones and Richard Jordan, and a young art historian, fresh into teaching, myself. For me, that was in 1976, more than a quarter century ago, and already Laphisophon was “working” in many ways on graphite drawings on large sheets of Arches paper, photo-based prints, and objects made of wood, paint, glue, paste and other materials hidden around the art building. Sometimes these works were made to be seen overtly by viewers who knew they were looking at a “work of art.” Other times, one stumbled on them or they were told by an excited Stephen that they existed to be found — thus becoming a covert viewer.

Since that time, Chicago has been his home and his work has taken various turns. First, toward comedic performance with a few friends in Chicago’s famous “scene” and, then, into the sophisticated lit-crit byways of grad school at Northwestern University. Wine occupied his time for a while — and he could talk eloquently about Barolo or Burgundies or the whites of northern Portugal. All of this — and a long-term marriage with a painter-professor — formed a life-long artistic education that has produced one of the best-read, most literary, and most subtle of artists working now.

In the past few years, Laphisophon began to test his private education by mounting installations and/or performances in various places in Illinois and Texas. These have included universities, where he has read from his texts and those of other authors he has admired, in public “art spaces” and in the streets. These have encompassed a wide range of issues from sight/insight/blindness to intertextuality and originality. Because Laphisophon has had serious physical problems in the last five years, his work has taken on the very nature

of “art” and “text” in ways that are all the more poignant because the maker of the art and the texts can “see” what he makes or writes only with help and in ways that are essentially impossible to characterize. Thus, for Laphisophon, sight is achieved rather than assumed, as it is for most artists.

For this reason alone, it is a logical step for Laphisophon to take on the fretful relationship between art and gesture, between thinking and making. I remember hidden or imbedded gestures in many of his graphite drawings of the late 1970s. I also remember seeing the results of his “performance” installations on two occasions in Dallas, where I live and work. Inks, paste and water are used by Laphisophon as he “writes” and “draws” and performs “calligraphy” on walls, ceilings and even floors, feeling the surfaces of the room with his arms and hands. Again, the results are known to Laphisophon mentally and physically (through the memory of his gesture) rather than optically. Hence, we, as “viewers” experience them in ways essentially different than their maker.

With *Amanuensis (I Hear a Symphony)*, Lapthisophon takes these earlier experiments to a new level, adding to them the "fourth dimension" of sound, with which he has experimented in other contexts for decades. His concern, expressed in the title, is with two separate issues: taking dictation from an authority figure (an amanuensis means, roughly, a dictation taker or a manuscript copier) and hearing symphonic sounds, presumably produced by others. In both cases, the artist assumes a role which is the opposite of "author" or "authority." Yet, in the parenthetical subtitle, he asserts himself as "I," suggesting, perhaps, that the symphony he hears could be "in his head." And, as if this "I" isn't authorial enough, the entire visual portion of the work is an immense signature with the name of the artist, Stephen Lapthisophon, written in vast cursive letters that fill the wall.

What does all this signify? Many things. First, that all art is "signatory" or personal and that it is performed in some immediate way by its maker. Just as the florid "Picasso" that gives thousands of painted surfaces value and "identity," so now this entire

wall becomes a "SLapthisophon." The artist is, in effect, becoming the work of art by allowing his calligraphic name to be the work of art. Like Duchamp, who hired a "sign" painter to "sign" a painting in *T'um*, like Picasso whose endorsed check became a "Picasso," Lapthisophon "signs" the wall so that it and its context becomes his "work of art." Yet, rather than doing so out of sheer hubris, the artist/performer entitles the work so as to force us to think of him as a "scribe" or a "copyist" rather than a maker of original forms. Thus, the "signatory" aspect of the work of art has deep resonance.

