Letting Out a Long-Interred Past

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I've dropped a few things along the way - a wry smile - it's the best kind of security.

The use of time as an artistic dimension sprang from the late 60's and early 70's when conceptualism was fresh. "Time was one of the many conceptual toys that came to the surface when Stephen, some of the other people here and I were kicking around back then," Mr. Artschwager said. "It was kind of a cooperative venture."

Time has played its own tricks on the artists. Just before the opening, Mr. LeWitt also said that he never thought he would see this day, and that he had forgotten what he put in his box. "I hope it's not embarrassing," he said. "Twenty-five years was too long to imagine."

On the other hand, the French artist Daniel Buren, who flew in from Paris to attend, said: "I have a fresh memory of filling the box. I am excited about it. I even wrote a letter in mid-1989 to ask: 'What's happening with our box? Are we close to the anniversary date?'"

Even though in 1987, Mr. Antonakos had envisioned the opening to be a private gathering of his friends, he was quite happy to share it with a sold-out crowd of more than 200 people who came to watch.

FOLLOWING a piano concert by the composer Terry Riley, Mr. Ryman's box was opened first. He was the only one to alter the box itself, criss-crossing it with now-yellow masking tape that recalled the texture of his variously white canvases. He explained: "I wanted there to be something on the outside as well as the inside; so the box itself would be seen as a thing - and also to keep anyone from peeking." Inside his box was a square wrapped in brown linen; inside the linen was a small, framed glass palette, dominated by a swirl of white paint. It was signed by Mr. Ryman and dated 1981.

Mr. LeWitt's box was next. At first its white-painted interior looked empty, then a tiny, one-inch white cube was discovered. "The cube opens," said Mr. Antonakos, "and there's a note inside the lid." Mr. LeWitt asked what it said. "A line, not straight, corner to corner," Mr. Antonakos read aloud. "This must be Sol's smallest work."

Inside Mr. Artschwager's box lay a nest of four skillfully made plywood boxes, the lids of which required a rather tedious unscrewing to reveal, finally, that the last and smallest contained nothing. These foreshadowed, perhaps, the artist's recent series of packing- crate sculptures.

It was Mr. Buren's box, though, that held the most poignant surprise. In keeping with the spirit of the project, he had given his box to yet another artist, Chris D'Arcangelo, who had been Mr. Antonakos's studio assistant at the time. Mr. D'Arcangelo, who died in the early 1980's, had, in turn, paid homage to Mr. Buren by painting the inside of the box with two wide red stripes (narrower, though, than Mr. Buren's standard stripe of 8.7 centimeters or 3.4 inches). A letter inside the box from Mr. Buren, dated June 15/85, explained this exchange, and ended with this salutation from the past: "Best regards to you from New York and... 25 years ago!"

While agreeing that the contents of the boxes turned out to be consistent with the work these four artists have gone on to produce, Mr. Ketner said it had come to realize the contents were less important than the time and space between the creation of the boxes and the opening. "It was the mystery, the wonder, the anticipation, the waiting for discovery and all that preceded that was the cruc of the project," he said.

Mr. Antonakos was just relieved that the waiting was over. "It was a tremendous responsibility, constantly wondering how this project would end," he said. "When you're young you only think about how things will begin; you never think about how they will end. I'm very happy, very gratified this has ended so beautifully."