

Untitled Ninth Piece: An Elegy to Lawrence Steger

by Phillip Barcio

John Thomure never met Lawrence Steger face to face. Thomure's relationship with the legendary Chicago performance artist began in the autumn of 2017, in the stacks of the Logan Square branch of the Chicago Public Library, where Steger reached out to Thomure from beyond the grave.

"I stumbled across this book entitled *Performance and Place*," says Thomure. "It had a chapter by a former teacher of mine, Matthew Goulish [co-founder of the collaborative performance group Goat Island], called 'The Ordering of the Fantastic: Architecture and Place in the Work of Lawrence Steger.'"

Only two years old in 1999 when Steger died from complications associated with AIDS, Thomure was an aspiring performance artist himself. This book chapter, encountered by happenstance, made him feel connected to Steger through time. Most fascinating, he says, was that "the chapter included an excerpt from Lawrence's notebooks detailing the aspects of an unfinished performance."

Steger called the performance simply "Untitled Ninth Piece." Its description made little sense to Thomure at first. It was a study of two seemingly diametrically opposed personalities: architect Mies van der Rohe (creator of the famed International Style, which, among other things, helped define the modern look of downtown Chicago) and Mitchell Szewczyk, a folk artist who created the House of Crosses (a no longer extant two-story house at 1544 W. Chestnut in Chicago's Noble Square neighborhood, covered entirely in handmade crucifixes, shields, cryptic messages and tributes to celebrities).

To better understanding the Mies—Szewczyk connection, Thomure began a deep dive into Steger's life and work.

"The more I researched, the more I realized what connects Steger, Mies and Szewczyk is that they are entirely self-taught in regard to their art," Thomure says. "Steger's work was examining what it means to be an autodidact."

Van der Rohe taught himself architectural design while working at an architectural firm. Szewczyk taught



Lawrence Steger performing in the 1994 P-Form Circus, "Psycho Circus: a performance art marathon and faux psychic fair," (Source: Event calendar—September/October 1994).

himself woodworking, then covered first his bedroom walls, and eventually his entire house, with crosses, in part to discourage gang activity in his neighborhood. Steger topped them both, convincing Antioch College in Ohio to let him create a performance art curriculum from scratch, of which he became the first graduate.

Even today, the performance art medium is ill-defined, perhaps on purpose. Too anarchic to be considered Fine Art, and too capricious to fit in the Performing Arts, it occupies its own idiosyncratic, hallowed, sweaty, irreverent, smart, honest, raunchy, beautiful ground where most members of polite society fear to tread. The only contact many members of

today's Fine Art world have with performance artists is at international art fairs like Frieze, Art Basel, or EXPO Chicago, where rogue representatives of the form periodically wander about, wearing masks, perhaps, or dragging chains, and making this or that amorphous commentary about the charade they are passing through, judging, and yet love to be a part of.

Yet surely performance remains at least as crucial to contemporary art as it is to life. As the malcontent Jaques stated more than four centuries ago in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*:

"All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts..."

Lawrence Steger made his first entrance in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1961. After graduating from Antioch in 1984, he moved to Chicago, earning his MFA in performance from the School of the Art Institute in 1986. Over the next 13 years, he played many parts, writing and performing works about violence, death, delinquency, sexuality and other such topics related to everyday life. Eschewing convention, he staged his pieces not only in formal art spaces but also in venues such as bars and local cabarets, where he performed alongside musicians and comedians.

"Steger's art was inseparable from his art making," Thomure says. "He showed that you don't need a gallery funding and supporting your work and that the work can happen anywhere."

On the occasion of Steger's final exit, *Chicago Tribune* staff writer Achy Obejas memorialized his contribution thusly: "An elegant, seductive presence on stage, Lawrence Steger was one of the most important, and most influential, performance artists in Chicago during the late 1980s and '90s. Besides producing his own provocative work, Mr. Steger often brought diverse artists together to explore complex and frequently dark subjects, especially obsession and desire. At the time of his death, he was surrounded by a group of friends, mostly members of his artistic community."

Thanks to Steger and his artistic community, Chicago now has one of the healthiest performance art scenes in the world.