Then, we have the gestural aspect of the work. And, in this, *Amanuensis* raises issues that have even greater historic and intellectual depth in the history of art. From the outlined hands and graphic bison of prehistoric painters to the magnified gesturals of the abstract expressionists (or, as Irving Sandler called them, gestural abstractions) in the late 1940s and early 1950s, art "making" has involved a science of gesture, whereby the ideas or "intentions" of the artist are translated by the body into their physical embodiment. In this way, an

entire strand of art, both western and eastern, relates closely to performance. We have to work very little to recall the bravura painting demonstrations of Fragonard or Sargent or to remember that Manet liked to have an audience when he painted. And every portrait painter, as we know all too well from Velasquez and Goya, makes their works of art in the very presence of their patrons or sitters. Imagine Philip IV watching a painter work for hours a day.

For Lapthisophon, who knows well the literature about painting as performance and the corresponding literature about calligraphy, gesture is of particular importance, because he literally "sees" with his body when he makes gesture work. For him, gesturing is literally seeing with the body, because the body "remembers" the duration and scale of its action. In many senses, SLapthisophon has danced himself an identity, however temporarily, as he performs his name. He has also reminded us, however, of the fact that we "learn" our signatures when we learn cursive writing in school. They are, in this way, rehearsed a thousand times as we sign letters, write checks and

John Hannah (as William Wordsworth) and Emily Woof (as Dorothy Wordsworth), his amanuensis from the film *Pandaemonium*, directed by Julien Temple (2000).



authorize payments. Our “signature” is less our identity than its signifier, but each is absolutely original.

It is perhaps best to conclude with a florid, but important passage from the single greatest art historical essay on gesture, an essay on the “hand” in art by the French art historian

Henri Focillion. “The hand wrenches the sense of touch from its merely receptive passivity and organizes it for experimental action ... Because the hand fashions a new world and leaves its imprint everywhere upon it, it struggles with the very substance it metamorphoses and with every form it transfigures. Trainer of man,

the hand multiplies him in time and space.”

So too does SLapthisophon’s “hand made” (or “body made”) signature.

**Richard Brettell, Ph.D.**  
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**“Or barely, hereby,  
in the form of the most  
improbable signature.”  
Or, won’t the real Slim  
Shady please stand up?**

When most of us think of a “signature,” we think of the product of a person manually writing his name on a document. Actually, the law recognizes a much broader range of symbols as valid signatures. The law generally accepts any mark or symbol that is executed or adopted by a person with the intention to authenticate a particular document. The intent of the person applying the symbol or mark is much more important than the form of the mark. Accordingly, a signature can be an “X,” initials or a stamp of citational grafting that belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and that constitutes every mark as writing even before and outside every horizon of semiolinguistic communication; as writing, that is, as a possibility of functioning cut off, at a certain point, from its “original” meaning, from its belonging to a saturable and constraining context.

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), small or large unity, can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is outside its context, but, on the contrary, to polite notions of what is permissible in the presentation of original thought, our statements, our reflections on various subjects should not be stolen from other sources. Unless properly attributed, our thoughts presented as writing, works of art, music are always original — our own creations and not the property of others. The question has been problematized by many: either in fields of literary theory or simply by legal minutiae relating to the “sampling” of music. Whether attempting to capture the imagination of the buying public through the acquisition of an exciting Internet address, or through the affectation of a particularly special style of dress or mode of speech, originality is held as a valuable commodity to members of contemporary society.

Identity, “authentic” experience is sought after, cherished by and argued about by creative individuals seeking to guard their “intellectual property.” As representative citizens, writers and musicians offer models of individual expression. Youth culture prizes the expression of distinct styles and creation of original modes of behavior. Of course, as styles change and the next fashion becomes popular, it becomes difficult to truly distinguish oneself while conforming to the current style of unique expression. No one wants to feel like a robot — aping the styles of the crowd for the sake of conformity; and rebellion is natural urge. But how can one rebel when everyone else is doing so in the same manner as all the rest of this restless, rebellious society. Safety in numbers, rebellion in a crowd, expression of individuality in the proper style — this is the group imagined by Eminem who *“talk like me, act like me, dress like me and cuss like me ...*

*“My English teacher wanted to  
 flunk me in junior high  
 Thanks a lot; next semester I’ll be  
 thirty-five  
 I smacked him in his face with an  
 eraser, chased him with a stapler  
 and stapled his nuts to a stack of  
 paper (Owwwwwwwww!)  
 Walked in the strip club, had my  
 jacket zipped up  
 Flashed the bartender, then stuck  
 my d\*\*k in the tip cup  
 Extraterrestrial, runnin over  
 pedestrians  
 in a spaceship while they screamin:  
 “LET’S JUST BE FRIENDS!”  
 Ninety-nine percent of my life  
 I was lied to  
 I just found out my mom does more  
 dope than I do (Damn!)  
 I told her I’d grow up to be  
 a famous rapper  
 Make a record about doin drugs and  
 name it after her (Oh thank you!)  
 You know you blew up when the  
 women rush your stands and try  
 to touch your hands like some  
 screamin Usher fans (Aaahhhhhh!)  
 This guy at White Castle asked for  
 my autograph  
 (Dude, can I get your autograph?)  
 So I signed it: ‘Dear Dave, thanks  
 for the support, A\*\*\*\*\*E!’ ”*

A given signature may not be used for all of the aforementioned purposes. The circumstances surrounding the application of a signature dictate the purposes for which it is used. For instance, a person receiving a personal letter is only concerned with the authentication function of a signature. On the other hand, a person who has entered into an agreement with another party looks to that party’s signature as a means to (i) authenticate the document, (ii) show that the other party has agreed to the terms set forth in the written document, and (iii) preclude the other party from repudiating the agreement (the other party would have to show that his signature was forged in order to avoid the nonrepudiation function of a signature).

The curious case of the hip-hop artist Eminem presents a matrix of self-identifying gestures, aliases, confusion and conflation of identity and other moves to demonstrate, or “authenticate” experience. The modes of representation (in both structural as well as colloquial terms) range from the engagement of

textual strategies to problematize the relationship between spoken and written word, deployment of masks and invented personas to play with and inversion of permissible public language. Eminem’s music is played on radio stations directed primarily at an audience of young teens, filled with dance music, attempting to hybridize black, Latino and young white kids through a conflation of fashion, electronic beat and youth slang to present exactly what is happening now. The mixture relies on the welcoming of different cultures, the championing of an imagined underclass and promotion of a kind of freedom through the inclusiveness of hip-hop culture. The fantasy element allows young girls to explore emerging sexuality through play with explicit address of sexual tension and gives teen boys a chance to express power through adoption of gangster disguises and dangerous language mostly bleeped off radio play. The fantasy requires the application of the imagined poses of a presumed underclass in order to make exotic otherwise drab and ordinary lives. The tendency carried the slang word “slumming” and is seen in various

forms of contemporary culture from linguistic switching practiced in sports slang to the portrayal of raw, authentic potency in the movie *American Pimp*. The familiar play in the field of an other in order to add danger, fantasy and power is combined in Eminem's music with virulent misogyny, homophobia and the familiar threat of violence in order to call attention to his unique voice. His imagined courage is thought to be in his willingness to be so unwelcoming, not egomaniacal as a leader of his own gang but simply hateful, toppling the commercial fantasy of disenfranchised youth of all races and gender uniting under the hip-hop banner. The anti-social attitude is neither new nor interesting, but as a figure of desperate emptiness he seems exemplary of a type of search for identity, which can be seen in various forms throughout contemporary discourse.

Applying a signature to a writing or document accomplishes the following:

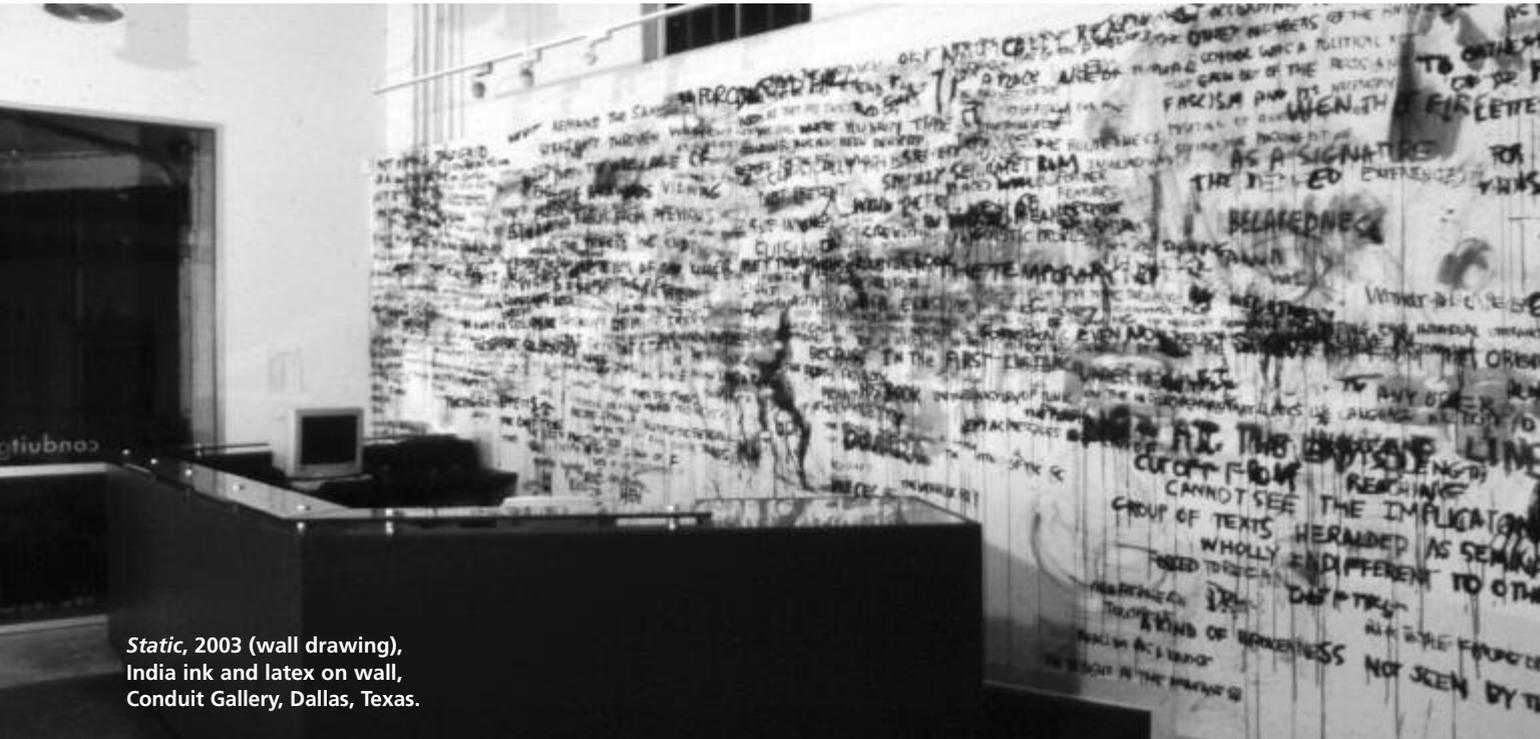
Authentication: A signature identifies the source of a particular document, thereby providing assurance as to the authenticity of that document;

Nonrepudiation: A signature precludes the person applying the signature from later denying that he sent the signed document or that he approved of its contents; and

Assent: With respect to a written agreement between two or more parties, a signature memorializes a party's approval of the terms or contents of the writing.