"Steger laid out a model for artists to remain independent," says Thomure. "His involvement in organizing performance events at Randolph Street Gallery helped introduce performance to the Chicago community. Even more important was his championing of Queer art. But he was not just a performance artist—he was a writer, curator, and community organizer. What sets Chicago apart is how many artists are involved in hosting shows, writing critical essays, and helping their communities. I believe this directly grows out of Lawrence's efforts."

Thomure cites the variety of Chicago spaces that currently host performance work, "from apartments and DIY spaces such as No Nation Lab in Wicker Park, to established performance galleries like Defibrillator [DFBRL8R] in Bridgeport, to large galleries to museums."

"From my vantage point," he says, "all of the daring and experimental work is happening in the Midwest. The art world isn't as ossified here."

Thanks to this experimental ecosystem, Thomure says he is witnessing, and participating in, a "new wave of transdisciplinary artists in Chicago, alongside Tandy Solutions, Sarah Pramuk, and Maryam Faridani, to name a few, who utilize humor, satire, [and] critical theory, and embrace the banal and the everyday."

His own latest contribution to the new wave evolved directly from his research into Lawrence Steger.

At the premier of "An Anthology of American Folk," John Thomure's completed version of Lawrence Steger's "Untitled Ninth Piece," at Oh!klahomo. Left to right: Mark Jeffery, Layla Gallagher, John Thomure (standing), Sarah Dhobhany, and Chia En Chen. Photo by Carlos Salazar-Lermont.



Through a mixture of empathy, inventiveness and transmogrified immersion into Steger's persona, Thomure completed Steger's "Untitled Ninth Piece."

"In my eyes, the project became a collaboration over time, as if Steger had left small fragments and clues behind," Thomure explains. "The performance is presented as a reading of an unfinished documentary script, which is a tongue-in-cheek way of bringing the process of researching to the audience's attention. I am inviting the audience to see the frustrating and embarrassing side of creating a work of art. The work begins with a fairly dumb slapstick joke from *The Three Stooges*—I trip over my own feet and collapse into my own set piece, totally destroying the performance in the process. The challenge then is to build the semblance of a performance with the broken remains. It's a twist on the old Mies van der Rohe moniker of 'Less is More,' embracing an attitude of 'Do More With Less.'"

Fittingly, Thomure debuted his experimental completion of Steger's final work (which he titled "An Anthology of American Folk") at Oh!klahomo, a residential performance space in Chicago's Ukrainian Village, as part of the 2019 Terrain Biennial—an event which, according to organizers, "takes place on lawns, in front yards, on porches, beneath awnings, and in windows." Founded in the front yard of a home in Oak Park in 2013 by Sabina Ott—who passed away in 2018, an elder of Steger by six years—this year's Biennial includes satellite events in 30 cities around the world.

"Terrain subverts the typical biennial structure by hosting events solely in small, DIY spaces," Thomure says. "It pays tribute to Chicago's longstanding underground DIY scene"—a scene that likely would not exist were it not for Lawrence Steger.

Reflecting on the experience of finishing Steger's "Untitled Ninth Piece," Thomure says he feels inspired.

"Steger defined his own form of success in the art world. He allowed himself the time and independence to create work that was dark, grotesque, and visceral. Alongside Ron Athey, he pioneered extreme endurance art in spite of audience walkouts and being panned by conservative critics. He inspired me to become more like him as an artist, to carve out my own space in the art world instead of waiting around for someone to 'discover me' or validate my work. Making art is a way of



At the premiere of "An Anthology of American Folk," John Thomure's completed version of Lawrence Steger's "Untitled Ninth Piece," at Oh!klahomo (left to right) Mark Jeffery, Sarah Dhoobhany. Photo by Carlos Salazar-Lermont.

learning to live life, not just create products to be sold. Making art is its own validation and reward."

Phillip Barcio is an art writer and fiction author whose work appears regularly in *Hyperallergic*, *IdeelArt*, *La Gazette Drouot* and the *New Art Examiner*. His fiction has

appeared in *Space Squid* and the *Swamp Ape Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*.

Links:

Goat Island:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goat_Island_\(performance_group\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goat_Island_(performance_group))

House of Crosses:

<https://www.wurlington-bros.com/Marvelous/castlecross.html>

Lawrence Steger Obituary:

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1999-02-09-9902090128-story.html>

Terrain Biennial:

<https://terrainexhibitions.org>

Sabina Ott:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabina_Ott

Ron Athey

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Athey

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