Use of naughty words and sexually explicit situations in rap music is common enough to be thought of as more of a requirement than an anomaly. Eminem's songs fulfill the necessary requirements and in their most commonly available form on mainstream radio, their censored versions do not suffer in transmission. The elided references are easy to restore and the complicated rhyme schemes become almost cleverer with bleeps and gaps. Depending on the financial resources of the teen listening audience or their access to the Internet the censored songs on the radio become even more elusive, dangerous in their forbidden format. It makes it more attractive to become part of a community who *"talks like me,*

*acts like me, dresses like me and cusses like me."* Assent to this community integrates pseudonymous identification, and desperation to mark this territory with anything but oneself. Marshall Bruce Mathers III seems an almost overly improbable given name for the arrogant rapper. Eminem's first popular hit squeaked out the refrain, *"My Name Is, My Name Is, My Name Is ... "* over and over only to have the confused iteration answered with SLIM SHADY! Displacement and irony replace each other. "Mathers" conjures up the whitest of white children in the form of Jerry Mathers as The Beaver; Eminem himself dyes his hair white deploying a vanilla cover over a persona, which wants to pretend to have a solid chocolate core. The M&M candies are marked, stamped by their name, M after M after M after M over and over in case some mistake in identification might be made. The candies themselves seem to be more enlightened than the rapper, at least manifesting themselves in a rainbow of colors. Eminem's vision repudiates the United Colors of Benetton for its weak social conscience of embrace of



**Static, 2003 (wall drawing),  
India ink and latex on wall,  
Conduit Gallery, Dallas, Texas.**

tolerance. Identity crisis is heightened by Eminem's biggest hit which wanders across the cultural landscape positioning him in full Bad Boy superiority but still lamenting, "*Won't the real Slim Shady please stand up? Please stand up!*"

As the world uses the Internet for an increasing number of communications and transactions that have heretofore required paper-based documentation, the legal community has raced to create the legal framework to facilitate

this shift. One of the hallmarks of our system of commerce is the ability of individuals to enter into private transactions. In order for such a system to flourish, each party to a transaction must be assured that the other party will be held to

the terms of their agreement and, likewise, a recipient of a written communication must have some assurance of the origin of the document. Signatures provide these assurances, thereby serving as the underpinning of our system of commerce.

“As active agents in contemporary culture, we would like to think of ourselves as autonomous beings, productively seeking new experiences rewarded for our efforts and marking our time and place with meaningful actions.”

The notion of originality and individual creation has been challenged on many fronts. Eminem stands off all the other “Slim Shadies” who are just imitating in synthesized music sampled from other records, with gestures appropriated from black culture. Far removed from its original source “the motive for metaphor” lies clouded in commercial production and reproduction of reproduction. Debate over copyright law mixes with “free” access to Internet

communication and legal battles over music “stolen” from record companies. Talk of virtuality and global communication speed alongside the fear of fair payment for all of the electronic activity filling bank accounts today. Desperate measures to mark and make payable all form of human thought and experience result in the hubris of conflict over ownership of the human gene code. Copyrights of the language of the patent statute signed both electronically and on paper in a ceremony covered and carried worldwide via Internet and television (but later reported on in the newspaper) will be disputed by attorneys from various jurisdictions.

The motive for metaphor, shrinking from  
The weight of primary noon,

The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer  
Of red and blue, the hard sound-  
Steel against intimation-the sharp flash,  
the vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

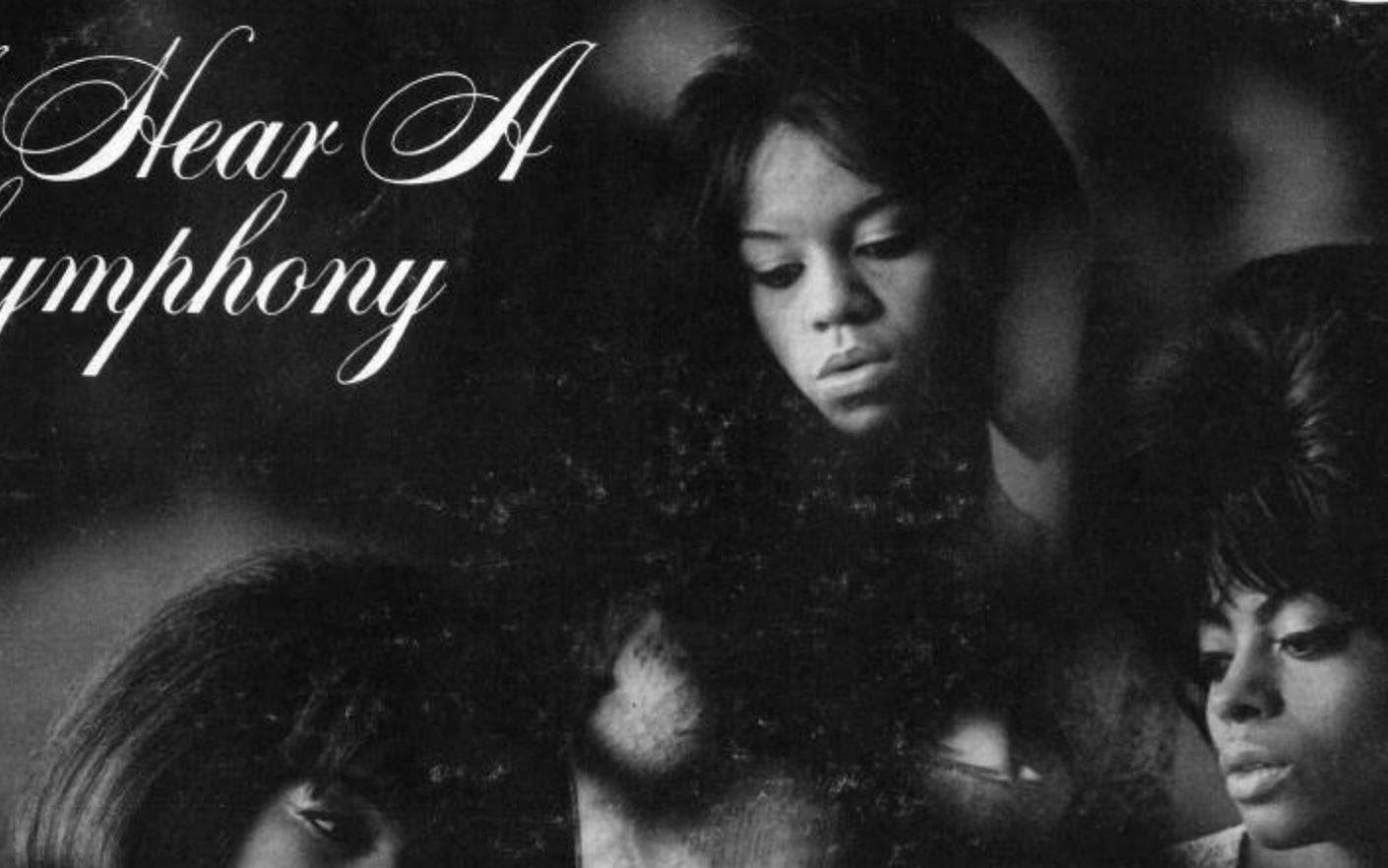
### **Stephen Lapthisophon**

**Stephen Lapthisophon** is a multimedia artist and writer whose most recent solo exhibitions include *Static* at Conduit Gallery in Dallas, TX (2003), *With Reasonable Accommodation* at Gallery 400 in Chicago (2002) and *Defense d’Afficher* at TBA Exhibition Space (2000), also in Chicago. His work has also been seen at Artists Space in New York, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and in Chicago at Gallery 312, N.A.M.E. and Randolph Street galleries. Lapthisophon is also represented in the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

In January 2004 his sound piece *Anonymity* could be heard on State Street in Chicago as part of the public installation “Sound Canopy” sponsored by the Hyde Park Art Center. As a resident artist at the Experimental Sound Studio in 2002, Lapthisophon produced the audio CD, the bells, a soundtrack to his visual novel, *Hotel Terminus*, published by White Walls the previous year. He has also been a guest lecturer in the “Artists Connect” series at the Art Institute of Chicago as well as at Northwestern University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he earned an M.F.A. in 1979.

# THE SUPREMES

*I Hear A  
Symphony*



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Barbara Wiesen  
Gahlberg Gallery, Director and Curator

***Amanuensis (I Hear a Symphony)***

*An installation by Stephen Lapthisophon*

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**Gahlberg Gallery**

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